



# LifeLight

“ *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.*” John 1:4

## Miracles



### LEADERS GUIDE



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## Introduction

### Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

### LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

*In-depth* means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

### LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

### LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

#### The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

#### The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

#### The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the

- large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings.

**The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)**

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

**The Small-Group Discussion Leaders**

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 57.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than 12 participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 59**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

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**Leadership Training**

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week’s work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week’s lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

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**The LifeLight Weekly Schedule**

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week’s assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of 12 or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week’s study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling

together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). They will follow the same schedule, but they may use the cassette tape to listen to the week's lecture presentation. The discussion leader will obtain the tape and leaflets from the director. A congregation may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

## Recommended Study Resources for Miracles

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*Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and time lines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains more than 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

*Every Voice a Song: Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-1565). Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.



# Miracles with a Purpose

## Lecture Leaders Session 1

### Preparing for the Session

#### Central Focus

Biblical miracles are extraordinary, supernatural acts of God with a purpose. Miracles are “signs,” pointing us to God’s identity, messengers, and truths.

#### Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit, will

1. understand the Bible’s miracles as signs, distinguishing the Bible’s usage of the word *miracle* from its common usage;
2. develop a deeper understanding of God’s purposes behind miracles;
3. celebrate the lengths to which God goes to get people’s attention and move them to believe;
4. celebrate the greatness and compassion of their miracle-working God;
5. begin to assess the place of miracles in their walk of faith.

**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 59.

### Session Plan

#### Worship

Begin the session with the hymn and prayer printed in the study leaflet. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It’s especially helpful for

mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.

### Lecture Presentation

#### Introduction: It’s a Miracle!

Years ago, a television commercial for Xerox brand copiers showed a monk, no doubt weary from hand-copying manuscripts, amazed at the relatively new technology. With an awestruck look heavenward, the monk said, “It’s a miracle!” We all know now it wasn’t a miracle at all, but a giant leap ahead from the arm-cranked mimeograph machine. Offices and even churches are grateful for the technological advance, but most would agree that the little monk probably over-stated himself.

Among Christians and non-Christians today one hears a readiness to call many events miracles. A woman looks for a parking place and, while circling the block, prays for one to appear. It does—after seven times around the block—and she says, “It’s a miracle!” A guy gets on an earlier flight to get home to see his son’s football game, and the later flight, the one he was on originally, goes down in a crash. He says, “It’s a miracle!” Or take the story of a woman in New Mexico who was frying tortillas in her kitchen. She looked at one of the tortillas and saw in the burn marks the image of the face of Christ. She called it a miracle and built a shrine to the tortilla. Thousands of people came to visit the Shrine of the Jesus of the Holy Tortilla, and many said they were seeing a miracle!

We’ve heard people say, “A miracle happens every day!” We’ve seen the littlest things called miracles—finding a new sofa, just the right one, for the right price; getting a bonus just when the checking account was depleting, even the timing of a phone call from a friend. Most Christians, when hearing stories like these, will likely hold back the designation “It’s a miracle!” Instead we use words like *coincidence* or *providence* for these events, or we may even be able to explain them.

Then there is the matter of the television evangelist in the orange suit who fills stadium venues with people in search of a miracle. Some healers even claim they've raised people from the dead. Of course, no one back from the dead has stepped forward yet to tell his or her story, but the claim is still maintained. Enough investigative reports have left many with a bad taste in their mouth where this kind of "miracle" is concerned. Reports of corruption, chicken guts, faked illness, huge profits, and psychological healings have made us wary of the claims of these miracle workers.

On the other hand, some events seem to defy explanation according to the laws or theories of science. An oncologist scratches her head as she looks at a CT scan and sees no sign of cancer. She says, "There is just no explaining it. The cancer has disappeared completely!" The chemotherapy and radiation had failed for months, but the prayers had been nonstop, and now the cancer is gone. She runs a second test and is amazed again at the disappearance of the cancer; so amazed she calls it miraculous. When we hear a story like this, the word *miracle* becomes more palatable.

American culture in the early twenty-first century is scampering after the spiritual. People want contact with God. They'll travel to Lourdes for it, pay large sums of money for the promise of it, and—in search of a miracle—may even walk into a church for the first time in years. For some, the experience of the numinous, an awesome sense of a divine presence, is most convincing when accompanied by a miracle. Yet what is a miracle? Clearly everything our culture labels a miracle is not. In the Bible, what makes an event a miracle and what purposes do miracles serve? This is the focus of our first session together.

