An article in The Washington Post reported that US and Israeli scientists have come up with a theory that Jesus might have walked on ice rather than on water. Their findings were based on evidence of two periods of climactic cooling in the region 1,500 to 2,000 years ago. The article said the finding could provide a scientific explanation for what many people have regarded as supernatural.

Why do intelligent people go to such lengths to explain away the miracles of Jesus? What’s at stake in whether or not Jesus turned water into wine or fed thousands with a few loaves?

In the face of such questions, RBC research editor Dennis Fisher takes a look not only at the miracles of Jesus but at their implications as well.

Martin R. De Haan II
THE MIRACLE WORKER

The word *miracle* is commonly used in many different ways. Newspaper headlines, for example, called it a miracle when the Boston Red Sox stunned the New York Yankees in the 2004 World Series.

Walt Disney gave the title *Miracle* to a movie based on the true story of Herb Brooks. This player-turned-coach led an underdog 1980 US Olympic hockey team to a “miraculous” victory over the much stronger Soviet team.

Then there was the tragic story of the 2006 Sago mining accident in West Virginia. A false report of a “miracle” rescue caused a premature celebration when a misunderstood communication indicated that all the trapped miners were alive. Later, however, the newspapers still talked about the “miracle” rescue and recovery of sole survivor Randal McCloy.

Although each of these examples is related to a sense of wonder, none of them describes the kind of miracles recorded in the Bible.

By contrast, look at the way the New Testament gospel of Luke reports the miracles of Jesus:

*He came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases, as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out...*
from Him and healed them all (6:17-19).

According to Luke, Jesus’ ability to heal people and cast out demons was witnessed by large crowds. People came from as far south as Jerusalem and all Judea to hear the Man from Galilee and be healed. The sick and disabled, believing that healing power flowed through Him, strained just to touch Him. Together they saw Him supernaturally give sight to blind eyes, restore withered limbs, and cause the deaf to hear.

Those who were cured didn’t know how Jesus healed them, but they didn’t hesitate to spread the word of what His healing touch had done for them. For 3 years the crowds followed Him until together they came to Jerusalem where the amazement and praise suddenly stopped. In the holy city of Jerusalem, the popular rabbi from Nazareth was confronted by religious leaders who accused Him of doing His miracles in the power of Satan. With such accusations they persuaded Roman authorities to sentence Jesus to death.

The New Testament says, however, that the miracles continued even after His crucifixion. Three days later, witnesses testified that they saw Him alive. For 40 days He appeared repeatedly to His disciples until finally ascending into the clouds from the Mount of Olives.

Even today, after 2,000 years, there is controversy about these widely reported miracles. While hundreds of millions stake their lives on the Gospels, others are not sure that the New Testament accounts should be taken at face value. Instead, like many of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, they speculate on alternative explanations for
Jesus’ miraculous powers. Even as followers of Christ remain convinced that He fulfilled the longstanding predictions of a supernatural Messiah, others suspect that there are better ways to understand what the crowds saw. Some are inclined to look for natural explanations, while others portray the reports as myths that were invented over time to support faith in Jesus. Metaphysical writers, on the other hand, suggest that Jesus tapped into paranormal powers that any “enlightened” person could do.

So what questions need to be considered when it comes to the miracles of Jesus? Let’s look at four: (1) How does the Bible use the term miracle? (2) What kind of miracles did Jesus do? (3) Why did Jesus do miracles? and (4) Why did Jesus’ miracles create controversy?

How Does the Bible Use the Term Miracle?

The New Testament uses three words to describe a miracle: sign, wonder, and power.

Sign (Gk. semeion).

The use of signs to confirm the work of God has roots in the Old Testament. According to Moses, genuine messengers of God were to be distinguished from false ones by the miracles that accompanied their message.

The Hebrew Scriptures, for instance, tell us that God called a childless old man named Abram to be the father of a chosen people (Gen. 12:1-3). As the story of the nation of Israel unfolded, it was marked not...
only by supernatural events but by prophets who were given signs to authenticate the message God wanted His chosen people to believe and accept (1 Ki. 18:16-46).

Because of this heritage, a first-century Jewish audience looked to signs as a means of testing the claims of a supposed prophet. In this context, Jesus’ miracles served as an indication that He was not a false prophet but a messenger from God.

