

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Many Signs and Wonders

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Acts 5:12-16

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Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 5.

Mine is probably the last generation that can remember the excitement of finding old videos from the family video recorder. Nowadays, with our phones and with the unlimited storage of the cloud, we videotape everything! But it wasn't always this way. When the video recorder was massive, and the tapes were limited to 30 minutes of storage, families had to be selective. My cousins and brothers would always love throwing the family videos into the VCR and watching highlights of Christmas 1995, or the church musical of 1996. These were the moments that mattered, and our parents were selective in capturing them for us.

I don't think that's a terrible analogy for what Luke is doing for us in the book of Acts. He can't record everything, but he has preserved some highlights of the critical moments in the church's early days. These are some of the moments that really mattered. And the scene that he has recorded in Acts 5:12-16 is the kind of scene that my brothers and cousins would want to play over and over on repeat. It's amazing! But it raises some difficult questions. Look with me to Acts 5:12-16. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. (Acts 5:12-16 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I said: This story is amazing, but boy does it raise some difficult questions! We're going to do some unpacking later on, but before we ask some of the big rock questions about signs and wonders – I want to ask a simpler question:

What Do We See In This Story?

Before we wade into big picture questions of application, let's make sure that we don't rush past the story itself. What do we see here? First, we see:

1. An answered prayer

Do you remember what the church prayed after Peter and John were released from prison and warned not to speak about Jesus any longer? Look back a few verses at Acts 4:29-30. Listen to their prayer request:

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.” (Acts 4:29-30 ESV)

One of the reasons why Luke has recorded this story for us is because he wants us to see the incredible way in which God answered the prayers of His people! Look again at verse 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. (Acts 5:12 ESV)

Where were Peter and John ministering when they were arrested? Solomon's Portico. And now, here they are again, at the sight of their arrest, speaking with boldness while signs and wonders are being performed in their midst. The prayer of the church was answered immediately and generously!

The wonders that we see in this story are the overflow of the prayer meeting in Acts 4. Luke is once again reminding us that the *powerful* church is the *prayerful* church.

I know that I keep banging the drum on this, but we see it in the Book of Acts over and over and over again. When the church is making decisions, they pray. When the church is facing persecution, they pray. When the church is lacking boldness, they pray. When the church needs a greater filling of the Holy Spirit, they pray.

Luke seems to understand that we are TERRIBLY SLOW learners! Time and time again, he reminds us that we can't have THIS without THAT. How often do we find ourselves saying, "I wish WE saw more of God's power here... I wish WE had more boldness... I wish WE saw more conversions and baptisms..." If Luke were here, I think that he would look us square in the eye and say, "Then it's about time for you to start PRAYING!" The ministry that this church enjoyed – the power that they received – the impact that their witness had – ALL of came AFTER and AS THE RESULT OF prayer. We often want the product but neglect the process.

What is our theme verse for this year? It's Luke 11:1. Lord teach us to pray.

At the start of this ministry year, we had two prayer groups that met regularly. Today, we have five. That's a good start. Let's keep going! The prayerful church is the powerful church.

That's the first thing that we see in this story. Second, we see:

2. A powerful reputation

I tried to track down the exact quote, and I couldn't find it anywhere, but I have heard a story about a famous actor who said that he did his best never to share a scene with either a beautiful woman or a monkey. "Because," he said, "If there is a beautiful woman or a monkey in my scene, then I know for certain that not a single person will pay attention to anything that I am doing."

Similarly, there are some topics and some doctrines that have a stronger gravitational pull than others. As we read this passage, how many of our minds were pulled immediately to the scene

where people were lining up to be healed by Peter's shadow? Everyone? Exactly. As our minds clamoured to verses 14-16, we might have missed the significance of verse 13. Don't miss it:

None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. (Acts 5:13 ESV)

The people of Jerusalem held the church in high esteem. They witnessed their generosity. They were struck by their transformed lives. And yet, none of the rest dared join them. Because this was the church where Ananias and Sapphira were struck down by the Lord for their sin. This is the church with the Consuming Fire in its midst. The church in Jerusalem had a powerful reputation.