## 1 Defining a Miracle

Let's begin by building a biblical definition for *miracle*. It's always good when defining something to say first what it is not.

*First, a miracle is not simply some event for which we have no explanation.* We use *miracle* that way sometimes. We say something is a miracle because there is no way of explaining it or our explanations for it don't seem to satisfy. For instance, two people meet by chance on an airplane. They fall in love. They get married. For the next 50 years, they call their meeting "a miracle."

Was it? Or was it just chance or providence, God at work in His world? Or we can't explain why a certain drug works so well for depression, but it does. Is that a miracle or is it just that we don't know enough yet to explain it?

*Second, a miracle cannot be an everyday, normal occurrence.* We know almost instinctively that if miracles are said to happen on a regular basis, the concept of miracle loses its zip. We see this in the long etymology of the word as presented by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: the word *miracle* is a twelfth-century Middle English word, which derived from an Old French word, which derived from the Late Latin word *miraculum*, which derived from the Latin word for a *wonder* or *marvel*, which derived from the word *mirari*, which means "to wonder at." Webster's definition is of "an extraordinary event" and "an extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment." That doesn't sound like business as usual, does it? As one wag put it, "If miracles were regular occurrences, we'd call them regulars instead of miracles."

*Third, miracles are not extraordinary events without purpose.* In other words, the "wow factor" of an event is not enough to take it to miracle status. In the New Testament, one of the words used repeatedly for *miracle* is *sign*. The Greek word here is *seimeion* (say-may-on). To call a miracle a sign means that a miracle points to something, attests to something. Though miracles are wonders and marvels that leave people amazed, they are also purposeful. This distinguishes a miracle from magic. Magic is all about wonder and marvel. A miracle is more. It is a sign pointing to something or someone in or beyond the event. In Psalm 78:43, for example, the miracles of the exodus are described as "miraculous signs." In John 2:11, John comments on Jesus' first miracle, the changing of water into wine at a couple's wedding reception. He describes the event as "the first of His miraculous signs." John says, "He thus revealed His glory." In Acts 5:12, Luke recalls that "the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people." In the next breath he talks about many new believers coming to faith. Miracles wow all right, but they also carry truth and point beyond themselves. They are purposeful. We'll discuss this further later.

*Fourth, miracles are not events that violate the laws of nature.* We'll talk more about this in Session 2 when

we look at miracles and science. The word *violate*, when loaded into a definition of miracles, has led more than one brilliant scientist to discount miracles as highly unlikely or downright impossible. How one defines a miracle can certainly determine one's readiness to accept or deny one when it comes. After all, the argument goes, if our definition of miracle allows for the violation of the laws of nature, the whole universe becomes shaky and science loses its moorings. Miracles, however, are not violations of the laws of nature. They are interventions, interruptions in the usual order of things, by the One who created the usual order of things in the first place. God does not violate His own laws, but He can and does at times supercede them, trump them, or suspend them. That's what makes miracles *supernatural* events. The One who is above the laws of nature (which He created) brings to the laws of nature something from beyond, something extraordinary. In miracles God supercedes the laws of nature as we normally experience them with higher laws. Miracles, as exceptions to the laws of science, don't threaten those laws. In fact, it's the laws of science that enable us to look at the extraordinary and say, "That was a miracle." After all, how do you have the *extraordinary* without knowing what the *ordinary* looks like?

Having said what a miracle is not, let's define *miracle* as God has in the Bible. We'll give the full definition and then unpack it phrase by phrase.

*A miracle is an extraordinary event that reveals God's supernatural intervention in human experience and points to some aspect of God's identity, God's messenger, or God's truth.*

Let's repeat the definition phrase by phrase: "A *miracle is an extraordinary event* (repeat with students) *that reveals God's supernatural intervention in human experience* (repeat with students) *and points to some aspect of God's identity* (repeat), *God's messenger, or God's truth* (repeat)."

Now let's unpack the definition phrase by phrase. First, a miracle is "*an extraordinary event*." As we've seen, miracles are known to be miracles because they break the routine of life as usual. Even in Jesus' day, long before any laws of science were known or written down, people knew when the ordinary was being upset. In John 9:32, the Pharisees show their knowledge of what's ordinary and what isn't when they interrogate the

man Jesus healed of blindness. They say, "Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind." The same sense of the extraordinary shows up in John 6:14 when Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a boy's sack lunch, and people want to make Him king. Thomas, the doubting disciple, is so familiar with the familiar that when he hears Jesus is alive he refuses to believe it until he sees it (John 20:25). By definition a miracle is an extraordinary event, noticeable because we know the way things usually are.

