

# Signs and Wonders

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## Signs and Wonders

*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 22nd May 2005*

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire. Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today. Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time. (Deuteronomy 4:32-40)

## Introduction

All true Christians who believe the Bible believe that God is a wonder-working God. In the pages of Scripture are many accounts of times when God has suspended the "laws of nature" and done remarkable miracles that defy scientific explanation.

The question that is, did God do these spectacular miracles at certain points in

the history of salvation only, or are we to expect him to do them today? And can believers today command miracles to take place in the same way that Moses, Christ and the apostles commanded them to take place?

There are some who would say that we who are believers can and should expect to see happening today the same sorts of miracles that are recorded in the Bible. They would say that we should be doing signs and wonders as part of our outreach. One writer has coined the term "Power Evangelism" for evangelism that is accompanied by what are claimed to be miracles. He treats the miracles that are recorded in the Gospels as a sort of text-book on how we as Christians today are to do miracles.

Others would say that the signs and wonders that are recorded in the Bible are "one-off" events that were given to authenticate the giving of Scripture. Now that the Scriptures have been given, there is no longer any need for such miracles.

How are we to settle this question? We need to turn to the Bible and see what the Bible says about signs and wonders, and their purpose. There are four things that become clear when we look at the teaching of the Bible about signs and wonders:

The term "signs and wonders" is used to refer to very extraordinary miracles that are done by the command of God's servants.

Signs and wonders show the uniqueness of God's salvation.

Signs and wonders validate those through whom God gave the Scriptures.

There can also be false signs and wonders

Let us look at these in turn.

### **1. The term "signs and wonders" is used to refer to very extraordinary miracles that are done by the command of God's servants.**

In the Old Testament the term "signs and wonders" is used almost exclusively to refer to the miracles which took place as God was bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt. We read in Exodus 7.1 - 5 that God says to Moses that he is going to do signs and wonders.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

This is the first reference to signs and wonders in the Bible. God is telling Moses that Moses is going to perform great signs and wonders, which will result in God being clearly seen to be the true God.

What God prophesied to Moses is exactly what happened. God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians. One plague came after the other in hot succession, each one more devastating than the last. The final plague consisted in God killing all of the first born sons of the Egyptians and the first born of their cattle. This led the Egyptians to expel the Israelites from their land. However, no sooner had they told the Israelites to leave than that the Egyptians then gathered up their army together to chase after the Israelites. Then the Israelites were hemmed in by the sea in front of them and the Egyptians coming up behind them. God told Moses to hold out his staff over the Red Sea which was ahead of them and God blew a strong wind and he parted the waters. The Israelites went through the sea as on dry ground and came through to the other side. Then the Egyptians followed the Israelites into the bed of sea and Moses again held his staff out and the waters came back over and the Egyptian army was destroyed.

Then, when the Israelites were in the desert, God did further miracles. He spoke to them from Mount Sinai. He gave them the Law. He also provided for them: he gave them water out of the rock; he gave them manna which came down like dew from Heaven, and he gave them quail to act as their meat to eat. Then, when the time came for them to enter the promised land, he parted the waters of another expanse of water, this time the River Jordan. They went through the River Jordan to the promised land and miraculously defeated the people that were in that land.

I said above that when the Old Testament speaks of signs and wonders, almost exclusively, it speaks of these great events at the time of Moses and shortly after

Moses was alive. In fact, all of the references where the term “signs and wonders” is used refer to this period except for two references in the Book of Daniel which speak about God’s general rule over the universe. All the other references are talking about these mighty miracles at the time of Moses. Many other places in the Old Testament use the phrase “signs and wonders” but they all refer back to the period of when the Israelites came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership.

Without doubt it is highly significant these signs and wonders it that they accompanied *the* great act of salvation of the Old Testament, which in many ways foreshadowed the act of salvation that God has done for us Christ. Just as the people were in bondage in Egypt, so we were in bondage in the Kingdom of Satan. Just as God set the people free from slavery to Pharaoh, so he has set us free from slavery to sin. Just as the people were promised the rest in the land of Canaan, so we are promised eternal rest in Christ.