**Wonder (Gk. teras).** Another New Testament word associated with miracles is teras, translated “wonder.” This refers to the effect a miraculous event had on witnesses. Both believers and unbelievers were astonished at the miracles performed by Jesus and later by His apostles (Mk. 2:9-12; Acts 4:30; 5:12).

This same idea of amazement at seeing the supernatural activity of God is also recorded in the Old Testament. When Moses described God as parting the Red Sea to lead His people to safety, he said that the effect on the people was one of wonder, fear, and astonishment (Ex. 14:31). Likewise, when Elijah asked the children of Israel to choose between the worship of Baal and Jehovah, we read that fire fell from heaven causing them to bow and say, “The Lord, He is God!” (1 Ki. 18:39).

Similarly, in the public life of Jesus, the Gospel records declare that in the presence of many witnesses He publicly restored damaged or missing tissue in human bodies and even brought the dead back to life. The impact on those who watched was one of astonished wonder.

**Power (Gk. dunamis).** A third term that is used to describe a divine miracle is...
the Greek word for power: *dunamis*. From it we get our word *dynamite*. When used in reference to miracles, *power* is the divine energy that produces them. The New Testament uses this word when describing “mighty works” performed by Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles (Mt. 11:20-21; 13:54; Acts 19:11).

Within the wider scope of the Bible, God uses such power to create and sustain the laws of nature (Ps. 19:1; Acts 14:15; Heb. 11:3). Then, at important moments in history, He uses the same power to miraculously alter these natural laws to confirm the credibility of His messengers.

The power of a miracle, therefore, is both similar to and distinct from the wonders of nature. Within the unfolding story of the Bible, the God who parts the Red Sea is the same Creator who designs into a seed the ability to grow into a flower, and gives the salmon its unexplainable ability to return to the same riverbed where it was spawned. But to confuse the wonders of nature with miracles is to misunderstand why signs are rare and carefully placed events in history. Miracles of the kind Jesus did are an exception, not the rule.

When the Bible presents a miracle, it describes an event that cannot be explained by the laws of physics. This is one reason many secular scientists doubt the miracles of Jesus. By adopting a worldview based on scientific assumptions, they find it difficult to acknowledge anything that cannot be replicated and measured under controlled conditions. Rather than doubting their naturalistic presuppositions, they either reinterpret the “miracles” with natural explanations or reject...
them outright as myths. Yet the very fact that miracles are, by definition, an exception to natural law is what makes the miracles of the Bible so important. These supernatural events point to a Person great enough to have created the cosmos and free enough to supersede His own natural laws when it serves His purposes.

In his classic book *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis writes that God has created two distinct orders of reality. One is the spiritual world where angels live. The other is the physical world that we experience. Lewis maintains that these two spheres of reality are like two mighty rivers that flow alongside each other with only occasional intersections. He reasons that when the King of both realms left heaven and entered our world in the Person of Jesus Christ, there was an outpouring of the miraculous. This, according to Lewis, showed that He is ruler of both spheres of reality. From Him flowed supernatural power that revealed He was sent from the Father, who endorsed His lordship over heaven and earth.

With this view of two spheres of reality and our examination of key biblical terms, we can now offer the following definition for a miracle:

*A miracle is the introduction of God's supernatural power by altering the laws of physics to endorse God's messenger and advance His purposes, bringing wonder to those who see it.*
WHAT KIND OF MIRACLES DID JESUS DO?

If Jesus is the Creator of both heaven and earth, then He has authority over both spheres of reality (Col. 1:16). The laws of nature may have operated for centuries with some predictability. But if the Creator actually came to earth in the God-Man Jesus Christ, there is reason to believe that these laws were bound to obey Him. The uniqueness of His miracles would lie in His power over His own created world.

POWER OVER DISEASE

The Bible teaches that sickness and death entered this world through the misused freedom of our original parents (Gen. 3; Rom. 5). Since then, it has been the plight of humankind to deal with all kinds of disease and ailments. Yet in the 3 years of Jesus’ public life, we see diseases cured by His word or touch.

An example of His supernatural power over disease is recorded in Mark 2:9-12. Here we find Jesus forgiving the sins of a paralyzed man who had been carried to Him. Jesus’ claim sounded blasphemous to the crowd who had gathered to hear Him teach. They believed God alone had the authority to forgive sins. So to prove that He had the right to do this, He said to the paralyzed man, “Take up your bed and go.”

The man stood up. His healing was immediate. He not only had the use of his limbs but was also given the strength to carry the bed that for so long had been his prison. He left the crowd and headed for home.