This biblical understanding of miracles as extraordinary events returns us to the quip that we don't call miracles "regulars" because they aren't. They're irregular. That's what makes them miracles. As we'll see in future sessions, the miracles of the Bible don't actually occur all over time, but are focused rather on pivotal eras in the history of God's people. Creation week was certainly packed with miracles (even though the laws of science were not in place the whole week)! We see miracles primarily in the exodus; at the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha; in Jesus' earthly ministry; and in the ministry of the apostles after Jesus' ascension. Years, even centuries, pass without miracles. Miracles in the Bible do not happen every day. That makes them extraordinary and conspicuous, to say the least!

Further, miracles "*reveal God's supernatural intervention in human experience*"—they are the work of God. Even if an agent or messenger of God does the miracle, biblical miracles are always God's acts. The very first sentence in the Bible, Genesis 1:1, shows God to be someone who acts: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Ever since, God has been acting in history, in human experience. Psalm 145:4–6 uses a variety of words (*works, acts, and deeds*) to capture the essence of our God, who gets things done in mighty and awesome ways. Miracles are God's supernatural works. That is, they intervene in our usual experience in ways only God, our Creator, can act. In miracles God intervenes in the laws of nature, not just as we do when we overcome the law of gravity by catching an apple falling from a tree. God intervenes with His own laws, which supercede and trump the laws of science. God acts in ways inexplicable to human beings. By their very nature, miracles reveal the presence and superceding power of God.

The last phrase, that miracles "*point to some aspect of*

*God's identity, God's messenger, or God's truth,*" captures the idea that a miracle is a sign. Let's provide biblical examples for these three pointings of miracles. First, a miracle points to some aspect of God's identity. In miracles we see who God is or what God is like. If you're still in Psalm 145, look again at how the attributes of God are so closely tied to God's "wonderful works." God is described in verses 3–7 as "great" and "worthy of praise." God's works move David to celebrate God's "glorious splendor," "abundant goodness," and "righteousness." In the New Testament, looking again to Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana, John says the sign "revealed His glory" (John 2:11). That means it identified Jesus as who He was and is, the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:30–31).

Miraculous signs in the Bible also point to God's messenger, providing corroboration for the messenger's identity and authority. Jesus, of course, is God's messenger, but God also uses human messengers. In 1 Kings 17, after God used Elijah to provide for the widow of Zarephath and then, through the prophet, raised her son from the dead, the woman says to Elijah, (v. 24) "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth." The miracle pointed to the integrity of the messenger. The same holds true for the apostle Paul when he cites (2 Corinthians 12:12) "signs, wonders and miracles" as "the things that mark an apostle." The miracles performed by God through the apostles lent authority to the apostles and their message.

Miraculous signs also point to God's truth. Often Jesus attaches a truth to a miracle. He ties to the miracle of healing a paralyzed man the truth that He has the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:1–2). He takes the occasion of the raising of Lazarus to teach, (John 11:25) "I am the resurrection and the life." Miracles are often teaching moments, God-driven supernatural events carrying God's truth.

Here again is our working definition of miracles as we see them described in the Bible:

A miracle is an extraordinary event that reveals God's supernatural intervention in human experience and points to some aspect of God's identity, God's messenger, or God's truth.

## 2 The Purposes of Miracles

With our definition of miracles, we've already highlighted some of God's purposes for miracles. Here we'll try to develop a list of purposes assigned to God's miracles in the Bible.

A good place to start is with an affirmation of the purposefulness of everything God wills and does. God never looks at alternative purposes and says, "Whatever." In Isaiah 14:24, God displays His purposeful will to crush the Assyrians with these words:

"Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."

God goes on to say in verses 26–27:

"This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart Him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?"

After Jeremiah buys a field in Anathoth, showing his confidence in the promises of God, he speaks a prayer of faith that includes these words: (Jeremiah 32:18–19) "O great and powerful God, whose name is the LORD Almighty, great are Your purposes and mighty are Your deeds." He goes on in the next verses to recall the miraculous works of God in the exodus. Purpose-driven deeds, often miraculous in nature, characterize God's activity in the world. Again, the purposeful nature of miracles is what distinguishes them from mere magic. What's more, knowing that God's miracles are not just acts of whimsy—something God does because God has nothing else to do—saves us from seeing God as capricious or a deity at play.

