

Signs & Wonders

Acts 5:12-16 on November 15, 2020

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Please read Acts 5:12-16 before going further in this manuscript.

Good morning church! I'm greeting you this morning from the basement of my house. Last week I was in close contact with someone who later discovered that they were positive for COVID-19. So, out of an abundance of caution, I'm in self-quarantine for about 5 more days. I hope to be back in the pulpit next Sunday. And I'm excited to preach on Acts 6 then, which talks about Deacon Ministry. Thanks to technology, I'm able to be here with you this morning on Zoom via livestream. Many of you have confessed to me that when you watch the service via livestream, you are often still in your pajamas. So, I'll have to admit, I was tempted to preach in my pajamas this morning. But I decided not to push my luck. Well, today we are going to back up to Acts 5:12-16. Last Sunday Pastor Eric brought us a great message, from the last half of Acts 5. He talked about how the early church faced opposition but remained faithful to their gospel commission. If you missed it, you'll want to be sure to go back in our sermon archives and check it out.

Acts 5:12 begins, "The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people...." Now, you'll notice that I can't put the slides up in the corner of the screen like I normally do. So, you will want to make sure that you have your own Bible out and open this morning. Verse 12 causes us to think about this fascinating topic of Signs/Wonders. In fact, that's the title for my sermon today: Signs & Wonders. Rather than go through a longer narrative section, like we have been doing lately, today we're going to have a more topical approach.

In Acts 5:12-16, Luke, the author of Acts, gives us a summary update on the early church. A key theme for this particular summary is the clear demonstration of God's power through signs & wonders. Let's take a closer look at these Signs & Wonders. The book of Acts records a total of fourteen miracles.¹ In a previous sermon, we already looked in detail at the first miracle: the lame man leaping in the temple. In the chapters still to come, we'll see even more paralytics be healed. We'll also encounter some miraculous prison escapes, people being raised from the dead, some exorcisms, and so on. However, there were FAR more than just fourteen miracles performed during the ministry of the early church.² Acts 5:12 tells us, "The apostles performed MANY signs and wonders among the people...." In fact, ten different times throughout the book of Acts, we'll find summary statements that say something like this: "MANY signs and wonders were being performed."³ These summaries of "Signs/Wonders" begin as early as Acts 2:43 and continue right on through to the very end of the book in Acts 28:9. Here's the point: the one thing that all of these many signs & wonders have in common, is that they point to Jesus!⁴ Much like a sign on the highway that says "right turn ahead" or "left-turn ahead," signs/wonders point people toward Jesus!

1. Signs & Wonders point to Jesus!⁵ The reason that God choose to do signs/wonders in the early church, was to demonstrate the ongoing power of Jesus.⁶ They prove that there is a clear connection and continuity between Jesus' ministry before His ascension and Jesus' ongoing ministry after His ascension. Jesus' ministry and message are ongoing, in and through the apostles and all of the believers in the early church. This pointing to Jesus, is twofold.

1a) Signs/wonders draw attention to the message about Jesus.⁷ We see this clearly if we look ahead to Acts 8:5-6, "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he

¹ See Acts 3:1-10; 5:1-11; 5:17-26; 9:32-35, 36-42; 12:1-19, 20-23; 13:4-12; 14:8-11; 16:16-19; 16:20-34; 20:7-12; 28:3-6, 7-8.

² See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 157 where he cites Pesch and Schneider.

³ See Acts 2:43; 5:12, 15, 16; 6:8; 8:6-7, 13; 14:3; 19:11-12; 28:8-9.

⁴ See Acts 3:12, 16.

⁵ Although, interestingly enough, Jesus' name isn't highlighted in this particular summary passage.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 157.

⁷ It's no wonder Acts 5:17 reports that the Sadducees "were filled with jealousy." They were losing clout quickly, and probably losing followers to this community of Christ-followers. The authoritative message that was being preached and the powerful signs and wonders that were being performed were exceedingly dangerous to the ever-loosening grip of the established Jewish leadership.

said.” Verse 6 highlights a significant truth that we DARE NOT miss today: Signs and wonders were NOT the key to the success of the early church. Rather, as we see here, signs/wonders caused people to pay close attention to what Philip said.⁸ In other words, the signs/wonders didn’t make the church grow, the preaching of the gospel message made it grow! Here’s the 2nd way that they point to Jesus:

1b) Signs/wonders authenticate the message about Jesus.⁹ Acts 14:3 explains it this way, “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.” Hebrews 2:3-4 agrees, “...This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” With great power, through “signs, wonders and various miracles”, the authenticity of the message about Jesus was confirmed in the early church.

Now, this is all well and good; in fact, it’s quite exciting! But what does this have to do with us? It’s not like we have these kinds of miraculous things happening all around us, the way that they did in the early church. Here’s one way that this has to do with us:

2. Signs & Wonders remind us that our God is a supernatural being. The God we love and serve, the God that we have devoted our lives to is a supernatural being. This is explicit in the very nature of the definition of what we mean by the word “God.” But sometimes, in our modern, scientific world, we may lose track of this part of our belief system. This is probably not intentional, but it certainly is DANGEROUS. In fact, losing track of God’s supernatural essence and miraculous power can be quite DEADLY. To our own demise, we may begin to humanize God or develop a limited view of Him. In fact, that may very well be what happened to Ananias and Saphira just a few verses earlier: they forgot who they were dealing with, when they tried to lie to the Holy Spirit. Trifling with the almighty, supernatural, living God cost them their very lives.

