

Word over Wonders

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[0 : 00] Well, how do you react to signs and wonders in the Bible? Read a passage like the one tonight, and I think people commonly react in two ways.

The first is to think, signs, miracles, and wonders? Surely it can't happen. Science has proved that already. There's no way the laws can be defied.

Instead, these stories must be embellished, or they're actually just natural phenomenon mistaken for miracles. So, for example, demon possession, well, that's really just, you know, mental illness.

Although, how you explain being healed from it, I don't know. It's not clear. Now, I'm not going to have time tonight to go into a detailed rebuttal of these theories, but in previous years, we've done some of that with our apologetics series.

So, suffice to say, though, that if you work on the premise that God exists, then there's every possibility of miracles, correct? If He created the universe and the laws that govern it, then He can certainly suspend them or direct them to produce miracles.

[1 : 10] And if Jesus is the Son of God, then He can surely do the same things as well. Anyway, that's all I'm going to say, but if you want to know more, then please come and talk to me afterwards.

I've got, you know, I've got books that you can read as well. I'd love to just talk more with you on that. The second reaction, on the other hand, goes something like this.

The question is often posed, if miracles are possible, then why don't we see them today? So, this second reaction thinks, yep, okay, I accept that miracles are happening, but why is it not more common today?

If God exists and He performed wonders in the past, why isn't He doing them now? Why aren't people cured of cancer, for example, whenever we call on Jesus' name?

Well, that's a good question, and we're going to address that tonight. But in order to answer that, one thing we need to delve into is to understand why Jesus performed miracles or wonders in the first place.

[2 : 08] Why did He perform miracles when He walked on this earth? So, let's look at our passage tonight, because it gives us some clues.

Now, in the verses just before this passage, we learn that Jesus had been rejected at Nazareth, His hometown. And being driven out of that town, Jesus now returns to Capernaum, which is a city by the Sea of Galilee.

That's probably where He is for the next few chapters. He continues His ministries, and now in verses 31 and 32, we see Jesus teaching with such authority that it amazes the people.

Then in verses 33 to 39, we find Jesus performing miracles, two of which are actually described in detail for us. The first occurs in the synagogue.

Jesus had gone there to actually preach and teach. But a demon-possessed man interrupts Him. An evil spirit tries to stop Jesus from doing His work by crying out in a loud voice.

[3:11] Now, we have to see this for what it really is. This is a direct challenge to Jesus' authority. The spirit tells Him in verse 34, Go away!

And accuses Him of coming to destroy them. It knows who Jesus is. He says that you are the Holy One of God. But then He refuses to submit to Him.

Now, some of you, I see around, some of you are teachers. Teachers would be familiar with this scenario. Imagine a situation in class at school. We're up the back.

There's a group of boys. Actually, a group of boys. It's right back now. There's a group of boys mucking around and disrupting the class. Instead of studying, they're chucking things at each other.

And then when the teacher tells them to stop, not only do they not listen, they actually defy Him. At worst, they start taunting Him, calling Him rude names. Now, the teacher really only has one response in this situation, doesn't he?

[4:12] He has to exert His authority. Authority which He already has, by the way. But He has to exert it by, I don't know, sending them to detention or to the principal's office.

But whatever is done, order has to be restored. Otherwise, these boys will start to rule the roost. They think that they'll be in charge. Well, a similar thing is happening here with Jesus.

That evil spirit is the so-called boys up the back. They're testing, He's testing, it's testing, defying and rejecting Jesus' authority. And so Jesus really only has one response.

He had to show who has the real authority. And so even though the evil spirit hated it, when Jesus exercised that authority, it obeyed and submitted to it.

And at Jesus' stern rebuke, it comes out of the man without harming him at all. Now the people would have already sensed Jesus' authority in His teaching.

[5:16] It says so in verse 32. But now they see His tangible authority over the spiritual realm. So if you look at verse 36, see what their response is.

They say, With authority and power, He gives orders to impure spirits, and they come out of Him. Now this doesn't happen every day. Usually I'm assuming that the evil spirits probably win the day.

But today, today someone's come to free them from their tyranny. Now something similar happens too with the second wonder, which we'll turn to now.

But this time, it's over the physical realm. So Jesus enters Simon's house to find his mother-in-law suffering with a high fever. Those around ask Jesus to help.

Again, this is being portrayed as another threat to Jesus' authority. Because in verse 39, it says that Jesus rebukes the fever. That word rebuke is actually the same word as in verse 35, when Jesus rebuked the evil spirit.

