

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

John 20:30–31



Getting Acquainted

Many people who live in the Western world today think of a miracle as something that occurs contrary to nature. A more accurate definition, however, is the way Augustine explained it: a miracle is an occurrence that is contrary to that which is *known* of nature. Augustine’s reasoning is driven by the biblical fact that the world is not a closed system. Even the word *nature* speaks in a less-than-biblical manner. Scripture makes clear that the world is God’s creation. That which we might refer to naively as nature from our perspective is, from God’s perspective (and that of the Bible), the operations of the world that God powerfully created and purposefully sustains. Miracles, then, might be defined as the “extraordinary operations” of God that intervene in the seemingly natural operations of creation. In that sense they are unmistakably more powerful and purposeful regarding that which they point to and communicate. This might explain why the arrival of Jesus (“when the fullness of time had come,” Gal. 4:4) was surrounded by so many miracles—or, as the Gospel of John describes them, signs¹ that “manifested [Jesus] glory” (John 2:11).

The four Gospels provide the official account of the miracles of Jesus that he accomplished during his time on earth almost two thousand years ago. Jesus healed sick people, calmed violent storms, exorcised demons, fed multitudes, and walked on water. These miracles served an important purpose in his earthly ministry, and still today (as recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) serve

an important purpose in Christian formation and discipleship. It is far too common, however, for Christians to think of miracles as problems to be resolved in our modern world. It is as though miracles are merely to serve a utilitarian purpose for Christian apologetics. While the study of the historical fact and reasonableness of miracles has its place, the biblical accounts focus less on the “how” and more on the “why”—not the proof but the purpose of Jesus’ miracles. The primary intention of the miracles of Jesus is to teach every disciple—those who witnessed the miracle in person and those today who read the testimony of the apostles—about the person and work of Jesus. A study on miracles, then, should be driven by a concern not merely to defend Jesus’ mighty acts but to understand them, even to be formed by them.

It is helpful when interpreting a miracle account to break it into three related parts: (1) *the setting*, which introduces the characters, context, and crisis in need of resolution; (2) *the miracle*, in which Jesus performs an “extraordinary operation” of *significance*; and (3) *the conclusion*, in which the narrative provides an interpretation of the work or the Worker (Jesus) in implicit and explicit ways. The questions included in each chapter will follow this structure.

▶ Placing It in the Larger Story

Throughout the Old Testament God performed miracles or empowered others to do so on his behalf. The primary example is the exodus² (Ex. 1–18), which served as a foundational miracle in the unfolding biblical story and communication of God’s redeeming work. The exodus offers something like a trailer for the rest of the biblical story and serves as a formal introduction to the work Jesus would ultimately accomplish. That which occurred in the exodus is echoed in the Gospels, as Jesus—the “new Moses”—offers full and final redemption for God’s people from their enslavement to sin and death. In Exodus God calls the miracles “signs” (Ex. 4:9; 7:3). John uses the same language in his Gospel to speak of Jesus’ miracles, and with these “signs” he communicates truths about Jesus and summons people to place faith in him.

Over forty miracles of Jesus are recorded in the Gospels, with each communicating particular truths about Jesus and offering different challenges to the reader. The message communicated by each can be more easily grasped if we understand the nature of the miracle. While many have classified miracles simply by their historical type (e.g., nature miracle), C. S. Lewis offers a helpful additional classification to explain their significance: the miracle’s place in biblical history in relation to the old creation and the new creation.³ Miracles that “sign” with operations fitting the current world are miracles of the old creation, whereas those that “sign” with operations fitting the coming world are miracles of the new creation. The following chart lists the miracles in relation to both types.