What was so significant
about this healing was that it could not be explained as a psychosomatic cure. This was not about a man’s ability to believe, but about withered, twisted legs that became immediately and visibly whole at the command of Jesus.

The effect on the crowd was understandably one of wonder. The Greek word translated “amazed” is existemi (lit. “to be beside oneself”). But the emotion of the moment was not just awe in response to an unexplainable act. It prompted the crowd to glorify God (v.12). The onlookers recognized the source of the miraculous healing as the Creator who had altered the healing process by supernatural means. Now they had reason to take Jesus seriously when He offered to forgive the sins of those who entrusted themselves to Him.

Other examples in the Gospels that show Jesus’ healing power are:

**POWER OVER NATURE**

The American writer and humorist Mark Twain once wrote, “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.” Twain’s wit plays on the often-cited need not just to complain about a problem but to try to solve it.

Over a century later, Twain’s point stands. Even now in the 21st century, we can do very little to change meteorological conditions. Droughts and floods are still a perennial problem.

In contrast to our inability to control weather, Mark 4:37-41...
describes a Man who could calm a violent storm with a word.

The event happened on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was being taken across the lake by seasoned fishermen who knew how a sudden shift of wind could change conditions on the water. In this instance, however, they were caught off guard. As an exhausted Jesus slept in the stern of the ship, conditions on the lake suddenly turned bad. As Mark records, the wind began pushing the waves over the side of the boat. Jesus’ friends became alarmed and woke Him from His sleep.

What happened next terrified these seasoned fishermen. Jesus calmly rebuked the wind and sea with the command “Peace, be still!” (v.39). The word translated “Peace” is best rendered “Hush” or “Be quiet,” as if He were speaking to an agitated child. The atmospheric conditions changed immediately. “The wind ceased and there was a great calm” (v.39).

Jesus’ disciples “feared exceedingly” because of what they had seen. These fishermen had never observed a weather change like this. They asked each other, “Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!” (v.41). The word translated “obey” was a Greek word used of someone who answers a knock at the door to let someone in. The implication is that the laws affecting wind and water listen to their Creator and let Him in to alter their normal process. The disciples witnessed Jesus’ authority over the laws of nature.

Other examples in the Gospels that show Jesus’ power over nature are: Matthew 14:13-33; 15:32-38; 17:24-27; 21:18-19;

POWER OVER THE SPIRIT WORLD

Horror films like The Exorcist have given our generation a fantasy version of demon possession. Yet the Bible tells of fallen angels who came into our world after being expelled from heaven (Isa. 14:12-21; Ezek. 28; Eph. 6:10-18). These demons oppose the purposes of God and in certain cases gain access to human bodies and personalities.

In Mark 5:1-20 we read about a demon-possessed man who lived on the east side of the Sea of Galilee among tombs. He could be heard day and night crying out as he cut himself with stones. The townspeople apparently believed he had superhuman strength, for he had a reputation of being able to break the chains of those who tried to restrain him.

When Jesus encountered the man, He confronted the demon within him and asked his name. One demon spoke on behalf of the other evil spirits, “My name is Legion; for we are many” (v.9). Knowing Jesus’ power and authority over them, the demons anticipated that they were going to be cast out of the man. They didn’t want to be sent “into the abyss” (Lk. 8:31), so they pleaded with Him to be cast into the bodies of a large herd of hogs feeding nearby. Jesus granted their request. At His command, the demons left the man and took over the bodies of the pigs, which then raced down the mountainside to their death in the lake below.

Here Jesus exercised power over the spirit world and delivered a tormented man, who was later found
by the townspeople “sitting and clothed and in his right mind” (Mk. 5:15).

Interestingly, the miracle had two different effects. Those who found the man delivered and the hogs destroyed were afraid. They pleaded with Jesus to leave the area. In contrast, the man who had been rescued from his torment had only one desire—to be with the One who had saved him (v.18).

Jesus’ authority over the spirit world showed His ability to control evil spirits and to bring sanity and health to a man who had been the target of their harm.

Other examples in the Gospels that show Jesus’ power over the spirit world are: Matthew 9:32-33; 12:22; 17:18; Mark 1:23-26.

POWER OVER DEATH
Although we are inclined to ignore our own mortality, many reminders point to the reality of death. Parents become grandparents and weaken with age. Young people are sometimes struck down before their time by auto accidents or cancer. Yet the death of a child is one of the most distressing experiences for a parent. As someone has said, “We are prepared to bury our parents but never to bury our children.”

