

Acts 5:12-16, No. 13**“Really?”****November 15, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We are in the midst of Luke’s narrative of the explosive growth of the fledgling Christian church and the gathering of storm clouds as the establishment had by this time realized that the Christian movement was a serious threat to their power and prestige.

We have just been treated, in the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira, to a remarkable demonstration of God’s power to judge sinful human beings. We are now to be treated to a similarly remarkable demonstration of God’s power to heal and help them. [Stott, 113] In 4:30 we read that the Christians had prayed that the Lord would vindicate his gospel with more signs and wonders and now we learn that he answered that prayer.

Text Comment

- v.12 Apparently many of these miracles were performed in Solomon’s Colonnade, the covered porch or cloister that ran along the eastern wall of the temple court, the place where Peter had preached the sermon recorded for us in chapter 3. It had become a meeting place of the believers so sick people knew that they could find the apostles there.
- v.13 It is not entirely clear to which people Luke is referring with his statement that “None of the rest dared join them.” Are these Christians or non-Christians? But it is clear enough that while some were afraid either for fear of the power the apostles were wielding (as mentioned in verse 11) or for fear of retribution from the authorities, a great many others were enthralled and continued to join the movement. (cf. the discussion in Bock, 230-231) Perhaps it is best to take Luke to be telling us that, on the one hand, there was an awestruck reserve, on the other great missionary success. [Haenchen, 244]
- v.15 There may have been an element of superstition in this thinking, as perhaps there had been in the case of the woman with the issue of blood who supposed that if she could just touch the hem of the Lord’s garment, she would be healed. But their behavior is evidence that no one doubted the remarkable power that the apostles, and especially Peter, were wielding. And it seems we are to believe that Peter’s shadow was enough to heal, as Paul’s handkerchief would be some years later. They believed in what the apostles were saying and doing and their coming for help was an act of faith. “It may be significant that the verb *episkiazō*, which Luke uses here, meaning to “overshadow”, he used twice in his Gospel of the overshadowing of God’s presence.” [Stott, 113] In other words, the people knew that it was God himself who was at work through these men.
- v.16 As had been the case in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, word quickly spread and folk acted on the hope that perhaps there would be healing for them. By the way, it is sometimes said that demon possession as it was encountered in the ministry of Jesus and of his apostles was simply a form of mental illness; they simply didn’t know enough in those days to distinguish the two. But not only do the Gospels make it clear that demon

possession was a very different condition, with features utterly unlike any mental illness we have knowledge of, but Luke here also clearly separates the two sorts of conditions as if it continued to be obvious that demon possession was an affliction entirely different from other doleful human conditions.

We have not yet grasped the nettle of Luke's reporting of miracles in his early Christian history. We have, of course, already read in 2:43 that such healing miracles occurred and now we read that they were, at least for a time, a regular feature of the apostles' ministry.

And, of course, two miracles have already been reported in some detail: the miracle of languages on the Day of Pentecost and the healing of the congenitally lame man in chapter 3. It is time for us to stop and consider what is being claimed, not once but again and again, both in the four Gospels and in the book of Acts. People were healed of diseases – even diseases such as a lifelong blindness or lameness –, were in several cases brought back to life after they had died, were delivered from leprosy, and all this by the mere speaking of a word or the touch of a hand.

Not anyone's word, to be sure and not anyone's hand. We are told explicitly that John the Baptist worked no miracle. And ordinary people didn't work them either. In every case it was the Lord Jesus and his apostles. What is more, it was apparently always clear to everyone that the apostles, in performing miraculous healings, were not wielding their own power but the Lord's. When a year or so before they were sent by the Lord Jesus on a tour and given power to work miracles and to drive out demons, we are told in the Gospels that this created a great excitement about Jesus, not about them.

No one doubts that the Bible claims that such extraordinary things happened. And there can be no doubt that this claim is a principal reason some people do not believe the Bible to be reporting real history. They think such accounts as we have here in these few verses we have read this morning are better described as legends or myths, stories invented, perhaps long after the fact, to dress up the Christian story and make it more credible in an age that tended to believe such stories. In our scientific age, so they think, we can no longer believe that such things occurred. Well, what have we to say to that? After all, if we take miracles out of Luke's narrative, and certainly if you take them out of the four Gospels, we are left with a very different story and a very different Jesus. In most ways, the other religions of the world would remain unaffected if you removed stories of the miraculous. Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, for example, have such stories, but they are not essential to those faiths. But Christianity is the story of great miracles. If you remove the miraculous, nothing important is left. So the question is very important: can we believe that such things actually happened in space-time history, the ordinary history of our world?

Before we tackle that question let us begin with some important observations.