My wife is gifted in evangelism, and she has been tenacious at our local gym. She's inviting people to church every morning. One of the regulars approached me the other day, and he said, "Your wife invited me to church again, but I'm telling you, if I go through those doors, fire will fall from heaven!" I've heard that joke 101 times. We all have. And it's just that – it's a joke. He doesn't *actually* believe that. He doesn't *actually* believe that he will encounter the holy God in our midst. It's a joke.

But it wasn't a joke in Jerusalem. The community in Jerusalem looked at the church and said, "GOD must be in their midst!" And they trembled.

When you read that, doesn't it feel like perhaps we have it almost exactly *backwards* in our culture? We attempt to lure the neighbours in with gimmicks and treats. We do everything that we can to make sure that the unbeliever walks away saying, "Wow! Going to church feels just like going to the movies!"

I'm not exaggerating when I say that – for most of the churches in North America today – THAT is the target! Make church as comfortable as possible. THAT will bring growth. But that assembly – as large as it may be – is the farthest thing from what we find here in Acts.

None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. (Acts 5:13 ESV)

As awkward and countercultural as it sounds, I pray Acts 5:13 for this congregation. I pray that God would move so mightily in our midst that rumours would spread in the community about the church where the Holy God is doing frightening things. He's bringing conviction. He's stirring up repentance. People are coming out fundamentally different than when they came in. I pray that people would find themselves counting the cost before joining the assembly because they know that the God of Redeemer City Church is a God that won't let them play with sin any longer. As G. Campbell Morgan writes:

It will be a good thing for the Church when she gets back so near to the Pentecostal manifestation and power, that fear falls upon the outside world.¹

You might expect that the Ananias and Sapphira incident would slow the expansion of the church. When we read books on church growth strategies, it is rare to find chapters on "holy fear" and "divine judgement". And yet, look with me at verse 14:

And **more than ever** believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women (Acts 5:14 ESV)

As the church grew in holiness – as God continued to display His power in and amongst His people – the city was terrified, but the city was also captivated. Whatever was happening in and amongst the Jesus followers, it was not something that could be ignored. And that leads to the third and final thing we see. We find in this story:

3. A great expectation

As we saw, some were too afraid to enter, but everyone was watching with expectation. To the extent that, as we read in verses 15-16:

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. (Acts 5:15-16 ESV)

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 154.

Just picture this in your mind for a moment: There is now an assembly of believers that has likely surpassed 10,000 people that is meeting daily in Solomon's Portico. And the streets between Peter's dwelling place and the temple are constantly filled with bystanders who are waiting with the hope that his shadow might fall on them with healing power. This sounds odd to us, but, as one commentator notes:

The idea that shadows had magical powers, both beneficent and malevolent, was current in the ancient world and explains the motivations of the people.²

In the same way that the bleeding woman had touched Jesus' cloak in the hope that she would receive a healing, these people were responding in faith with their own limited understanding. And God healed ALL of them! We see that in verse 16. ALL were healed!

In the same way that God validated Jesus' ministry through signs and wonders, here He validates the ministry of His Apostles. People are now flocking from the towns outside of Jerusalem to find out for themselves what all the commotion is about.

An answered prayer. A powerful reputation. And a great expectation. The assignment that Jesus gave to his church in Acts 1:8 is well under way. The church is growing in Jerusalem and beginning to stretch out to the neighbouring towns as the gospel is preached and signs and wonders are performed. That's what we find in this story.

But, with the time that we have remaining, I want to address some of the complicated questions that arise from a story like this. Should we expect to see signs like this in our day, or was this just for the time of the Apostles? If these kinds of things CAN happen today, then why aren't they happening as frequently as we might like? Are we a bad church if our people get sick and suffer from disabilities? Is it appropriate to ask God to heal? In short, I want to conclude with the question:

What Are We To Make Of Signs and Wonders?

