

Series: *The Book of Acts: A Fresh Encounter*

15th Sermon in Series

Signs, Wonders, and the Spread of the Gospel

Acts 5:12-16

12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 15 so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. 16 The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Signs and Wonders: An Answer to Prayer

This section is the third summary of the early church that Luke provides. Luke tells us in verse 12 that *“many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles.”*

This is an answer to one of the requests in the prayer that we looked at two weeks ago. Let's look back at that prayer in chapter 4.

Acts 4:29-30 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

You recall that Peter and John had been arrested and held overnight to be questioned by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish equivalent to our Supreme Court) about how they had healed a man born lame.

After being commanded to *“not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”* (4:18) they were released. Peter and John “went to their own” friends and reported all that had happened and what the “chief priests and elders” had said.

Three Requests

These believers responded by praying that God would do three things (Acts 4:24-30).

- 1) That God would grant boldness to continue to speaking and teaching about Jesus
- 2) That God would stretch out His hand to heal people

3) That God would grant signs and wonders performed through the name of Jesus

The very next verse (4:31) tells us that after they had prayed the Holy Spirit came, shook the house they were in, and filled them all giving them the courage “to continue speaking the word of God with boldness.”

God Granted the First Request :: Speaking Boldly

The Holy Spirit came, filled them, and granted them boldness in speaking the word. We saw two weeks ago that the primary effect of being filled with the Holy Spirit is the ability to be a bold witness for Jesus (Luke 24:47-49; Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8, 13, 31, **33**). So God answered the first request. The Holy Spirit came and they spoke with boldness.

God Granted Second and Third Request :: Healing and Signs & Wonders

Our text for today (Acts 5:12-16) describes the answer to the other two requests. Verse 12 tells us that God granted the signs and wonders and verse 15 & 16 tell us that God granted them to be able to heal the sick.

Why Does God Answer Their Request?

The question is, why? Why does God grant these three requests? In particular, why does God grant the request for “signs and wonders?” The reason this question arises is because Jesus said it was wicked and evil to ask for signs.

Matthew 12:38-39: Seeking Signs Is Evil

In Matthew 12 some scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” 39 But He answered them, “*And evil and an adulterous generation seeks for a sign...*”

These are very strong words. Jesus tells these scribes and Pharisees that they are evil and adulterous for asking for a sign. Peter and John surely heard what Jesus had taught about seeking signs. I’m quite sure they would not have prayed something that was evil.

Yet here in Acts 4 these believers pray for “signs and wonders” and God grants their request? If it is evil to seek signs then why does God say yes to this prayer?

The answer must be that there is a right way and wrong way to seek signs and wonders. The scribes and Pharisees did it the wrong way. The believers praying in Acts 4 did it the right way. So what’s the difference?

What Signs Do – They Point to Things

In answering this question, it will be helpful to ask what signs do and don’t do. Signs are pointers. Signs point to things that are beyond themselves. Signs are *not* the things to which they are pointing. Signs are not the ends in themselves. They are not the destination to which they point.

Welcome To Boston

Imagine you are driving down I-93 and you see a big green sign that says, “Welcome to Boston.” You notice a group of people standing around at the base of the sign celebrating. You stop just to make sure everything is OK. You ask them what all the excitement is about and you are shocked when they tell you, “We’ve been traveling a long time and we’ve finally arrived at the city!”

You smile and say, “Well... that’s just the sign. Downtown Boston is actually two more miles. This is just the beginning of the city limits.”

You receive a stern look from a frowning man who looks at you like you’re nuts and replies, “Thank you very much, but you’re quite mistaken. This is Boston,” as he points to the sign, “You see the sign says so! Good day.”

Everyone knows that signs are not the same as the thing to which they point. Signs are merely frail indicators that point to a greater reality beyond themselves. The sign “Welcome to Boston” is frail pointer to the reality of the city that lies just beyond.

One Sign = Two Conclusions

When the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 12 (see 12:22-45) approached Jesus and said, “We wish to see a sign,” Jesus had just healed a demon-oppressed man who was both blind and mute. Jesus healed the man completely and his eyes and mouth were opened.

The People Saw The Son of David

Matthew 12:23 says, “*And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?”*” When the people saw the sign that Jesus had done, they realized the sign might be pointing them to the conclusion that Jesus was not just some upstart carpenter seeking to move up the rabbinical ladder! The miracle made them stop and wonder if He was more than He appeared to be.

The Pharisees Saw Beelzebul

However, that didn’t happen to the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw something completely different. They saw the same sign but arrived at a very different conclusion. The scribes and the Pharisees said, “*It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.*” ***They refused to believe the sign!*** The people were asking the question, but not the Pharisees. Jesus answered them.