It is important also to notice about these miracles is they were not merely answers to prayer. These were great and powerful signs which God initiated and then God got his servant to perform. Very often it was by means of the staff that Moses had. At other times other means were used. For example with the plague of boils, Moses got soot and threw it up into the air and it turned into boils. But God always used the command of his servant to do these great miracles.

When we come to the New Testament we find that the term “signs and wonders” is now used to speak about the miracles that Jesus and his apostles did. Just as the great act of salvation of the Old Testament was accompanied by great miracles, so the great act of salvation of the New Testament is also highlighted by signs and wonders.

Jesus himself used the term in John 4.48 where he said that “unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders you will never believe”. Clearly he was referring to himself and the signs and wonders that he was doing.

Peter on the Day of Pentecost Acts 2.22 says about Jesus “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by the miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.” Jesus carried out truly astonishing miracles, in great number. The blind were given sight, even people that were born blind. The lame were made to walk, the paralysed able to move again, the dumb made able to speak. Those with

demons were delivered, the hungry fed, the storms stilled, and the dead were raised. Indeed there are occasions in the gospels where it is recorded that vast multitudes came to him and he healed every single one of them.

The greatest sign of all was Jesus' own death and resurrection. He said at the time that this is *the* great sign – the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for 3 days so he would be in the earth for 3 days and afterwards he would rise again.

Notice again these signs and wonders that Jesus did were not mere answers to prayer. These were mighty acts of God done by Jesus' command. He did not pray that the lame would be able to walk and a few started walking. He did not pray that the evil spirits would come out: he commanded them to come out. He did not pray to God that somehow the winds and the waves might calm down a bit: he commanded them and they were still. He commanded the dead and they came forth. That was the nature of these great signs and wonders.

Now then when we come to the apostles we see that the very same term, "signs and wonders", is used to describe the mighty miracles that the apostles did. We read in Acts 2.43, "Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." Also, Acts 5.12 says, "The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people."

The signs and wonders that are recorded in the book of Acts were all carried out by the apostles or by those upon whom the apostles laid their hands and also by Barnabas who was a close associate of Paul's. There are no instances of anything being called a "sign and wonder" being performed by anybody except by the apostles, their close associates, and those on whom they laid their hands.

Again, when we look at the recorded miracles they performed, these were not answers to prayer; they were commands. Consider the crippled man by the Beautiful Gate. Peter said to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3.8). And he walked. We see the same thing with the miracles carried out by Paul. He did not pray for them to happen. He commanded them to happen, and they did so.

So we see that the Bible consistently teaches that signs and wonders are very extraordinary miraculous acts of God done through the command of God's servant.

## 2. Signs and wonders show the uniqueness of God's salvation

The second thing to notice about signs and wonders is that they show that the salvation that God has provided for his people is totally unique, unlike that of anything that is seen in any other religion in the world.

This is the point that Moses is making in the passage from Deuteronomy chapter 4 which is quoted at the beginning of this booklet. What he is really saying in this passage is that the signs and wonders that God did are unique in the history of the world. You will not find them at any other place or in any other time. This is because God is the only true God. There is only one God and there is only one Saviour.

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

Moses is saying, go back in history over all the thousands of years before now and search all the civilisations of the world. Will you ever anywhere find anything like this that has ever happened? Has any god ever done anything like this for any of his people? The answer is of course "No". These signs and wonders are a completely unique set of miracles. They are unheard of. That is what makes them so amazing.

Now we can very legitimately apply this to the work of Christ. You could say, "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Have you ever heard of a religious leader like Jesus Christ? Have you ever heard of any collection of signs and wonders like the signs and wonders that Jesus did? The blind seeing, the lame walking, the dead being raised – has anybody ever heard of such a thing? Has it ever happened anywhere else?" The answer is "No". The like of it has never been seen before or since. Has anybody ever heard of a God who sends his only begotten Son into the world to die for sinners? Is there any

religion in the world that is like that? Has anybody ever heard of that same Son being raised from the dead and then appearing to witness after witness and then over 500 witnesses all at one time? The answer is “No, it has never been heard of”. Before or since there has been nothing like it.