Types of Miracles	Miracles of the Old Creation	Miracles of the New Creation
Miracles of Fertility	Water to wine (God's provision for his creation)	
Miracles of Healing	Curing the sick (God's healing of his creation)	
Miracles of Destruction	Withering a fig tree (God's judgment of his creation)	
Miracles of Dominion	Stilling a storm (God's control over his creation)	Walking on water (future reality of a new human nature)
Miracles of Reversal		Raising of Lazarus (God's renewal of his creation)
Miracles of Glorification		Jesus' resurrection (new creation's inauguration)

This two-part classification reveals the ministerial authority of Jesus and his active work in the present world, as well as the purpose behind his ministry that focuses on the world to come. The miracles of Jesus, using the unfolding biblical narrative as their framework, depict the gospel's progression from Genesis to Revelation, representing the ultimate and true exodus. These miracles offer profound insights into Jesus' mission and message, which are centered on the gospel, the "good news" that God has been revealing to the world since the beginning. For Christians today the miracles of Jesus provide specific lessons about God's nature, his actions in the world, his care for the church, and the ultimate restoration of all things in the new creation.

Key Verse

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31).

Date and Historical Background

The four Gospels offer apostolic, eyewitness testimony to the life and ministry of Jesus (on the dates of Jesus' ministry and crucifixion see *ESV Study Bible*, pages

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

1809–1810). While contemporary readers may raise philosophical questions about the possibility of miracles from their modern perspective, neither those in the ancient world nor confessing Christians who accept the authority of Scripture truly doubt the veracity of the miraculous accounts. Not only do the miracles of Jesus fit comfortably in the worldview of the first-century world in which Jesus lived, but they also sit comfortably in the domain of Jesus’ authority as the incarnate Son of God (see Col. 1:15–20). The miracles of Jesus are clearly expressing Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies regarding the promised Messiah, who would enact God’s intentions for his people and his creation. As they are recorded in the four Gospels, therefore, the miracles of Jesus offer a primary interpretation of the person of Jesus and his ministry in the world.

Outline

- I. Miracles of the Old Creation
 - A. Jesus Turns Water into Wine (John 2:1–12)
 - B. Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30–44)
 - C. Jesus Heals the Paralytic (Luke 5:17–26)
 - D. Jesus Heals the Demon-Possessed (Luke 8:26–39)
 - E. Jesus Curses the Fig Tree (Mark 11:12–25)
 - F. Jesus Calms the Storm (Mark 4:35–41)
- II. Miracles of the New Creation
 - A. Jesus Walks on Water (Matthew 14:22–33)
 - B. Jesus Reveals His Glory (Matthew 17:1–13)
 - C. Jesus Raises the Dead (John 11:1–57)
 - D. Jesus Rises from the Dead (John 20:1–18)

As You Get Started

Do you believe that Jesus performed miracles? Are there any of his miracles that you struggle to believe?

Of all Jesus' miracles, is there one that stands out to you? Why do you think that particular miracle stands out to you?

Are there any of Jesus' miracles that are confusing to you? How could fitting Jesus' miracles into the broader story of Scripture (e.g., the exodus, new creation) help explain their purpose?

Jesus' miracles are not just for those who witnessed them in the flesh; they are for every Christian at all times. Can you think of some ways in which Jesus' miracles could inform Christians today about how we ought to live in and love the world around us?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

As you prepare to focus on the miracles of Jesus, it might be helpful for you to read at least one of the Gospels in its entirety. Consider the ways that the

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

narratives about Jesus direct the reader to see the significance of his person and work. This will give you the necessary context to begin a study of the miracles of Jesus, which are couched in the larger narratives of the four Gospels. And spend some time praying that the Lord would open your eyes to see the wondrous truths presented to his people through the miracles of Jesus.

Definitions

¹ **Signs** – Miracles that attest to Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God and lead unbelievers to faith.

² **Exodus, the** – The departure of the people of Israel from Egypt and their journey to Mount Sinai under Moses' leadership (Exodus 1–19; Numbers 33). The exodus demonstrated God's power and providence for his people, who had been enslaved by the Egyptians. The annual festival of Passover commemorates God's final plague upon the Egyptians, resulting in their release from Egypt.

³ **New creation** – The world to come (Heb. 2:5), which stands in contrast with the sin-laden world in this "present evil age" (see Gal. 1:4; 6:15).