An account of the death of a child is recorded in Mark 5:35-43. Jairus, the ruler of a synagogue, was grief-stricken over his daughter who was sick and close to death. In desperation, he had sought out Jesus of Nazareth, who reportedly had marvelous healing powers. Sadly, just as Jesus had agreed to come with him to see his daughter, word came that she had died. Because of this, Jairus thought that Jesus’ help was no longer needed. Yet Jesus...
was determined to encourage his faith and still go see the little girl.

When Jesus arrived at Jairus’ home, He encountered mourning family and friends. When He said that the little girl was only sleeping, they mocked Him. They had seen her cold, lifeless body and knew she was dead. Underneath their unbelief was the assumption that there was no possibility of someone being awakened from death’s sleep.

With the distraught mother and father, Jesus, Peter, James, and John walked into the room where the child’s body lay. Picking up a lifeless hand, Jesus said, “Talitha, cumi,” which means, “Little girl, arise.” In response to this gentle command, the 12-year-old girl stood up and walked.

Although there is little more recorded than those present being “overcome with great amazement” (v.42), there must have been tears and hugs between a healthy child and her grateful parents.

Then Jesus gave two specific instructions. He told the parents to give their daughter something to eat, but not to tell anyone what they had seen. While showing care for the little girl, He apparently wanted those who had laughed at Him to experience the wonder of seeing the 12-year-old girl full of life again, without being invited into the parents’ joy.

In response to Jairus’ faith, and in spite of the mourners’ disbelief, Jesus showed power over death.

Other examples in the Gospels that show Jesus’ power over death are the widow’s son (Lk. 7:11-15) and Lazarus (Jn. 11:41-44).

Together, Jesus’ miracles showed the authority He
had over disease, nature, the spirit world, and death. But why did Jesus have to perform signs and wonders at all?

WHY DID JESUS DO MIRACLES?

In Western civilization, the impact of Jesus of Nazareth is difficult to overstate. Our current calendar is divided into BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini—Latin for “in the year of our Lord”). Kenneth Scott Latourette’s carefully researched study, The History Of The Expansion Of Christianity, chronicles the amazing influence of Christ’s life and teaching carried by missionaries from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and into the farthest corners of the earth.

Such unparalleled influence raises questions. Down through history many other religious leaders have also made great claims for themselves. Why then haven’t they had the same impact on history as Jesus?

One answer is that Jesus’ claims were confirmed by His miracles. Supernatural signs accompanying His words placed Him in a category apart from all other religious leaders. It was the pattern of the miraculous that confirmed a series of divine purposes.

TO FULFILL PROPHECY

One of the most important results of Jesus’ miracles is that they confirmed the appearance of the long-awaited, supernatural Messiah.

For centuries, the people of Israel had waited for the “anointed King” who would deliver them from pain and political oppression. Scores of prophecies anticipated the arrival of the Messiah.
who would miraculously deliver the people of God.

Michael Rydelnik, Professor of Jewish Studies at Moody Bible Institute, did not grow up believing in Jesus. His parents were Jews who survived the Nazi Holocaust. Initially, they opposed the thought that Israel could have missed the coming of their own Messiah. But when Michael’s mother studied the Scriptures, she eventually concluded that the miracle worker from Nazareth was the Messiah foreseen by the Jewish prophets. This caused Michael to become curious. As he carefully examined the Jewish Scriptures about Messiah, he was surprised to find so many unexplainable correlations with Jesus of the New Testament. Here are just a few of the striking parallels that Michael encountered:

- Born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Mt. 1:18-23)
- Rejected (Ps. 118:22; Mt. 21:42-43)
- Mocked (Isa. 50:6; Mt. 27:31,39-44)
- Crucified (Ps. 22:2-7; Mk. 15:34)
- Atoned for sin (Isa. 53:5-7; Acts 8:30-35)
- Resurrected (Ps. 16:8-11; Acts 2:25-32)
- Ascended (Ps. 110:1; Acts 1:9-11)

Michael is only one of countless people who have come to faith in Jesus over the centuries by considering the scriptural evidence. They have come to see that the miracles of Jesus confirmed the supernatural predictions that foresaw the life, death, and resurrection of the promised Messiah.