² I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 115.

I mentioned near the beginning of this series that there are two ditches that we are going to stay out of. Let me remind you of those. On one side, there are those who are convinced that God will never work miracles in our midst, and that it would be wrong for us to ask. We don't believe that, and if you do, this probably isn't the best church for you. But on the other side, there are those who believe that God is going to immediately heal every person, every time we ask, and that the only reason He doesn't is a lack of faith. We don't believe that either and, again, if you do, this probably isn't the best church for you.

Those are the ditches. If you fall into those, you can expect an awkward meeting. But between those two ditches, there is a healthy spectrum. Within this room we have some who lean more towards caution and some who lean more towards expectation. And can I tell you something? I'm thankful for that! Iron sharpens iron. We see through a glass dimly, and it is good for us to worship beside brothers and sisters who stretch us.

Let's be humble. Let's be wise. And let's be biblical. To that end, I want to close with three truths that we can all agree upon that will help us to walk together between the ditches, and I'll draw out some implications as we go. First:

1. Signs and wonders served to validate the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles

No one can legitimately deny that there WAS a disproportionate number of signs and wonders that accompanied the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. We see this experientially as we contrast our lives with the scene that we find in Acts 5, but we also see this truth attested in Scripture. For example, the first century Corinthian church certainly had an expectation that true Apostles were identifiable by their miraculous ministries. We know this because, when Paul wrote to them to defend his own apostleship, he explained:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with **signs and wonders and mighty works.** (1 Corinthians 12:12 ESV)

The church understood that Jesus and his Apostles had ministries that were particularly marked by signs and wonders. The miracles were like neon signs that pointed to Jesus and the Apostles and declared: "This is what you have been waiting for! Pay attention!" So, wherever you stand on the

theological spectrum, we can all agree that – whether the signs and wonders continue today or not – one of their undeniable functions was to validate the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles.

Implication: So, don't let it shake your faith when you see fewer signs today

If you are expecting to see the same number of signs and wonders in our midst as we see in Acts 5 – if you are excited to see what Keith Giffen's shadow will do for your sore throat – then you are likely going to be disappointed. Through Jesus and the Apostles, the Kingdom of God was breaking into the world. Something special – something unique – was happening.

That doesn't mean that we should NEVER expect the miraculous in our midst – we'll get to that shortly – but it does mean that our faith shouldn't be shaken when we observe that God was doing things in the early church at a far greater frequency than we see today.

Second, we can all agree that:

2. Signs and wonders were never an end unto themselves

All of the people who were healed by Peter's shadow eventually died. And so did Peter. The purpose of momentary healings is to point our attention in faith to the ultimate healing that is ours in Christ. Lazarus rose from the dead, but he eventually died again. And that's okay, because the sign served its purpose.

Before I explain this point, I want to illustrate it from Jesus' ministry. Do you remember the story of the men who carried their paralyzed friend on a mat to Jesus? Jesus looked at the man and, to the surprise of everyone listening in, said: "Your sins are forgiven." The religious leaders who heard this were fuming. "Only God can forgive sins! Who does Jesus think he is?" And do you remember how Jesus responded?

which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? ⁶ But **that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins**—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." ⁷ And he rose and went home. (Matthew 9:5-7 ESV)

Jesus healed that young man – he performed a powerful sign – but the sign was simply a means to an end. The purpose of the healing was to prove that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. And, I would be so bold as to say, that is the purpose for EVERY healing!

Time and time again in the book of Acts, we see the same pattern repeated: A miraculous sign is performed, and then an explanatory sermon is given. The purpose of the sign is to grab attention, but that attention is then immediately directed – not to the sign – but to the message of the gospel. Signs and wonders always function as means to an end.