So what does God accomplish through His miracles in the Bible? Here is a list of nine purposes attached to biblical miracles, along with biblical examples:

1. To display His power as Creator and almighty God (Psalm 77:14)

God's miracles, especially in the Old Testament, reveal His power over the forces of nature and over the enemies of His people. Several of Jesus' miracles (e.g., His stilling of the storm, walking on water, and feeding of 5,000) display His power as Creator and Lord of creation.

## 2. To redeem or rescue His people (Psalm 77:15–20)

In the exodus, the miracles of the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea were all designed to free Israel from its long ordeal of slavery.

## 3. To fulfill prophecy (Matthew 8:14–17)

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' miracles clearly fulfill Old Testament prophecy, pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah.

## 4. To testify to the identity of Jesus Christ as God's Son (Acts 2:22)

Peter clearly sees Jesus' miracles as supporting Jesus' words. They corroborated His claims to being the Messiah.

## 5. To express compassion for the sick longing to be healed (Mark 1:40–42)

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus seems almost hesitant to perform miracles lest people misunderstand Him. After He does a miracle, He is quick to try to keep the event a secret. Yet Jesus is God, and His concern for the sick gets the best of Him, leaving us with many miracles that simply flow from a heart of compassion needing to be expressed.

## 6. To carry or exhibit a truth to be learned (John 9:1–7)

Jesus tells His disciples that He is (v. 5) "the light of the world." He then brings light to the eyes of a man born blind!

## 7. To bring people to faith (John 10:22–39; 20:30–31; 1 Kings 18:39)

In John 10:25 Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "The miracles I do in My Father's name speak for Me." In verse 38, He pleads with them, saying, "even though you do not believe Me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." Miracles were meant to bring unbelievers to faith.

The use of miracles to bring people to faith is not exclusive to the New Testament. Following Elijah's miraculous defeat of the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, (1 Kings 18:39) the people "fell prostrate and cried, 'The Lord—He is God! The Lord—He is God!'"

## 8. To confirm the message of the apostles (Hebrews

2:1–4)

The writer to the Hebrews clearly saw (v. 4) "the signs, wonders and various miracles" of the apostles as God's confirmation that they spoke the truth. In miracles both message and messenger were confirmed. Miracles were God's way of "signing" off on the word His messengers brought.

## 9. To provide a glimpse of heaven (Revelation 21:1–4)

More than one Bible commentator has looked at miracles as providing a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth. Then there will be no death, no sickness or pain, and all will feast at the heavenly banquet. The raising of Lazarus, the healing of the sick, and the feeding of the 5,000 all point toward life in the new Jerusalem.

## Conclusion

Not long ago, after a day at Disney World in Florida, a young pastor from a bush church in Africa was exhausted from visiting one thrilling site after another. Then, just at dark, his American hosts explained that his thrills were not over yet. They stood open-mouthed as a fireworks display lit up the sky to the accompaniment of stirring music. That night sitting over a snack at his hosts' home, the young pastor said, "It's a wonder you Americans can be moved by anything anymore."

It is a wonder. From footprints on the moon to heart transplants, from Disney World to the next generation of computer hardware, we've seen it all, it seems, and then there is more. Yet in such a context, we can still be moved by the miracles of an itinerant teacher in His thirties who said He was the Son of God. As we think about what He said and what He did, we may find it is not the miracles themselves that move us. After all, we have magicians who still draw great crowds. No, what catches us about the miracles of Jesus Christ are the purposes behind them. They point us to One who would set aside His miracles one day to die in our place and then miraculously rise from the dead to give us all the miraculous hope of living forever.

## Summary Take-Home Truths

- Biblical miracles are not regular occurrences (otherwise we'd call them "regulars").
- In miracles God doesn't violate the very laws of

nature that He put in place; rather, God intervenes from above with laws that supercede the laws of science.

- Biblical miracles are not magic, but are signs pointing us to what God is like and to the truth God has for us.
- Biblical miracles are extraordinary acts of God with a purpose.