TO AUTHENTICATE HIS CLAIMS

In many ways, the claims Jesus made to forgive sins or to give everlasting life to
those who trusted Him were bound to create questions. No confession was more important to His Jewish countrymen than the words of Moses who taught them to say, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!” (Dt. 6:4). So when Jesus made claims that implied His own oneness with God, some of the religious leaders of Israel were convinced that Jesus was dangerous.

**His Divine Nature.**

As the New Testament shows, many who saw the miracles of Jesus were convinced that the long-anticipated Messiah of Israel had come. But when Jesus began talking about Himself in terms that belonged to God alone, many found they could no longer follow Him.

In John 10:30-39, we are told that some even took up stones to kill Him because He claimed, “I and My Father are one.” Jesus’ response was interesting:

*Do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”? If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him (vv.36-38).*

In effect, Jesus was acknowledging that the crowds would be justified in rejecting His claims if He couldn’t back up His words with the power of God. But because they were seeing miracles, He challenged them to believe their own eyes as a first step in coming to faith in Him.

This pattern of the supernatural would also confirm another purpose for which He said He came into the world.
His Ability To Rescue. If Jesus, the Creator of heaven and earth, came to our rescue (Jn. 1:1-14; Col. 1:13-17), we shouldn’t be surprised to find that He saved His greatest miracle to confirm the success of that mission. The Rabbi from Nazareth foresaw not only His death in Jerusalem but also His resurrection. His offer of forgiveness and of everlasting life would be confirmed by His ability to survive His own sacrificial death. In anticipation of this, Jesus said to His disciples:

A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also (Jn. 14:19).

In the hours that followed, those same disciples abandoned the One they had known as a miracle worker. In the worst and darkest moments of their lives, they watched their Rabbi and Messiah die a terrible death on a Roman cross.

Then came the event that changed their lives. Three days after Jesus’ crucifixion, He rose bodily from the grave. Over the next 40 days, the New Testament says that He appeared many times until even a doubting Thomas fell down in worship, saying, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28).

Only after Jesus’ resurrection did the reality of what happened form clearly in the minds of His disciples. It was then that Jesus opened their minds to see how the prophets of Israel had anticipated His suffering and death to make an atonement for sin (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-47).

His Promise To Return. Prior to His death and resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that their
relationship with Him was about to take a different form. On the night before His betrayal, in a place described as the upper room, He explained that it was necessary for Him to go away to prepare a place for them. He assured them, however, that He would return to bring them to His Father’s house (Jn. 14:1-3).

But in the hours that followed, it seemed as though Jesus had chosen to leave His disciples through death. His miraculous resurrection and appearances over the next 40 days, however, prepared His followers for His final departure—a departure that would reassure them of His promise to return.

In a final meeting on the Mount of Olives, Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit who would make them witnesses to all the world of what they had seen. Then, “While they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).

The significance of Jesus’ last miracle is important. If He had just walked out of His disciples’ lives without returning, they would have been confused about where He had gone. But by allowing them to witness His ascension into a cloud, He confirmed His promise to return in like manner. Luke wrote:

While they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10-11).
TO SHOW COMPASSION
Jesus’ miracles did more than authenticate His claims. Those same miracles also revealed His heart. Together they showed a compassion that was to be a mark of the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

In the 7th century BC, the prophet Isaiah had written:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Isa. 61:1-2).

Many centuries later, Jesus read these words at the beginning of His 3 years of public teaching. He astounded and angered the people of His own hometown of Nazareth, by saying, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:16-21).

It was clear that He saw Himself as the Messiah called to fulfill Isaiah’s prediction. He would be the One to announce good news to the poor and to heal the brokenhearted.

Compassion For The Bereaved. In Luke 7:11-15, Jesus and His disciples came upon a funeral procession in the city of Nain. There they found a brokenhearted widow who had just lost her only son.

When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” So he who was dead sat up and began to speak.
And He presented him to his mother (vv.13-15). This supernatural intervention into an all-too-common practice of burying the dead describes how a cold corpse miraculously became a living, breathing person once again. Not only was a mother’s grief turned to joy but the miracle shocked the crowds and became big news around the region.

The literal meaning of the word compassion indicates that Christ’s “heart was moved by” this grieving mother. He told her not to cry. Then He gave her back her son. Clearly the Messiah cared about the brokenhearted.

Compassion For Outcasts. In the days of Jesus, leprosy was an untreatable disease that ravaged bodies and turned victims into social outcasts. By law, those with the disease had to shout out, “Unclean!” as they entered the presence of others.