[6:24] And so just as the evil spirit submits to Jesus' authority in the spiritual realm. So in this case, the fever submits to Jesus in the physical realm.

So with both wonders and miracles, we see that Jesus is Lord of both heaven and earth, and He has authority over both the physical and spiritual realms of creation.

Both these wonders are done to show that Jesus has the authority. Now, why is this taking place? Why the need for Jesus to show His authority?

Well, because we're meant to see that these wonders are the fulfillment of the prophecy that we saw two weeks ago in Isaiah. That Jesus is the anointed one to preach the good news.

And not only that, that this good news is true. The miracles authenticate Jesus' preaching. So look again, just in the next column or the column before, look again with me at Luke chapter 4 and verse 18 and 19.

[7 : 33] It says of Jesus, the Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

chapter 4. This couple of verses is what we call a programmatic statement in the Gospel. It sets the scene for the following chapters in Luke. It's a bit like when the Queen, I don't know whether it's actually the Queen that does it or the Speaker. Anyway, the Queen gives her speech at Westminster at the start of each parliamentary year or when a keynote speaker opens a conference.

Those speeches are meant to set the agenda, aren't they, for the conference or for the parliamentary year? Likewise, these two verses, verses 18 and 19, sets the agenda for the succeeding events in these next few chapters.

It helps us to understand what Jesus is doing and why He's doing them. And so by performing these miracles, Jesus gives evidence of His anointing and of His authority.

[8 : 43] But it also authenticates the good news that He's preaching. It shows the people that Jesus is trustworthy, that this message that He brings is worthy of acceptance.

And so these wonders of Jesus actually support the Word that He teaches. And this is actually quite a common pattern with God if you read the Bible.

We saw in our first reading today, way back even at the time of Moses, God did a similar thing with Him because He gave Moses signs to show the people that He had God's authority.

He was given signs to show that actually He was sent by God. So similarly, Jesus' miracles here show that He is sent from God and that He has authority to preach the good news.

So the first thing we need to realize is that Jesus did not perform these miracles for their own sake. He is not doing it to show off His power or how great He is even though He is great and powerful. And neither was Jesus simply motivated by compassion.

[9 : 52] Although again, that's true. There is no doubt that He cared for Simon's mother-in-law or the demon-possessed man. But it wasn't the main reason why He healed them.

Because otherwise, if that was the main reason, He would have healed everyone, every sick person. But in both cases, and in the many miracles that come afterwards, it's actually the people that bring the sick to Him.

And it's only then that Jesus responds to their request for healing. He didn't go around healing everyone because that wasn't His priority. Instead, when we look at verses 40 to 44 now, which is our next point, we see that Jesus' priority was actually the Word.

So, verse 40, look with me. I'll read the whole passage. At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness and laying His hands on each, He healed them.

Moreover, demons came out of many people shouting, You are the Son of God. But He rebuked them and would not allow them to speak because they knew He was the Messiah. At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place.

[11 : 03] The people were looking for Him and when they came to where He was, they tried to keep Him from leaving them. But He said, I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also because that is why I was sent.

And He kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea. It's very clear, isn't it? Jesus, although He did not turn anyone away in need, yet when He had the opportunity, He withdrew to a solitary place.

He wasn't sitting in the city gates and, you know, inviting everyone, who is sick, come, come, I'll heal them. No, He tries, He moves to a solitary place. And then when the people tried to keep Him from leaving because that's what they wanted Him to do, just heal them, Jesus corrects them by saying, I must preach the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also because that is why I was sent.

And so, it's very clear that His priority was to preach the good news because that's what the Father sent Him to do. Not the wonders.

No, the wonders support His preaching. But it's the word over the wonders, as my title says tonight. It's the message above the miracles.

[12:23] And Jesus had to preach this message on His own terms. And that explains why He shushed the demons.

They knew who He was, but by declaring His identity, they were actually undermining His message. And that's why He said to them, be quiet. Instead, Jesus wanted to preach the message of repentance first.

Why? Because that's the message that people needed to hear most of all. They needed to hear their need for the forgiveness of sins.

Not healing, not freedom from the Romans, not freedom from demons. They needed to hear that the thing they needed most in their lives was to be forgiven by God.

that what they really need saving from was not external enemies, but their own sinfulness, their own evil, their own rejection of God's authority.

[13:29] And the only way that was going to be achieved, the only way they were going to be saved, is for Jesus to die for them on the cross, to stand in their place under God's judgment.