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## Concluding Activities

Speak a brief prayer, asking God's blessing upon participants in this LifeLight course and all who are serving as leaders. Make any necessary announcements. Distribute the enrichment magazine and encourage participants to read it as part of their weekly study. Then distribute study leaflet 2.

## Miracles and Science

### Preparing for the Session

#### Central Focus

Christians have a ready and winsome response to the objections raised against the veracity of the miracle accounts in the Bible.

#### Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit, will

1. prepare a winsome response to those who raise objections concerning the truthfulness of the Bible's miracle accounts;
2. discover and celebrate the reliability of the Bible's witness to divine miracles;
3. be strengthened in their own belief in the miracles of the Bible;
4. connect their Christian faith to their belief in biblical miracles.

**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 61.

#### Session Plan

#### Worship

Begin the session with the hymn and prayer printed in the study leaflet. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.

### Lecture Presentation

#### Introduction

Miracles are strange occurrences—by definition! No wonder, then, that some people are so taken with miracles that they'd like to have one on a regular basis. Others, though, have a difficult time believing in miracles. Take, for instance, the little boy who came home after Sunday school and was asked by his mother, "What did you learn today?"

"Well," he said hesitantly, "we learned how Moses in the Old Testament took the slaves of Egypt to the edge of this big sea. Pharaoh was chasing them with his army. So Moses built this big pontoon bridge across the water and all the Israelites got across. Then Moses turned his tanks on Pharaoh's army and blew them all up."

Mom was more than a little concerned about what she'd just heard. So she asked, "Are you sure that's the way the story goes?"

"No," said the little guy, "but if I told you what our teacher told us, you'd never believe it!"

It's an old story but one that illustrates well how incredible miracles can be. *Incredible* means "unbelievable," and that's exactly how some people respond to the miracle stories of the Bible. They won't believe them.

In this session we will look closely at the objections of science to the miracles recorded in the Bible. In 1 Peter 3:15 we are encouraged to be ready to answer those who question the hope that is in us. The word for "answer" here is *apologia*, which means "a defense." The word *apologetics* comes from this word and refers to our readiness to defend what we believe. The Bible in one sense needs no defense; its truth stands on its own for all time. In another sense, though, Christians are called to a readiness to defend the Bible's truth. As the miracles of the Bible continue to come under attack, even by scholars who claim to be Christian, we must prepare to answer their objections with *gentleness, respect, and good reason*.

## **Objection No. 1: Miracles must be denied because they violate the laws of nature. (Empiricist's Objection)**

### **Understanding the Objection**

This objection's champion is David Hume, an eighteenth-century empiricist (one who thinks we can only know what our senses tell us). Hume's argument includes these basic assumptions:

1. Science is a closed and predictable system of inviolable laws.
2. Miracles by definition violate the laws of science and so must be discounted.

### **Responses to the Objection**

First, science is not a closed, predictable system of laws. Science is constantly changing, moving from old paradigms to new ones, and redescribing our universe.

Yet there are certain laws that experience confirms again and again. That leads us to a second response: there are laws of nature, but miracles do not violate them. Actually, the Bible teaches that the laws of nature have been put in place by God, the Creator. Acts 14:15–17 and 17:24–28 testify to God as Creator and Sustainer of His creation. As such, God, who put the laws of nature in place, has the right and the power to intervene in those laws, to interrupt them or suspend them when and how He pleases. God does not violate His own laws; He interrupts them purposefully. At times, in special moments of history, God operates above and outside the laws of nature at will. Miracles are extraordinary and supernatural. That means they come from a source above and outside science's laws. As such, science has no application to miracles. By definition, miracles are outside science and above it. A scientist in a lab, for example, cannot prove or disprove the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Hume may have been right when he wrote that experience tells us miracles are a long shot at best—that the odds are stacked up against them. But does that prove miracles are impossible? The odds may be strongly against a person's winning the lottery, but does that mean people don't win it? Few people have ever seen or experienced a resurrection from the dead, but does that mean a resurrection is impossible? I like the man who said he wanted to be buried in or near Jerusalem

because, as he put it, Jerusalem has the highest resurrection rate of any city in the world!

## **Objection No. 2: God may have created the world, but once He created it and set the laws of nature in place, He left it to itself. (Deist's Objection)**

### **Understanding the Objection**

Deism was popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson, for example, were Deists. Thomas Jefferson's Bible, published after his death, deletes the miracles of Jesus and His resurrection. Deists believed that God was like a watchmaker. He built the watch perfectly and then gave it away. Deists refuse to see God getting involved in the world. Rather, the world runs according to fixed laws, and God does not stoop to intervene in people's lives. Miracles are denied here because they bring God down from the heights and have Him hip-deep in the affairs of human beings. Deism survives today in those who keep God detached in heaven, rarely imagining God at work in current events.