In the region of Galilee and Samaria, Jesus encountered 10 lepers. Standing at a distance, apart from the crowd, they cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Lk. 17:13).

Jesus heard their desperate calls for help. Luke 17 tells us that He gave them back their lives that day by healing them.

The text goes on to make another point, however. Of the 10 leprous men who were healed, one had an additional stigma. He was a Samaritan. Samaritans were regarded by the Jewish people as racially and spiritually unclean.

Ironically, the Samaritan is the only one of the 10 lepers who returned to thank Jesus and glorify God. He had experienced a miracle of compassion that did more than heal his body. He had
seen the heart of Jesus reach out to him across boundaries of racial and religious prejudice.

**Compassion For Gentiles.** As we read the New Testament, we see that Jesus spent most of His time with His Jewish countrymen. On at least one occasion, He indicated that He had been sent primarily to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24). Such an acknowledgment reflects His messianic connection with the people of Israel.

His mission, however, also had global implications. From the days of Moses, the prophets of Israel made it clear that their Messiah would fulfill God’s promise to bless the whole world through Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).

*A Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mk. 7:24-30).* This account tells us of a Greek mother of Syro-Phoenician birth who asked Jesus to deliver her daughter from demon possession. At first look, the Teacher’s response sounds heartless. To the desperate woman’s appeal, He replied, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (v.27).

Referring to Jewish people as children and Gentiles as dogs seems anything but compassionate. But it’s important to understand that the Greek word used to record what Jesus said does not refer to a wild dog or a dog of the streets. Instead, it’s *kunarion*, a puppy, a small house dog.

In response to Jesus, the Syro-Phoenician woman replied, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children’s crumbs” (v.28). Jesus was moved with compassion. He healed her daughter, and in the process He...
reached beyond the borders of Israel.

A Centurion (Mt. 8:5-13). Hollywood movies like Gladiator, Ben Hur, and Spartacus have graphically illustrated the injustice that took place under the Roman occupation of the ancient world. Because first-century Israel lived under the heavy heel of Roman authority, it’s interesting to see the way Jesus responded to a Roman military officer who came to Jesus on behalf of his ailing servant.

When Jesus offered to go to the man’s home, the centurion indicated that he was not worthy of such a visit. Instead, being a man who understood authority, he asked Jesus merely to say the word and his servant would be healed. The text indicates that Jesus marveled at the centurion’s faith and healed his servant.

Once again we see Jesus’ compassion reach out across racial lines even to the officer of an occupation army. In the process, He bridged normal human boundaries and showed the love of God for all.

Many of the religious leaders of Israel, however, did not warm to Jesus’ miracles or to His compassion.

WHY DID JESUS’ MIRACLES CREATE CONTROVERSY?

Today the dividing line between those who believe in biblical miracles and those who don’t is often the same line that divides religious from secular thinking. But in Jesus’ day the controversy surrounding His miracles was primarily among those who regarded themselves as people of faith.
THE RELIGIOUS LEGALISTS’ OBJECTION

Many religious leaders of Jesus’ day tended to focus on the external form of the law while losing sight of its spirit. Believing they had inherited the authority of Moses, the rabbis of Israel added rules over time that worked against the original intent of the law.

One of the reasons the miracles of Jesus created so much controversy is that He used His power not only to establish His own credibility but also to expose what had happened to Israel’s religion.

John’s gospel describes what happened when, on a Sabbath day, Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth:

Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” Therefore some of the Pharisees said, “This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them (9:14-16).

The irony is that a man who was born blind had his physical sight restored while the spiritually blind Pharisees could not see beyond their own traditions. By focusing on the letter of the law rather than on its intent, they had missed God’s purpose for the Sabbath and the significance of what Jesus had done.

Other incidents of conflict grew out of similar miracles. Luke 13:10-17 records the plight of an elderly woman crippled by a chronic back ailment. She too met Jesus
on a Sabbath day. The Pharisees watched to see if Jesus would heal on their day of rest. He did, and the ruler of the synagogue stepped forward and indignantly said to the crowd:

“There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day.” The Lord then answered him and said, “Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?” And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him (vv.14-17).

The Pharisees were indignant because He didn’t follow the law as they had interpreted it. Their loyalty to a rigid code of conduct caused them to miss God’s most basic life lessons. The charitable virtues of Judaism—faith, justice, and mercy—were lost (Mt. 23:23-24). In the process, they misunderstood a miracle that brought healing on the Sabbath—a day originally intended to bring renewal to the people of God.