But the question is, how can they believe unless Jesus proclaims the good news to them? The only way to be saved for them, for us, is through faith.

And faith only comes when the word of God is preached. That's why Jesus prioritized the word. Now we'll see more of that in chapters 5 and 6 in the following weeks.

But I want us to see very clearly tonight in this passage that Jesus performed wonders not in and of itself, but to support the word.

It's the word that has priority. I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom, Jesus says. It can't be any clearer than that. Jesus prioritized the word and God sent him to do just that because that is the only way people can be saved.

[14:37] being physically healed or having a demon exercise, these things don't bring ultimate healing or freedom. Only faith that comes from hearing God's word does.

So that is the big take-out from our passage tonight. Word over wonders, message above miracles. Well, that's good, but what are the implications and application for us tonight?

Well, for a start, Jesus' priority is still the same, isn't it? Salvation and life in the kingdom are still the most important things in life. It was for them, it is still for us. Remember what Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels?

He says, it's better for you to enter life, crippled or lame, than to have two hands and feet, but thrown into eternal fire or hell. And that's still true today, isn't it?

Dealing with our sin is still more important than our physical health, than our material comfort, than our relationships, our relationships in life. And as a society, dealing with sin is still our most pressing issue, more so than many of the social justice issues of our time that we all get very excited about, whether it's asylum seekers in detention, or the push against same-sex marriage, or euthanasia, abortion, or trying to get President Trump impeached.

[16:11] These are issues that are, yes, important, and I'm not saying by this that we don't care about these things, because we're called to be like Jesus too, we're called to be compassionate, we're called to be generous to the poor, to help migrants at ESL classes, to support organizations like the Babes Project, which helps women to be moms rather than to abort.

These are all important issues, things that we should care about. The same with our jobs, we've been given our jobs to serve others, those things are important too, whether we're teaching or nursing, helping people save for their retirement, or providing goods and services that people need.

Now all these are good things, but the choice today isn't a choice between good and bad things, and that is to prioritize the preaching and teaching of the word.

And so as a church, last week, if you're here, Andrew already laid out for us that we will continue to prioritize preaching and teaching the gospel, and we'll let that shape everything we do, whether we're gathered, when we're gathered as a church, or when we're sent out during the week into the world.

And of course, we must keep loving our community, we must keep showing compassion to the world, just as Jesus did, but the point is this, we must not allow these things, these good things, to be the substitute for the word.

[17:41] We must not retreat into thinking that as a church or as individuals, just doing good deeds is enough. instead, what we want to do is to keep praying that we'll focus on serving people with the ultimate good.

That is, the ultimate good of giving them a chance to hear the good news of Jesus so that they can believe and grow in their faith and be saved.

Friends, that is what we need to focus on as a church and as individuals as well. Some of us do it for a living, some of us can give a lot of time to it, but even if that's not what you do as the main thing in your life, that is the thing that we need to give space and time in life to prioritize.

The word over wonders. And friends, I want to say that I think that also applies to our giving. And I say this particularly to those who are part of our church, so if you're visiting for now, don't worry too much about it.

But for those of us who are part of this church, and some of you have started working and you're thinking what you should do with your giving, how you should be generous as Christians, well, I want to encourage you to be generous with things that apply to the word ministry for people who actually prioritize the word in what they do, organizations, mission organizations that do that.

[19:15] So yes, by all means, let's be generous with those in need, you know, giving to disaster relief, supporting good things like cancer research, and all these other good causes. But then we should also prioritize giving and supporting gospel ministry.

In fact, let me go one step further. I think we should favor it because while the world and those who are not Christians may give to other causes, only Christians who prioritize the word will give to gospel ministry.

So, I say this because sadly, I think that there are churches who have lost that focus. Over time, if we are not careful, we can drift towards just doing good deeds.

And to be honest, it's easier. If we do those things, the world, society will applaud us for doing it. And also, if we do these things, we can actually do them without relying on God.

By contrast, though, when we proclaim the word, it's only something that we can do with God's power. Faith is a gift of God and proclaiming the word requires us to actually rely on him when we do it.

[20 : 29] It's not easy work and trust me, the world will not thank us for it. In fact, they may even persecute us for it. So just look at Jesus. I mean, they loved his miracles, right?

They came and wanted to be healed, but not many actually loved his message as well. But Jesus did not lose sight of that priority just because of that. And so neither should we as a church.

All right, let me just return then to that question we had at the start, which I promised. The question then was, why, if God exists and Jesus is his son, are there not more miracles today?