1. *First, miracles are very rare in the Bible.* During most of the history covered in Holy Scripture, from Abraham to the apostles, even people who belonged to God's people or who lived in proximity to them would never have witnessed a miracle. Their lives in this respect were as our lives. The Bible makes no bones about this. Miracles are highly unusual, exceedingly rare events. Indeed, they wouldn't be miracles if they weren't.

2. In fact, *miracles occur almost exclusively during three brief periods* of salvation history: 1) from the exodus through the early stage of the conquest of Israel; 2) in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha at the headwaters of the prophetic movement in Israel; and 3) the ministry of Jesus and his apostles. It has long been noticed that these three short periods of miracle-working coincide with the great turning points in the history of biblical revelation: Moses gave us the Pentateuch, the prophets, of whom Elijah and Elisha were the fathers, gave us certainly most of the rest of what we call the Old Testament; and the apostles gave us the New Testament.
3. *There are no miracles anywhere in the Bible that are not directly associated with the ministry of a prophet or apostle.* Indeed, we are taught in Holy Scripture, for example in Acts 2:22, that the primary purpose of miracles was to authenticate the men who gave us the Bible, to establish their authority as men who spoke from God. That sick people were cured, that demon-possessed people were delivered was not their main purpose; that was simply their happy side-effect. Their purpose was to prove that God himself, the Almighty, was with these men; that they were acting and speaking *for him*. This explains why miracles apparently were a feature of the ministry of the apostles only for the earlier period of their ministries. By the end of Paul's ministry the evidence suggests he was no longer working miracles and that seems to have been the case generally. Miracles were never intended to be a regular feature of Christian life and ministry. We live by faith and not by sight and miracles obviously belong to sight. You don't need faith to see that a man born blind now has 20/20 or that a man lame from birth is leaping and dancing before you! But once the authority of the apostles was established the miracles came to an end.
4. That leads us to a fourth observation about miracles. *In the Bible miracles are invariably objective demonstrations of supernatural power.* A miracle is not in the Bible - though we may use the word loosely in this way - a wonderful answer to prayer; it is not someone's sudden conversion to faith in Christ, nor is it a striking providence. Such things, however wonderful, can always be explained by skeptics as something else: as a coincidence, as a matter of a man or woman turning over a new leaf, and the like. No one can *see* the hand of God in such things, wonderful as they are, and certainly God's work as they are. *But biblical miracles were public acts of supernatural power*, events that could in no way be explained naturally. They were awe-inspiring demonstrations of divine power as much to the Egyptians as to the Israelites, as much to the Pharisees and Sadducees as they were to the followers of the Lord. In the Bible, for that reason, there is no record of anyone denying that a genuine miracle had occurred for the simple reason that no one *could* deny it. A sign (that is, something that speaks an unmistakable message), a wonder (that is, something that leaves us struck dumb), an event that cannot be explained as anything other than the manifestation of supernatural power *is the definition of a miracle in the Bible*. The Pharisees did not doubt that Jesus performed miracles, even as they hated him for having the power to do so.

This, of course, is the problem with the claims that faith-healers make today. Their claims are convincing only to the credulous. They can't convince even most Christians that they are performing miracles and they certainly don't convince unbelievers. *Real miracles convinced everybody all at once!* They might not have created faith, but no one doubted that they had occurred. That is why I have told you before that you needn't worry about missing out on

miracles, as if being skeptical of the claims being made by others might keep you from witnessing God's power unleashed in the world. If miracles happen again in the world, you'll read it about on the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The editors may ascribe the power to demons as the Pharisees did, or to aliens, as Erich van Däniken did – anything to avoid the conclusion that God himself is visibly and undeniably at work in the world – but that supernatural power had been unleashed they couldn't deny because everyone would know that something totally beyond the power of man or nature had taken place. *That and that alone is a biblical miracle.*

There were lots of others then as now claiming to be able to work miracles. And they were soon forgotten because it became obvious to everyone that they could not. In that day - before the Lord's time and immediately after - among the Jews there were messianic pretenders who promised to part the waters of the Jordan River or to bring down the walls of Jerusalem and even attracted a following, until it became clear they could do no such thing, just as there have been a steady stream of faith-healers in our day who have been discredited by undercover investigations of their claims and the discovery of their fraudulent practices. People then as now could tell the difference between a charlatan and a genuine prophet of God.

But now to the question: is such an account as we have read this morning credible? Can we believe that such things actually happened? We've never seen anything like that. No one we know has ever seen anything like this. Our *Westminster Confession of Faith* has a very short statement on miracles, because in the mid-17th century the credibility of the Bible's accounts of miracles was not in dispute. But since the time of the philosopher David Hume, the 18th century Scot, it has been widely thought in unbelieving circles that these miracle stories are the Bible's Achilles' heel, the proof that we needn't take it as serious history.