Matthew 12:26 *And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? 27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

Jesus clarified the meaning of what He had done. He silenced them. The healing of the demon-oppressed man was a sign pointing to the fact that the kingdom of God had come.

Yet after Jesus clarified this did they believe it! Did they choose to rejoice that the kingdom of God had come? No, they did not. They continued in unbelief.

And then to make things worse, a few more scribes and Pharisees step up to Jesus, as if He hadn't said a word and asked, "Let's see another sign Jesus" (Matthew 12:38). It is at this point that Jesus said, "*An evil and an adulterous generation seeks for a sign.*"

Then Jesus went on and said, "*The men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*" (Matthew 12:38-42).

Jesus was saying, "Jonah did not heal any sick people or cast out any demons when he went to Nineveh. All he did was preach and they believed and repented. And you scribes and Pharisees just saw Me do way more than Jonah ever did and you are still refusing to believe in Me and repent???"

You just witnessed Me cast a demon out of this man, open his blind eyes so that now he sees, and open his mouth so that he now speaks and yet you have the nerve to ask Me to do another sign??? If you didn't believe the first sign, why will you believe another one??? You are refusing to believe undeniable evidence. You are an evil and adulterous generation!"

Signs and wonders were pointers. The amazing things that Jesus did pointed to the reality of who He was (and is). The miracles Jesus performed simply pointed to the fact that He was God's chosen Messiah. The wonders that Jesus performed pointed to the fact that He was the Lord's anointed.

God was with Him. And all the Pharisees knew this, but they refused to believe in Jesus. One of the Pharisees, a man named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and said,

John 3:2 "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus then responded, "*Nicodemus, if you want to see the kingdom of God, then you must be born again*" (John 3:3).

The scribes and Pharisees had refused to go where the signs were pointing, namely to the conclusion that the man performing them (i.e. Jesus) was the Messiah. Instead, they had settled for being content to see signs rather than submit to the Savior.

Merely seeing signs and wonders will not save your soul. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again. Witnessing wonders does not in and of themselves awaken saving faith in the human heart. Don't believe the lie Satan will tell you, "If only you could see some hard evidence then you could believe. If only you could see Jesus do some miracle then you could believe in Him."

Seeing Is NOT Believing

Seeing is **not** believing. This was the mistake of rich man in Luke 16. The rich man had died and gone to Hell. He cried out to Abraham and said,

The Rich Man and Lazarus: Luke 16:27-31

27 And he said, Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment. 29 But Abraham said, They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them. 30 And he said, No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. 31 He said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

That is amazing. This rich man thought for sure that if only his brothers could see someone come back from the dead, then surely they would repent and believe. Abraham says, “Nope. If they do not believe the message, then they will not believe even if they see a man come back from the dead!”

The Children of Israel

The children of Israel are another example. Consider all the miracles they witnessed as God delivered them from the “iron furnace of slavery” in Egypt (Deut 4:20; Jer 11:4). They personally witnessed the 10 plagues that decimated Egypt, they personally witnessed the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea even walking through the sea bottom with walls of water on each side (Ex 14:22), and even heard the very voice of God Himself (Ex 20:1, 18-19) and yet they died in the desert because they refused to have faith in God.

Hebrews 3:19 *So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.*

Summary: Signs and Wonders Do Not Save

The children of Israel saw many signs and wonders and yet many of them still refused to believe. Signs and wonders do not save. Neither do they in and of themselves produce saving faith. So we need to be very careful not to place too much weight on signs and wonders. Yet signs and wonders do have a significant role to play in bringing people to saving faith.

What Signs Can Do

The believers in Acts 4 had prayed for God to grant signs and wonders and He did! So what do they do? What role do signs and wonders play in salvation? Let's look again at Acts 5:12.

5:12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. ... 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.

Signs & Wonders Provide Opportunity to Preach

Notice there is a connection between signs and wonders and salvation of sinners. What is the connection? The connection is the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The miracles, signs, and wonders are a visible demonstration of the reality of the power of the name of Jesus.

The reason God answered the prayer in Acts 4:30 was because they were not seeking the signs and wonders themselves. They were seeking the occasion signs and wonders could bring, namely an opportunity to boldly proclaim Jesus. They did not **just** want to see miracles. Those believers were seeking opportunities to tell people about Jesus.

Acts 4:30 *“while You stretch out Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

Signs & Wonders Grab Attention

They wanted to proclaim the name of Jesus. Signs and wonders and healings are used by God to grab the attention of people so that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be heard. The occasion signs and wonders and healings provide is to shock stubborn, sinful hearts into listening to a saving message. They draw out of the regular routine and slow us down long enough to listen.