Why are there often no wonders whenever the word is preached today? Well, I think if we look at the passage tonight, the question becomes, the answer becomes clear to that question.

And the answer is this. I think that often words, wonders, are no longer accompanying the word as it's preached because this is no longer needed.

[21 : 35] Our preaching of the word, our proclamation of the word no longer needs to be supported by wonders. Why is that? Well, you see, what is the good news that Jesus was ultimately pointing to?

It was to the fact that we can be freed and saved and that this salvation would come through the death and resurrection of Jesus, correct? That is the good news. ultimately, the word that Jesus was proclaiming comes true in this greatest of miracles, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so, when Jesus did rise from the dead, well, there was really no further need for other miracles, is there? Because that is the great miracle that authenticates the gospel.

The wonders that come before are signs of Jesus' authority, but that is now superseded by Jesus' resurrection. And so now, when we proclaim the good news, it's to this great miracle, this great wonder of Jesus' resurrection that we point people to as the wonder and the sign that authenticates the good news.

And if you look at the book of Acts, that's exactly what the apostles did with their preaching. I don't have time to look at all of them, but I'll just give you one example on Acts 4, verse 8-10.

[22 : 53] Peter, after he's healed a man, is filled with the Spirit and says to them, the elders, the authorities that were questioning him, he says, rulers and elders of the people, if you are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel, it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and look here what he points to, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

And time and time again when you look through Acts, when the apostles preached, they pointed to the resurrection to say that the message is true. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, the good news is true.

And so, once Jesus is raised from the dead, both the wonder and the word now go hand in hand. It's the same thing. We proclaim the good news and then proclaim the great miracle of the resurrection together.

They are the same thing. And our confidence that this good news is true comes from the fact that the resurrection did happen. The one cannot go without the other. Now, if some of you here are new today and you've got questions about the credibility of Jesus' resurrection, then again, please come and talk to me afterwards.

I'd love to talk more about that with you. And I'm not saying by this that also miracles don't happen today because yes, I know some of us have heard stories of Muslims becoming Christians through miraculous dreams and visions.

[24 : 29] But to me, these are actually special circumstances in cultures where the gospel hasn't been heard before. But when we're witnessing or when we are living in a culture which has had God's word for generations, like here in Australia, then for us to want to seek more signs and wonders is actually a sign of our pride and our hard-heartedness.

So I'll give you another verse which is from Luke chapter 11 and 29. Jesus says this, this is a wicked generation. The people there were asking for a sign but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.

For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. In other words, just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and night, so too Jesus was in the belly of death before rising after three days.

And so Jesus is saying to that generation that the sign of the resurrection will suffice. If they want a sign, then it's the resurrection that they have to look to. And so today when we preach and when we proclaim and we share the gospel, we point to the resurrection as the wonder that supports our word.

But friends, if we really still think we need to have wonders when we share the gospel, then let me say you only need to point to yourselves.

[25 : 54] Because the truth is the very fact that you're a Christian and you're sharing the gospel is itself a miracle. Salvation is a supernatural work of God.

Every believer only becomes one because of God's miraculous work in their lives. And so each and every one of us today here, if you believe in Jesus, you are a walking, talking miracle.

You have not become a Christian except by God's supernatural work in you. You are God's work of wonder. Now, you will not often hear me encourage you to talk about yourselves.

But when it comes to sharing the gospel, then let me encourage you to talk about yourselves. Share your testimony even when you share the gospel. Because you are living proof that God is at work in this world.

You are living proof that blind people, that is morally and spiritually blind people, can see. Your life is evidence of what it means to be freed from the punishment and power of sin.

[27 : 04] In other words, you are living proof of God's prophecy in Luke chapter 4 verse 18 and 19. So share your testimony as you share the good news of Jesus.

As you talk about the resurrection of your Messiah that brings you salvation, salvation, that brings salvation to all who trust in him. Share the word and if you need a wonder, talk about the resurrection and if you need another mini wonder, talk about your own conversion.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your precious word that gives us confidence confidence that Jesus rose from the dead and that because he rose from the dead, this great miracle, this great wonder in our history, in our lives, that we too can be saved and that we too will rise up one day at the end.

Help us as a church to keep prioritizing the word. Help us not to be sidetracked by looking for wonders and looking for miracles. Help us not to be distracted by just doing good deeds.

Of course, we need to keep doing good where we can, but help us not to neglect your word at church but also in our lives as we live our lives through the week.

[28 : 37] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. amigos. Until then, amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.