One of the reasons that we may fall away, from a proper reverence for God, and His supernatural essence, is that we don’t tend to see Him working through signs/wonders in our world today. Now certainly, God is under NO obligation to prove Himself to us. However, when we don’t experience signs & wonders on a regular basis in our own personal lives, it can be easy for us to drift from a proper understanding of God’s awesome nature.¹⁰ Jehovah God, the one true God, has been proving Himself to mankind all throughout our history. As far back as the first day of creation. Romans 1:20 reminds us, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”¹¹ In other words, the very fact that we are CREATED beings, speaks clearly to the reality that our Creator is a supernatural God. If we don’t believe this, then we don’t believe the God of the Bible.

On and on, throughout the Bible, God has demonstrated His miraculous power through signs & wonders. From sending the ten plagues on Egypt, parting the Red Sea, and providing manna and quail in the wilderness to Jesus turning water into wine, calming the storm, and raising Lazarus from the dead. The point is simply this: without a supernatural God, we really have no “god” at all. Reading about all of these signs & wonders in the book of Acts is a helpful reminder to all of us, as Christ-followers today, that our God is a supernatural being who works in mysterious/miraculous ways. He’s not just an organized system of teachings or a collection of moral truths. He’s not just someone sitting up in the sky that we sing to. He is the all-powerful, supernatural, awesome Creator of this universe. He is ABLE to do WHATEVER He wants, WHENEVER He wants to do it. And we best NOT forget that!

⁸ As Luke is writing the book of Acts, he attributes the explosive growth of the early church to the powerful preaching of the gospel message. See discussion by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 102.

⁹ See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 112.

¹⁰ In fact, Jesus Himself, when being tempted by Satan to throw Himself off of the top of the temple, declared, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

¹¹ See also Acts 17:24-28.

And so, as we consider this topic of signs & wonders, we shouldn't have any questions about God's supernatural nature or His ABILITY to do miraculous things. But what many of us probably do wonder is this:

3. WHY aren't Signs & Wonders as common today? After all, God hasn't changed. Theologians describe Him as "immutable." Hebrews 13:8 tells us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Therefore, if all of these signs/wonders were being done "in Jesus' name," in the early church, what changed? What happened? If signs & wonders point to Jesus, then wouldn't it make sense for God to keep doing them? If signs & wonders are a helpful reminder, that our God is a supernatural being, then wouldn't it make sense for God to keep performing miracles? There are many different explanations out there, as to WHY signs/wonders aren't as common today. Let's consider 4 possible explanations. One explanation is that...

3a) Signs & Wonders ARE just as common today. We just don't see them and experience them that much in modern America. But, in other parts of the world, particularly on the mission field, LOTS of miraculous things are happening. Among the persecuted church and in areas of pervasive unbelief, where resistance to the gospel is strong, God is breaking through in miraculous ways. There are many reports of God sending people dreams and visions and performing miraculous signs and healings in Jesus' name.¹² A 2nd explanation is that...

3b) Signs & Wonders are no longer needed today. This is, of course, almost exactly opposite of the 1st explanation. This is a sometimes referred to as Cessationism. Now certainly, this explanation isn't nearly as exciting, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily wrong. As a matter of fact, many fine Bible scholars hold to Cessationism. And it's not necessarily because they lack genuine faith, or a passion for Jesus, or that they are being unreasonable. Their thought process goes something like this. God only worked through signs and wonders at key points in history, when He was delivering some new special revelation. Now that we have His complete revelation in His written Word (the Bible), there is no longer any need for signs and wonders in our current day and age. One author explains it this way: "When God delivers new special revelation, He employs extraordinary methods such as prophecy and tongues to deliver that revelation... extraordinary signs such as miracles, to confirm those whom we should receive (prophets and Apostles) as His inspired deliverers of that revelation. Consequently, when God is not delivering new special revelation, He does not use extraordinary methods and signs; rather, He works in and through the exposition of His special revelation (Scripture) by gifted teachers and duly appointed church elders."¹³ Now, I'll tip my hand here, I don't personally agree with Cessationism.¹⁴ But I do respect fellow believers who hold to this position. And we should note, that within the EFCA, we don't see disagreements over the continuity of signs & wonders, as an issue to divide over. Personally, I'm drawn to a different explanation as to why signs/wonders aren't as common today.