Moses and the Burning Bush

This is what happened to Moses. Moses was a work one day watching over the flocks and suddenly he saw a bush on fire but the fire was not destroying the bush. So Moses says,

Exodus 3:3 *And Moses said, I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.*
4 *When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, Moses, Moses! And he said, Here I am.*

The miracle of the burning bush got Moses' attention and then God spoke. This is exactly the pattern we see again and again in Acts. Miracles, signs, and wonders draw people's attention and then it's time to speak the gospel of Jesus and proclaim His name.

Peter At Pentecost

In Acts 2 the miracle of Pentecost occurred and Peter took the opportunity to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins (2:38) and 3,000 people were saved.

Healing the Man Born Lame

He did the same again when he healed the man born lame (Acts 3). After healing the man Peter preached and 2,000 more were saved (4:4).

Philip the Evangelist

Philip, the evangelist (Acts 8:4-8), went through Samaria doing signs and they “paid attention” because of what they saw they listened to him when he “preached the word,”

and as a result “... there was much joy in that city.”

Peter Healed Aeneas

Peter traveled to Lydda and healed a man who had been bedridden for eight years. Peter proclaimed healing in the name of Jesus to them, healed bedridden Aeneas, and “*All the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord*” (Acts 9:35).

Peter Raised Tabitha

Peter had been traveling around preaching (Acts 9:32). He was called to Joppa where he in the name of Jesus raised Tabitha from the dead. “*And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord*” (Acts 9:42).

Paul and the Philippian Jailer

The miraculous midnight earthquake got the attention of the Philippian jailer so that he asked, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). Paul then shared the gospel of Jesus with him and he and his whole family were saved.

Signs and wonders serve as a powerful assistant to validate the claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Luke even spells this out very plainly for us.

Acts 14:3 *So they [Paul & Barnabas] remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.*

Paul and Barnabas were boldly preaching “the word of His grace” and God was assisting their preaching by witnessing to the truth of the message by “granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.”

What Does This Mean For Us?

- 1) **Praying that God will use signs, and wonders, and healings to give opportunity to tell people about Jesus is not evil.** Yearning for the miraculous while ignoring Jesus is evil. Demanding more proof from God, as a guise to continue on in sin and unbelief is also evil.

Remember what Jesus said Thomas. “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (John 20:29).

Therefore, since it is not evil to pray like this, we too should pray this way.

- 2) **Signs and wonders and healings are primarily for those who have no faith.**

Yesterday I quickly read through Acts and I counted over a dozen instances where miracles along with the proclamation of the name of Jesus lead to the salvation of sinners and only one instance of a miracle happening among believers (Eutychus raised from the dead Acts 20:7-12).

Acts 5:16 says, *“The people gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits and they were all healed.”*

This is the first mention of the gospel reaching beyond Jerusalem. People were hearing what was happening among those who followed Jesus and they were drawn in and 5:14 says, “multitudes of men and women were added to the Lord.” They saw the signs and wonders and they believed what the apostles were preaching about the name of Jesus and they “were added to the Lord.”

- 3) **God still uses signs and wonders today.** There are so many good and godly men whom I deeply respect that land on both sides of this issue. When I was young I was taught that signs and wonders and healings ceased to be used by God after the death of the apostles.

I was taught that God had granted the miraculous gifts to confirm the apostles as God’s unique and authoritative messengers. It is certainly true that apostles were authoritative and unique and God used them in ways He hasn’t used other, writing Scripture for example. However both Peter and Paul didn’t seem to think that they themselves were anything special.

When Peter and John healed the man born lame, Peter said, *“Men of Israel... why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made this man walk?”* (Acts 4:12)

And when Paul and Barnabas healed a similar man, “crippled from birth,” and the crowds thought they were the gods Zeus and Hermes and wanted to sacrifice to them, they said, *“Men, why are you doing this? We also are men, of like nature as you...”* (Acts 14:15).

And Jesus said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.”* (John 14:12-14)

In other words, Jesus has the power and authority to enable us to do anything that will bring glory to God through the name of Jesus.

Some will argue that we just do not see God working in this way today. One possible reason could be due to lack of faith. When Jesus went to His hometown of Nazareth

we are told, “And [Jesus] *did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.*” (Matthew 13:58). Perhaps we do not see God’s mighty works because we really do not believe He can do them!

But I read that God is working in this way in other countries like China and Asia. If you have read the book *The Heavenly Man*, which is the story of Brother Yun, you will read how he was miraculously released from prison in a similar way to Peter, along with dozens of other miracles.

Read the publications of Gospel for Asia. They regularly report that God grants miracles as the gospel is preached.

We must be balanced in our walk with Jesus. We must avoid the evil of seeking signs only. But I do not want to inhibit the work of the Spirit of God because I fail to believe that God can do the impossible. Signs and wonders and healings are definitely not the normal way that God works, but to say that signs and wonders and healings have ceased is to say something that the Bible does not say.