### **Response to the Objection**

Christians point those who hold this view to the true God of the Bible who has *always* immersed Himself in His creation. The Bible, from one perspective, is nothing else but a record of God's interventions in the history of humanity.

Psalm 105 celebrates the interventions of God in the history of Israel. John 1:10 describes Christ as being "in the world." The incarnation, celebrated in John 1:14, is not just God walking among people. God did that already in Genesis 2. The incarnation is God becoming a person Himself. Deism, taken to its logical conclusion, always ends up denying both the incarnation and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

## **Objection No. 3: Biblical miracles were recorded in a prescientific age when people believed in the supernatural.**

### **Understanding the Objection**

This objection looks at the miracles of the Bible as fantasies of unsophisticated, ignorant people. The ancients, the argument goes, saw everything from a comet to lightning as supernatural. They would say

scholarship involves explaining these occurrences from what we know to be scientifically plausible. Perhaps it *appeared* that Jesus walked on water, but He really just found a sandbar. Call it the deconstruction of miracles in the pure light of science.

### Response to the Objection

The disciples and the crowds who witnessed Jesus' miracles were hardly ancient fools. As one studies the miracle accounts, the amazement and even fear of the witnesses shows they understood: this is not normal; this is out of the norm. To borrow from Hume, even the ancients had enough uniformity of experience to know when something broke the mold. Joseph knew that when Mary became pregnant, he had trouble on his hands (Matthew 1:18–19). The disciples knew people don't walk on water (Matthew 14:26), and they knew that one boy's lunch does not 5,000 feed (John 6:5–9). By the standards of modern science, the eyewitnesses of the Bible's miracles may seem ignorant or even fanciful. Their reactions to what they witnessed, though, seem as natural as can be when in the presence of the supernatural! They responded just as we'd respond when faced with a pregnant fiancée, a man astride the waves at sea, or 5,000 folks waiting to eat. They knew the ordinary and the extraordinary and could tell the difference (despite the lack of a degree from MIT).

### Objection No. 4: The biblical record giving us the accounts of miracles cannot be trusted.

#### Understanding the Objection

Here the argument turns on the reliability of the Bible itself. Two primary arguments surface here, each relating to the truthfulness of the Bible as a source for miracles.

1. The biblical record of miracles reflects legends formed over time by the community of faith. The exodus with its sea-crossing, for example, is said to be a product of community legend. The miracles are said to be legends formed between the purported events and the written record. Members of the so-called Jesus Seminar, for example, say that miracles are not so much a record of what Jesus said and did but a record of what others *say* Jesus said and did.

2. Because the writers of biblical miracle accounts were so set on presenting their faith to the world, they were biased, motivated more by theology than actual history. This is shown by the variance in details from one miracle account to another.

### Response to the Objection

1. Of any ancient book, the Bible has the greatest number of manuscripts, as well as the oldest. Some fragments of the Gospels, for instance, are dated to within 100 years of the events they record. In this respect alone the Bible's record of miracles is more reliable than the records left behind by respected ancient historians such as Thucydides, Herodotus, Xenophon, or Suetonius.
2. In the case of the New Testament, the time between the actual events of Jesus' life and their being written down is too short a time for community legend to create these miracle stories. The first Gospels appear already around A.D. 60 (Mark and Matthew), only 30 years after the events occur. What's more, there were eyewitnesses still living when the miracle accounts were being written. When Paul writes to the Corinthians about the miracle of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he mentions that many of the eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after His resurrection are still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6)! This time of oral tradition, as it is called, was hardly a time for legend building. Rather the oral tradition stereotyped (kept these stories intact) via memorization of detail and correction by eyewitnesses.
3. Over the years more than one skeptical legal mind has subjected the Bible's record to the strictest rules of evidence. Among the rigorous standards is the reliability of the witnesses to Jesus' miracles. The witness to Jesus Christ and His works by such men as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and Paul was hardly driven by a desire for wealth or power or by fear. The prologue to the Gospel of Luke (1:1–4) hardly reads like the work of someone not concerned with accuracy. Paul talks about many witnesses to verify his testimony (2 Timothy 2:2). The witnesses who left behind their record of Jesus' "signs" were willing to die for what they believed and wrote down. Most of them did die for their faith. Let me ask you: Does one die for a community legend developed over just three decades?