3c) Signs & Wonders go through seasons of ebb and flow. For example, in 1 Samuel 3:1 we learn that... "The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions."¹⁵ What we're getting at here is that the Bible seems to indicate that there are times throughout human history when there is more/less supernatural activity. John Stott notes that, "the thrust of the Bible is that miracles clustered... at fresh epochs of revelation, particularly Moses the lawgiver, the new prophetic witness spearheaded by Elijah and Elisha, the Messianic ministry of Jesus, and the apostles."¹⁶ In other words, "signs & wonders go through seasons of ebb/flow." We might also remember things like the 400 silent years between the end of

¹² "There may well be situations in which miracles are appropriate today, for example, on the frontiers of missions and in atmospheres of pervasive unbelief." John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 102-103.

¹³ He goes on to say, "God's people have gone centuries without a prophet at various times in history. For example, God did not speak to His people by prophets—at least by prophets as we normally conceive of them—from Abraham to Moses. Moreover, first-century Jews recognized that the Lord sent no prophets during the four centuries or so between Malachi and John the Baptist. Yet, God was at work in those eras even when there were no prophets." Robert Rothwell, *Cessationism*, *Tabletalk* magazine, April 2020. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2020/04/cessationism/>

¹⁴ However, I will admit there are some verses in the Bible that do seem to support at least part of this way of thinking. For example, Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe."

¹⁵ Consider Amos 8:11-12 and Revelation 1:20, 2:5

¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, bottom of p. 102.

Old Testament Malachi and the beginning of the New Testament Gospels, or the 430 years of captivity of the Israelites. Exodus 12:40 says, "Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years." In other words, as much as we marvel over the 10 plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the manna/quail, we shouldn't forget, that for OVER 400 years God's people didn't appear to be experiencing ANY signs & wonders AT ALL.

It COULD very well be that right now is a season of ebbing tides. That said, this ebb could very well be getting ready to turn to a surging flow AT ANY TIME. It's not predictable; God is the One who's in control of these seasons. So let's pose this question to ourselves E-Free Bemidji: Are we ready for God to move in powerful, supernatural, gospel-authenticating ways? AND... are we sure that we really WANT Him to? Brother or Sister in Christ, if we really want spiritual revival, and we want God to move in supernatural ways in our day and age, then we need to honestly ask ourselves, how badly do we really want it?¹⁷

In Acts 5:13-14, we find a seeming paradox. Right in the midst of the Apostles performing many signs and wonders... verse 13 says that "no one else dared join them." Verse 14 says "nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord." So which one is it, "no one joined them" or "more and more believed"? Apparently, it was some of each. You see, some were very drawn to all that God was doing in the early church. These amazing signs and wonders, this authoritative teaching, the Good News about God's grace and new life in Christ. **So, they wanted to get CLOSER to it.** But others, well, for them... the presence of the living God was just far too scary and dangerous! After all, Ananias and Saphira dropped dead in their tracks before the living God. All of these signs/wonders revealed a power and an authority that was just way too overwhelming!¹⁸ **So, they BACKED AWAY from it.** And that leads us right into our 4th and final explanation for WHY signs & wonders may not be as common today:

3d) We aren't praying for Signs & Wonders. It' at least POSSIBLE, that one of the reasons that we DON'T see as many signs and wonders in our world today, is that we DON'T pray the way the early church did.¹⁹ Do you remember their prayer just one chapter earlier, back in Acts 4? After the Sanhedrin first put them in jail and then warned them NOT to speak in Jesus' name, Peter and John go back to the church and they have a PRAYER MEETING. It was a POWERFUL prayer meeting; SO powerful, in fact, that God shook the building. They prayed for boldness to speak God's Word; but they also prayed for something else. In Acts 4:30 they prayed to God, "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

Should we pray for signs/wonders today? Should we pray for miracles and supernatural healing? On the one hand, praying for miracles, presents the danger of raising false hopes, or of disenfranchising people's faith in God's love and goodness. On the other hand, NOT praying for miracles, presents the danger of misunderstanding God's divine nature and of missing out on God's supernatural activity in our lives and our ministries. Yes, we should approach God with reverent humility. No, we cannot and should not DEMAND anything from God. And certainly, we always pray for God's will to be done, not ours. It's His plan, His timing, His agenda, not ours. Even so, the biblical model for prayer is boldness and persistence.²⁰

Brother or Sister in Christ, maybe our prayers have gotten too small.²¹ Maybe our understanding of God has gotten too small. But the name of Jesus is not small! The name of Jesus is mighty and powerful to accomplish Signs & Wonders!

¹⁷ Take a look at Exodus 34:29-30 and the story with the pigs in Matthew 8:28-34, especially verse 34 and then Matthew 12:28.

¹⁸ See discussion by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 113.

¹⁹ Also consider Matthew 13:58 where it says this about Jesus ministry, "And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith."

²⁰ Even audacity. See Luke 11:8 and James 5:13-16. Also consider Exodus 6:5. Contrast Isaiah 38:5 with 2 Chronicles 16:12-13.

²¹ Now, it could be that we are simply in a period of history where there is a little bit of a lull in God's plan for signs and wonders. And we should never make disrespectful demands of God as though He were some kind of a magical genie or vending machine. But as long as we ask with a genuine reverence for God, as long as we trust His sovereignty and pray "thy will be done," it would be more than appropriate for us to pray bigger than we do.