Implication: So, focus more on the thing signified than the sign

It's not uncommon for a family to stop at the sign outside of the Grand Canyon national park to take a photo. They're excited! The sign tells them that something incredible lies ahead. But, once the photo op is done, they quickly proceed to the Grand Canyon, because OF COURSE THEY DO! And when they go home, they might briefly show their friends a picture of them standing with the sign, but then they quickly proceed to a million photos of the majesty of the Canyon.

Signs and wonders simply serve to illustrate the glory of the gospel. They are a first fruit – a foretaste – of the new life that Jesus has purchased for us.

When the church is more excited about miracles and healings than she is about evangelism and conversions, then the church is in trouble. This is a very real temptation. We see churches like this today, and we find them in the New Testament as well. There were crowds that followed Jesus, for example, not because they wanted to learn from him, but because they wanted to see him multiply the loaves again. Similarly, in Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas performed signs and wonders in Lystra, the crowd seized upon the healings and wound up missing the mark entirely. We read:

And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. (Acts 14:11-12 ESV)

Now, Paul and Barnabas were quick to correct this dangerous mistake, but it serves to highlight the danger. It is not uncommon that, upon witnessing a miracle, a community becomes *obsessed* with a longing for more. But the miracles are JUST SIGNS. When you see one, take a photo,

thank God for the foretaste, but then press forward to the thing that the sign signifies! The gospel of Jesus Christ is the Grand Canyon! Don't pitch your tent at the sign out by the entrance. Press in.

But having said all of that, I want to close with one last important truth:

3. Signs and wonders are gifts from God, and we are invited to ask for them

Are there churches that inappropriately fixate on the miraculous? Yes.

Can signs and wonders wind up drawing crowds for all the wrong reasons? Yes.

Does that mean then that we should stop asking God to do the miraculous? NO!

Just because people have misused a tool in a terribly unhelpful way doesn't mean that we should throw out the tool. Just because my neighbour looked ridiculous trying to clear the leaves from his lawn with his vacuum cleaner doesn't mean that I should throw out MY vacuum cleaner. The misuse of a thing does not negate a thing.

I don't see any texts that teach that God won't perform similar signs and wonders here if He so chooses. In fact, we find passages that not only *expect* God to continue working in this way, but *command* us to pursue such blessings. James 5, for example, says:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. (James 5:14-15 NIV)

We obey that command here, and we heard a testimony just a few weeks ago about how God answered one of those prayers in a miraculous healing. If your approach to signs and wonders would keep you from obeying the clear teaching of James 5, then I would suggest that you have adopted an unbiblical approach.

I would also point you to 1 Corinthians 12 as an indicator that signs and miracles are expected to continue until Christ returns. Paul told the Corinthian church:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, **to another gifts of healing** by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ **to another the working of miracles**, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:7-11 ESV)

I have not yet heard a persuasive argument to convince me that Paul expected these gifts which he spends so much time explaining here in chapter 12 to cease upon the death of the Apostles.

Therefore, if signs and wonders were used by God to advance the gospel in the earliest days, and if both Paul and James gave us instructions on how we should use those gifts in the church, then the Bible seems to teach that signs and wonders are gifts from God, and we are invited to ask for them.

Implication: So, let us resolve not to put our own restrictions on what God can or cannot do

Let's make sure that the only restrictions that we impose are the restrictions that God gives to us in His word. Let's make sure that we don't give ourselves permission to go further than the Bible and put God into a box.

Can He work wonders in our midst today? Might He determine that the hard soil in Orillia would be made receptive to the gospel by an outpouring of signs and wonders? Is it appropriate for any of us to say, "No, God CANNOT do that today"?

God is a good Father. He won't give us a gift that we don't need. If He sees that we will pitch our tents at the sign and miss the thing signified – if He sees that we will be distracted from and neglect the ordinary means that He called us to in the great commission – then He won't give us the gift. Praise God for that!

But, if there is a gift that we DO need, He won't withhold it from us. Don't let your past experiences and some of the silliness that you've witnessed in the world prevent you from opening your hands to receive the gifts that your heavenly Father might have for you. There is work to be done. We need every help that God has for us. To that end, let's pray together.