4. Variances from one account of a given miracle to another bolster the veracity of the accounts, not threaten it. Take a moment, for instance, to look at the account of the feeding of the 5,000 in each of the four Gospels: Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:10–17; and John 6:1–13. Note some of the variances you see (information in one account and not in another, for example). The variety in the accounts not only allows us to fill in details, but it assures us that the writers did not get together to compare notes to keep the “legend” intact.
5. Amazing is the lack of evidence for opposition to these accounts. Jesus’ enemies never once question that He did a miracle. Look at the Pharisees after the raising of Lazarus. They couldn’t deny the miracle because so many had seen it happen (John 11:45–48). They opposed Jesus’ claims, His following, and the threat He presented. The same is true of Jesus’ resurrection. Nowhere do we find evidence of opponents denying this ultimate miracle. Opponents of Jesus and His followers simply could not disprove His resurrection because hundreds saw Jesus alive after His dying. This silence bears vivid testimony to the truth of the apostles’ witness. In the case of a healing miracle by Peter and John, their opponents say outright, (Acts 4:16) “Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it.” Not bad when hostile witnesses corroborate the Bible’s record!

## Conclusion

In the end, the work of bringing people to believe in miracles is the job of the Holy Spirit. At times people of great intellect have subjected the Bible with its stories of miracles to the most rigorous of tests. People like C. S. Lewis, author of *Miracles*, and Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Faith*, came to be Christians largely on the basis of the strong evidence supporting the truthfulness of the claims and works of Jesus Christ.

For all of us, however, faith in the miracles recorded in the Bible must come from more than good reason and argumentation. We’re not Christians because we win debates. Ultimately, the first step toward believing in miracles is believing in God. Once the Holy Spirit gets us there (actually not much beyond Genesis 1:1),

we have arrived at a point where we can say, “Something and Someone exists outside of science, beyond everyday cause and effect.” When we believe in God, we open ourselves to the reality that the miracles of the Bible could and did happen. For with the God of the Bible, nothing is impossible.

A step even farther down the road of faith in biblical miracles lands us at an empty tomb. The Bible records the atoning work of Jesus Christ—His perfect life, sacrificial death, and victorious (yes, miraculous) resurrection. That good and glad news is our greatest motivation for believing in the miracles of the Bible. To know and love Jesus Christ personally, to be in a living relationship with a living Savior, makes faith in the miracles of the Bible easy. Is there anything He cannot do? Is there any way Jesus would deceive us? Jesus is the truth that makes miracles true.

Let me tell you a true story:

Over a period of several months a pastor visited a young woman who was very sick with cancer. She was married and had three young children. Through chapter after chapter in her battle with breast cancer, she never stopped believing that God, if He chose, could heal her of her disease. She prayed for a miracle, and even when things got worse, she continued to believe that God had the power to heal her. She was often asked by others why she was so confident in God’s power to heal. She could never say why so always said something like, “Just because I do. That’s all.”

Her prayers with her pastor always told God of her faith in His power and her yielding to His will. God would heal her this side of heaven or on the other side, they said. Then on one visit the pastor read from John 14, where Jesus says, (v. 6) “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

“That’s it,” she said.

“That’s what?” her pastor asked.

“That’s why I believe in miracles,” she said, “because I believe in Him.”

## Summary Take-Home Truths

Biblical miracles present God, the creator of the laws of nature, as *intervening* in or *suspending* the laws He’s made.

Miracles, by definition, are beyond the scope of scientific corroboration.

Miracles reveal that God is not separated from His creation but immersed in it.

The eyewitnesses of Jesus' miracles could tell a miracle when they saw one—they knew the ordinary from the extraordinary.

Eyewitnesses, the silence of opposition, and an amazingly reliable biblical record attest to the truthfulness of the Bible's accounts of miracles.

Real faith in miracles begins with faith in God and leads people ultimately to faith in a risen, living Jesus Christ.

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### Concluding Activities

Speak a brief prayer asking the Lord to guide the church through its controversies in our own day, with the result that the Gospel will continue to remain free to do its saving work. Briefly mention again the resources in the enrichment magazine. Then make any necessary announcements and distribute study leaflet 3.