This is one of the things that makes Christianity so unique: the signs and wonders that accompany the great revelation of God, and his great act of salvation. Go to Islam. What do you find? No miracles that can in any way compare with the splendour of these signs and wonders. Go to any of the other religions. What do you find? Nothing that can begin even remotely to compare with the majesty and the glory of these great mighty signs of God. So the signs and wonders show the uniqueness of God’s salvation.

### **3. Signs and wonders validate those through whom God reveals scripture**

The third thing to see is that signs and wonders prove that those through whom God gave the Scriptures are genuine servants of God who are revealing God's very words to the world.

One reference that makes this very clear with regard to Moses is Deuteronomy 34:10 – 12:

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt – to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

Moses was unique among the prophets of God. No-one knew God face to face in the way that Moses did. And one way that we know that there has been no prophet like Moses is that he did all those miraculous signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to do. The signs and wonders showed that he was a very great prophet.

When we come to the New Testament and we see the same thing again. We noted above that Acts 2:22 records how Peter says of Christ, “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man *accredited by God to you* by the miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (emphasis added). These miracles and signs showed that Jesus is God’s prophet. And not just a prophet. The very Son of God. The signs and

wonders demonstrated that he is God's Son, revealing the Gospel to the world. He is that great prophet that Moses had prophesied would come (Deuteronomy 18.18).

The same is true for the apostles. The apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12.12 "The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance." The signs, wonders and miracles that Paul did showed that he was an apostle, one through whom God gave the New Testament Scriptures.

Hebrews starts off by telling us that in the past God spoke to us through angels and through various prophets but now he has spoken to us finally and authoritatively through his own Son. In Hebrews 2.1 – 4 we read,

We must pay careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? 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 gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Now notice there that what is said about signs, wonders and miracles is in the past tense. The passage does not say God *is* testifying to it. It says God *has* testified to it. God showed that this message that Christ brought and the apostles brought was true through "signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. "

#### **4. There can be false signs and wonders**

The fourth thing to note is that the Bible speaks about false signs and wonders being performed by false teachers. False signs and wonders are not necessarily false in the sense that they have not happened. They are false in the sense that they lead people in the direction of error if you take notice of them.

It is recorded in Mark 13.22 that the Lord Jesus said "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect – if that were possible."

Paul warns in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 – 10, "The coming of the lawless one will be in



accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those that are perishing.”

Revelation 13 also speaks of a "beast" who was given power to do miraculous signs, which would persuade people to worship another "beast" who was nearly killed. "And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honour of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived" (verses 13 and 14).

The true signs and wonders, which authenticate the giving of Scripture, are no longer necessary, because the work of authenticating the Word of God has been completed. We are not to expect any more of these, because God has spoken. But there will be false signs and wonders performed by others, seeking to persuade men to turn away from the truth and to believe false ideas about God. We must not be gullible, and believe what someone says just because he seems to have supernatural power. Rather, the claim to have supernatural miracle-working power today should make cause "alarm bells" to ring in our minds, warning us that false doctrine is likely to be being preached.

### **Lessons for us for today**

What lessons can be learnt from what we have seen about signs and wonders?

#### ***1) Do not try to replicate the signs and wonders of the Bible***

First of we have no mandate from the Scriptures to seek to replicate the signs and wonders that we find in the Bible. Those signs and wonders that are recorded in the Scriptures performed a unique function of drawing attention to God's great saving work and of validating Scriptures which have now been given. Now that God has accomplished his salvation, and provided an authoritative record of it in the Bible, there is no longer any need for signs and wonders

Does that mean to say that we should not pray for, or expect God to do the miraculous? Far be it for me to say that! Christianity is a supernatural religion from start to finish. Every time we pray for somebody to be converted we are

praying for a mighty miracle of God. Every time we pray for somebody to grow as a Christian we are praying for the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit. And of course if you have a friend who is ill it is only natural that you will pray for healing. Many Christians, including myself, can testify to the way God has answered prayer for healing.