THE RELIGIOUS SKEPTICS’ OBJECTION

In our own day, it’s not difficult to find some church leaders who deny certain miracles of the Bible. Interestingly, in first-century Israel, a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees were known for their rejection of
miracles. These Sadducees represented an aristocratic priestly class who, while putting emphasis on moral and religious law, did not believe in the resurrection of the dead nor in the existence of angels. Their selective interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures got them into ongoing arguments with the Pharisees (Acts 23:8).

In Matthew 22:23-33, we see how the Sadducees' skepticism put them at odds with Jesus. In an attempt to question a future resurrection, they confronted Him with a hypothetical situation in which a woman was married and widowed seven times before she herself died. The Sadducees' example was based on a Mosaic law indicating the responsibility of a man to marry his deceased brother's wife in order to give her children (Dt. 25:5-10).

The Sadducees' question was this: “Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her” (v.28). The Sadducees were trying to make the resurrection appear ridiculous.

Jesus answered them: “You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching (vv.29-33).

With His response, Jesus challenged an anti-supernatural assumption.
in which the Sadducees denied the resurrection.

Jesus’ words silenced the Sadducees (v.34). But over time, the skeptical Sadducees would have to confront more than Jesus’ explanation.

In John 11:1-44 we read about a man named Lazarus who had fallen ill. Because Jesus was a special friend of the family, Lazarus’ sisters sent for Jesus to come, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick” (v.3).

What happened next was surprising:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was (vv.5-6).

The irony is striking. Jesus loved the family of Lazarus, but He deliberately delayed His response to the sisters’ urgent request. As a result, Lazarus died.

When Jesus finally arrived, He was confronted by two brokenhearted sisters who couldn’t understand why Jesus didn’t come right away.

Although John tells us that Jesus cried when He saw the grief of His friends (vv.33-35), it is just as clear that Jesus had every intent of doing a miracle to show His power over death (vv.14-15, 25-26). He took this opportunity to reveal that the hope of the resurrection resided in Him alone.

Jesus said:

*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die* (vv.25-26).

Then Jesus came to the grave of Lazarus and cried out:

“Lazarus, come forth!”

And he who had died came out bound hand
and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.” Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him (vv.43-45).

Jesus had answered the skepticism of the Sadducees with more than words. He did a miracle that supported His personal claim to be the source of resurrection life and showed their denial of resurrection to be baseless.

THE SCIENTISTS’ OBJECTION
Pioneers of the scientific method began their work in Athens over 500 years before the birth of Christ. Aristotle was the great founder of systematic study in biology, botany, astronomy, and many other disciplines. He was also tutor to Alexander the Great, who Hellenized much of the Western world during his conquests. The impact of Greek culture and intellectual pursuits had spread throughout the Roman Empire by the time of Jesus.

Hellenized Jews tended to be sophisticated thinkers who tried to reconcile the revelation of the Hebrew Scriptures with Greek philosophy. Likewise, there were Greeks who had become proselytes of Judaism who carried the analytical thinking of Greece into their new faith.

In John 12, we learn that eyewitnesses of Lazarus’ resurrection were spreading the word. It’s possible that this is the reason some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover asked to see Jesus.

*Therefore the people, who were with [Jesus] when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from*
the dead, bore witness. For this reason the people also met Him, because they heard that He had done this sign. The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, “You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!” Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (vv.17-21).

Even though we are not told the motivation of these Greeks, it’s likely that they had heard about the resurrection of Lazarus. Talking to Jesus would allow them to interview the person who was rumored to have actually raised the dead back to life.

If nothing else, they are a picture of good science pursuing the evidence of Lazarus’ resurrection.

Although they are a minority, many scientists of our own day have shown the same openness exhibited by these ancient Greeks. They are willing to examine the evidence for Jesus’ miracles and follow it wherever it leads (see *The New Testament Documents—Are They Reliable?* by F. F. Bruce and *The Supernaturalness Of Christ* by Wilbur M. Smith).

**THE OCCULTISTS’ OBJECTION**

Today a growing number of people are concluding that there are dimensions of the real world that cannot be tested by scientific methods.

Many who embrace New Age thinking believe we are all gods with untapped powers of the mind. Some in this group see Jesus as an example of what any “enlightened” person can do.
They are also likely to think it is possible to make contact with spirit entities and those who have passed from this life.