Hume argued that belief in miracles is unreasonable because miracles are so inherently improbable – no matter how strong the testimony in support of them – that it will always be more probable than not that the reports are false. He also assumed that the biblical testimony was fatally compromised by the fact that people in those days were ignorant of scientific fact, credulous or easily duped. Moreover he argued that the reader of such ancient stories is bound to wonder “why such prodigious events never happen in our days.”

But it has long been observed that, despite the influence they have wielded in modern thought, neither of Hume's arguments is actually very persuasive and, in fact, they have lost a lot of their former prestige. [D. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 533-535] Of course miracles are inherently improbable. The Bible makes that very clear. They almost never happen. It seems to be the case that on the Bible's own testimony they haven't happened since the last miracle performed by an apostle occurred sometime in the mid-first century. But there are many improbable things that have actually happened and, of course, it is precisely the Christian claim that some of those most improbable things, humanly speaking, explain the Christian faith. The probability of an event, in Hume's view, is simply a function of the frequency with which events of that type occur. But the Bible is candid in asserting the rarity of miracles. It is precisely that rarity that made them so breathtaking to those who witnessed them. You cannot judge historical records by whether or not they record improbable events. Huge meteors very rarely hit the earth, but we know they have on several occasions! [For the above cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Why*

Christian Faith Still Makes Sense, 95-99] Or, to put it in another way, our experience tells us what happens in our own space and time, it does not and cannot tell us what is or is not possible or what *always* or *never* happens. [Frame, *Apologetics*, 144]

What is more, it is simply a canard that people in the first century were credulous rubes who would believe anything they were told; that ancient peoples didn't know the difference between fact and fiction and didn't care or couldn't tell whether claims of the supernatural were true or false. That is simply not true, and anyone who knows the ancient world knows how untrue it is. As I already noted, people who claimed to be able to work miracles but who couldn't deliver the goods were soon forgotten. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant he certainly didn't assume that a miracle had happened. He assumed, as anyone would, that she had had relations with another man. They knew how women became pregnant. He would not likely have believed her if she had told him that an angel had told her that her pregnancy was caused by the power of God. That is why Gabriel appeared to him too! Indeed, if people didn't know the laws of nature there could be no such thing as a sign or wonder. They had to be utterly nonplussed at what happened to realize that it was indeed nothing but the power of God! Nothing can be extraordinary unless and until you know what is ordinary! Indeed, the very same sort of arguments that Hume used can be found used by early skeptics of Christian claims. What is more, there are as many credulous people today as there were in those long ago days. At least in the first century they didn't publish horoscopes in the daily newspapers!

But the fact is, consider the Christian claim. It is hardly that every now and then something extraordinary has occurred. Rather, it is that the infinite/personal God who made the world by the word of his power, has been at work in his world. And, in particular, that in revealing his will to mankind, he took pains to ensure that those who delivered his revelation would be once-for-all accredited as men who had the authority to speak on his behalf. What better way to do that than to give such men the power to perform wonders that no one else could or ever has been able to perform? There can be no doubt that, according to the Bible, we have the Bible at all because at the time it was written there were proofs provided, unassailable proofs, that this was the *Word of God*, not simply of men.

But still more, consider this. If you consent to the possibility that God might save his sinful world, if you agree that his love and his justice together would require atonement for human sin, if you understand the logic that required God the Son himself to enter the world, and to become also a man to fit himself to be the only possible sacrifice for that sin, then is it not true that in that moment, at that time, under those circumstances, the occurrence of miracles is hardly unlikely. If God actually entered the world to save the world, then it is hardly unlikely that unusual things would happen in connection with his presence among us! Lest we forget, it was the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a great miracle, that propelled the Christian faith on to the world stage!

In fact, I think a little bit of thought will reveal that miracles are not the real issue at all. We have no difficulty understanding why people in our time, educated in the way they have been, find it difficult to believe the Christian message. We proclaim that Jesus was born of a virgin mother and they think, quite naturally, that such a thing is impossible. We proclaim that it was the death of Jesus on the cross that secured reconciliation with God and entrance into eternal life. And

they simply cannot fathom how the death of an amateur Jewish rabbi 2,000 years ago could possibly be so important to them today. We proclaim that after his death on the cross, Jesus rose from the dead to unending and transcendent human life, was seen alive by many, proving that he had conquered death, not only for himself for us all who trust in him. And many modern people find that simply impossible to believe. Death is final, they think, and resurrections simply do not happen.