But what I am saying is that we do not have the mandate from God to *command* healing, or other miracles. If it is God's will he will do them, but we can not command them.

## ***2) Do not be fooled by the claimed signs and wonders of others***

Secondly, we must not be fooled by those who claim to do signs and wonders. We need to heed the warnings in Scripture about those who will perform false signs and wonders. Ask yourself about those who claim to do signs and wonders, "What is this person wanting me to believe? Where is this leading?" Do not be deceived by the fact that the person may claim to be a Christian. Ask yourself, is what he is teaching actually the real Gospel, or a subtle perversion of the Gospel?

One false version of the Gospel which is very much associated with claimed signs and wonders is what has been called the "prosperity gospel". This false gospel says that if we come to Christ he is able to fulfil our personal ambitions, and make us rich, powerful and successful in this world. The emphasis is upon gaining happiness in this world rather than on being saved from the wrath that would otherwise come upon us because of our sin. Biblical teaching about the need to "take up the Cross" and suffer with and for Christ is ignored. This is really a different Gospel, and one which we should not be taken in by, even if the proponents of it seem to have apparently successful lives, and seem to be able to do miracles.

## ***3) Believe the testimony that God has already given***

The most important lesson from what we have seen this: that we should believe the testimony that God has already given.

God has spoken in his Word, and he has shown that what his Word says is true through the signs and wonders he has done. God does not have to do more miracles to prove the point because he has already made proved it. God could

say, as a barrister would say, "I rest my case."

There is no answer to the case that God has made through these signs and wonders. If anybody will not believe it is not because of a lack of evidence or because of a lack of signs. God has multiplied signs and wonders to give final and unanswerable proof of his existence and his power to save. And on top of all these signs God has given the sign to beat all signs, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. You can not have a greater miracle than the resurrection of Christ.

So the great message is this: believe on the basis on the testimony that God has given through the mighty signs and wonders that he has done.

If you are not a Christian what should you do? The message is quite simply this: repent and believe. You have no excuse for not believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. God has amply proven and demonstrated the truthfulness of the message that Jesus proclaimed, and the truthfulness of the message that his apostles proclaimed, through the signs and wonders that Christ and his apostles performed. The message to you is this: Stop doubting and believe. Don't make excuses. Don't try to drum up all sorts of sophisticated sounding arguments like "Why is there all suffering in the world?" or "What is the origin of the evil?" or "Why does God choose to save some and not others?" Forget about those arguments. You know you are just clutching at straws. Look at the great central facts of Christianity, humble yourself and believe. The Bible says, "The fool says in his heart there is no God" (Psalm 14.1). Stop playing the fool. Start to believe. Face up to the facts and believe the truth about Jesus Christ. Confess your sins to God and come to him and ask him to save you through Jesus Christ.

For somebody who is already a Christian the message is this: keep on believing. Even the greatest prophet of all, John the Baptist, had doubts, and sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the one who was to come. What did Jesus do when these messengers came? He pointed John to the signs and wonders that he was doing and he said, effectively, "That is the answer. Just look at what is actually happening and you'll have no reason to doubt anymore."

We who are Christians can sometimes go through difficult times, like John, and like him start to doubt aspects of our Christian faith. You might look at some difficult circumstances of your life and think, "Maybe God does not really love me."

What is the answer to such doubt? Look at the facts. Look at the great facts of the Gospel. Look at the signs and wonders God has done. How can you think God does not love you, or he is not very powerful, when you remember these great things that he has done?

Or again we might get discouraged in our work as Christians. We might work hard for many years seeking to make the Gospel known, with not many people seeming to respond. We might be tempted to think, "Is Jesus really Lord? Why is it that so few people believe? Is the gospel really the power of God's salvation?"

What is the answer? Go back to these great truths, these great events. You can not really entertain doubt if you remember these great things God has done.

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