While the Bible acknowledges the existence of angelic spirits who serve God in human affairs (Heb. 1:14), it also speaks of fallen angels who are deceptive and destructive at heart (Eph. 6:10-18).

In Matthew 12, we read about a man who “was demon-possessed, blind and mute” (v.22). Jesus recognized the man’s problem and delivered him from the evil spirit that was troubling him. In response to this deliverance, some Jewish countrymen asked each other, “Could this be the Son of David?” (v.23). In other words, “Is this David’s descendant, the promised Messiah of 2 Samuel 7:12-16, who has come to rule over us and bring healing to our nation?”

The Pharisees attempted to counter the public interest in Jesus by saying, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (v.24).

The argument of these religious leaders parallels the belief of those who acknowledge that Jesus did miracles but that He did so by tapping into spiritual powers rooted in a source other than the God of the Bible.

Jesus responded to the accusation by asking why He would cast out a demon if He were in league with the devil (vv.26-27). His reasoning was difficult to challenge. But His wisdom and power were even more compelling. Christ’s ministry was characterized by serving others, exposing falsehood, giving hope to the weak, standing for truth despite consequences, and sacrificing Himself so
that others might live. Indeed, it was the character of Christ that further exposed the false accusation that He was doing miracles by the power of Satan.

**ARE JESUS’ MIRACLES STILL IMPORTANT?**

The question is significant. What do you say to someone who says, “I don’t doubt that Jesus did miracles. I just don’t think it matters. Even if Jesus did heal the sick and raise the dead, so what? What difference does that make today?”

The person who asks, “So what?” needs to answer a different question: “Are you looking for real answers, or are you asking ‘So what?’ only to put distance between yourself and the claims of Christ?”

If the reports of Jesus’ miracles are only tradition and myth, their significance is easily dismissed. But the writers of the New Testament were convinced that His miracles had a time, a place, credible witnesses, and most important, a role in fulfilling the Jewish prophecies.

If the Gospel writers are right, then Jesus’ ability to heal diseased bodies, deliver from demons, and raise loved ones from the dead reflect His timeless significance to all of us.

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be one of the blind or the lepers whom Jesus healed, or the dead to whom He gave life? If so, your heart is more likely to resonate with the Bible passages that tell us we have all been born spiritually blind and diseased with a fallen human nature inherited from Adam.

If you see your own
experience as consistent with what the Bible says about human nature, then you may be ready to see that Jesus’ death for your sins and His resurrection from the dead are the miracles that offer forgiveness and everlasting life to anyone who believes (Jn. 3:16-18; 5:24; Rom. 3:23; 6:23; 1 Jn. 5:11).

Personal salvation is the beginning of what the Bible says God is planning for His family. Beyond the redemption of our own souls is His promise to renew all of heaven and earth.

In the last book of the Bible we find a vision of the future that brings fulfillment to everything that began in the book of Genesis. In his Revelation, John wrote, “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (21:1). This passage provides us with God’s intent for His work of re-creating our world: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The universe we now know will be retired and replaced with something wonderfully new.

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By the great miracle of Jesus’ resurrection, He became the first of many who will be raised from the dead in the last day.

But how do the miracles of Jesus fit into this “cosmic overhaul”? The answer is found in the term firstfruits. When a farmer’s crops are ready for harvest, the first portions he gathers are called the firstfruits of what God has given him. The
New Testament says that when Jesus rose from the dead He became “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). By the great miracle of Jesus’ resurrection, He became the first of many who will be raised from the dead in the last day.

But this promise of everlasting life in the presence of God requires a positive response from your heart. You can accept or reject God’s payment for your sin.

The significance of this decision is beyond measure. How each of us responds to Christ’s payment for the debt of our sin will determine where we will spend the future—in God’s presence, or separated from Him for eternity (Rev. 20:11-15).

If you have not yet received Christ’s offer of forgiveness, you must first admit that you have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and that your sin has separated you from God. Then you can go to God in prayer to receive His pardon and the gift of eternal life. Jesus said:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life (Jn. 5:24).

If you sincerely trust Christ to forgive your sin, you can have the assurance that you have passed from being under God’s judgment to being adopted as one of His own children (Rom. 8:15-17).

For further help on how to grow as a Christian, see the booklet How Do You Live The Christian Life? (Q0702) www.rbc.org/bible_study/discovery_series/booklet/31030.aspx
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