But those problems are not the problems at all. It is not here that the real issue is joined. The great miracle that Christians proclaim and upon which they rest their confidence of salvation and eternal life is not that Jesus walked on the water or fed 5,000 men with a few scraps of food, or healed lepers or gave sight to the blind. Those are not the great mystery and challenge of our Christian faith. *The really staggering claim we make is something else entirely:* that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man, that God the Son, the second person of the triune God, the living God, the God who made heaven and earth and everything and everyone in it, *that* God became a man, that he took on humanity without the loss of his deity, and that Jesus was as fully divine as he was human. *There is the issue!*

And surely it is obvious that if *that* is what happened, if that mighty miracle occurred – as the Bible says it did; as the faithful men and women who were witnesses of Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection said it did – then such miracles as are reported in this morning’s text are hardly a problem. If this is *who* Jesus is and this is *what* he is – God and man in one person, the only such person who is or who could ever be – then the fact that he performed miracles is not only not a difficulty, it becomes something quite likely and easy to imagine. The maker of heaven and earth can certainly multiply food. The maker of water can walk on it if he wishes to. The maker of the eye can fix it if it is broken. The maker of skin can purify it if it is corrupted by some disease. And the maker of spirits, including evil spirits, can order them to do whatever he wishes.

If you consider the biblical miracles by themselves, in isolation from the central facts of biblical revelation – the creation, the incarnation, and the love of God for his rebellious creatures – of course they will prove a stumbling block. But if you accept the existence of a personal God, if you accept that God, being perfect love and perfect justice, might very well have thought to save the world in just the way the Bible says he did, then miracles are not an impediment to faith, they are further evidence for it, for the divine authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As Dr. Packer beautifully put it:

“If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable man, godly man, the difficulties in believing what the New Testament tells us about his life and work would be truly mountainous. But if Jesus was the same person as the eternal Word, the Father’s agent in creation, ‘through whom also he made the worlds’ ...it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked his coming into this world, and his life in it, and his exit from it. It is not strange that he, the Author of life, should rise from the dead. If he was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that he should die than that he should rise again.”

“‘Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies,’ wrote Wesley; but there is no comparable mystery in the Immortal’s resurrection. And if the immortal Son of God did really submit to taste

death, it is not strange that such a death should have saving significance for a doomed race. Once we grant that Jesus was divine, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in any of this: it is all of a piece and hangs together completely. The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.” [*Knowing God*, 54]

And I have still said nothing about the unique quality of the testimony to the miraculous in the Bible. Nothing like the legends and myths of the ancient world, the biblical accounts of the miraculous are sober, serious, chaste, - obviously not written for anyone’s entertainment -, and bear faithful witness to the mixture of confusion, fear, and wonder that the miracles provoked in the minds of the people who witnessed them. What is absolutely certain, a point often admitted by the Bible’s critics and as often unexplained by them, *the writers of the Bible’s accounts of the miraculous obviously themselves thought that these stupendous works of divine power had actually occurred*, that what they were writing was not fantasy but history.

In other words, the reason people stumble over the Bible’s narrative of miracles – signs, wonders, works of supernatural power – is not because those accounts are unbelievable but because they have not yet encountered Jesus Christ as God become man for our salvation. When that occurs, all the doubts about miracles disappear as the morning mist!

So, carry yourself back to those wonderful days in Solomon’s colonnade. Imagine yourself a visitor to the temple who happened to be there when Peter put his hand on some leper and the man’s skin become suddenly healthy, no longer white and scaly, but looking like skin ought to look like, or when he commanded a demon to leave a man or woman only to witness the shriek when the demon did and see in a moment the person restored to a sound mind and body.

Imagine how flabbergasted you would be, such power on display, such happiness all around, such shouts and tears of joy from those who were sick and from their loved ones. But imagine the questions that would rise in your mind. How was this possible? By what power did such healing take place? What is the explanation for such an extraordinary thing, something I’ve never seen before? This demands an explanation!

And then you would hear Peter talk about Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. You would hear him or one of the other apostles say that the power by which these poor people were healed was not theirs, but Christ’s, now present by his Holy Spirit. Would you not consider that carefully, having seen what you saw, heard what you heard? And would you not believe? Would you not think, I must come to know this Jesus Christ myself? Would you not think, I want such power and such goodness to be wielded on my behalf and on behalf of my loved ones? Wouldn’t you immediately realize that the healing was not the main thing? The revelation of the power and the love and the goodness and the divine authority of Jesus Christ: *that is the main thing!*

The history of man’s redemption from sin and death *is* the history of the *supernatural*, of events utterly unlike those encountered otherwise in the experience of life. It is no wonder that our faith again and again has stood or has fallen according to the strength of the church’s conviction that

the biblical account of the miraculous is not only credible but persuasive. And it is and always has been precisely that: credible and persuasive.