

Signs and Wonders

A Church that Prays: Prayer in the Book of Acts

October 15, 2023

Acts 2:43; 4:23-31, etc.

We're continuing our series called *A Church that Prays*, which is all about the subject of prayer in the book of Acts.

Today we're going to consider a topic that we haven't talked about a great deal at Cornerstone. These days it can be a challenging topic to address, for various reasons. But it's prominent enough in the Bible—and especially so in Acts—that we want to give it due attention as part of this series. So let's dive right in, shall we?

Please turn in your Bible to Acts chapter 4 verse 30— and just keep your finger there for now. We'll be reading it soon, and it's going to serve as the launching pad for the rest of the message.

But first, let me take a few minutes set things up with bit of context from the book of Acts.

Following the events of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, the first Christian church was born in Jerusalem. Just as he had promised, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on his followers.

And the young church began to grow like gangbusters.

In Acts 2 we're told that:

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.¹

Given that this is a series about prayer, that verse is noteworthy, because it shows that the first Christians didn't just pray every now and then. They were *devoted* to prayer. Now, in the very next verse we read that:

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.²

So in this prayer-soaked environment, lots of miracles were taking place, says the text. After all, Jesus *had* promised his followers that:

¹ Acts 2:42-43, 47b (NLT)

² Acts 2:43 (NLT)

... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.³

Power. The original Greek word is *dunamis*. It's where we get the word dynamite. And one of the ways we see the Spirit's power at work in the book of Acts is through miracles, healings, supernatural deliverances, and the like.

For instance, in Acts 3, the apostles Peter and John head to the temple for afternoon prayer. They come across a beggar with a physical disability sitting outside the temple gate. The man was unable to walk.

As Peter and John pass by, the beggar asks them for money, but Peter says:

"Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."⁴

They help him up. Instantly, his feet and ankles become strong. This man who had been physically disabled from birth now *walks* with Peter and John into the temple courts, jumping and praising God as he goes.

Everyone in the temple courts turns to see what the commotion is about. They immediately recognize this man that they knew to be unable to walk, now walking. Astonished, they gather round.

Peter begins to preach the good news of Jesus to the crowd, and says:

Through faith in the name of Jesus, this man was healed—and you know how crippled he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has healed him before your very eyes.⁵

The story continues into Acts chapter 4. Temple security arrives on the scene, along with some Jewish religious leaders, who are very disturbed to hear Peter and John talking about Jesus and resurrection. So they arrest them, and put them in jail until morning. Regardless, many who had heard the apostles' message that day put their faith in Jesus.

The next day, a Jewish religious council convenes to question Peter and John, who continue to declare Jesus as Messiah, without apology. The religious authorities simply couldn't deny

³ Acts 1:8a (NLT)

⁴ Acts 2:6 (NIV)

⁵ Acts 3:16 NLT)

that the disabled man—who had been well-known to the community for decades— was now healed. It was public and indisputable— and all the people were praising God because of it. So they decide to release Peter and John, warning them of dire consequences should they ever speak publicly in the name of this Jesus again.

Peter and John return to a gathering of believers and report what the religious authorities had said. Upon hearing this, they all join their hearts together in prayer (remember, the early church was devoted to prayer), and they ask God for great boldness to keep preaching his word, in spite of the threats.

That brings us to the verse I asked you to look up— Acts 4:30. Let's have a look at it now. Here's what the believers prayed. O God,

Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus. ⁶

Question: As believers today, should we also pray like that? Or, was that something more for then than it is for now? It is asking too much, expecting too much of God, to pray like that? Or, does our lack of such praying suggest, perhaps, that we expect too little of God?

This congregation is so large and diverse. We come from a wide spectrum of church and cultural backgrounds—it's one of the things that makes Cornerstone so beautiful.

And given our diversity, when it comes to *this* topic it's likely some of you here may be of the conviction that miracles were for Bible times but not for today. Others believe we should enthusiastically pursue the miraculous. Still others are somewhere in between. Some probably haven't given it much thought before. Surely others of you have prayed earnestly for a miracle only to end up disappointed and confused, and I want to be sensitive to that as I teach today. Still others will flat-out skeptical of miracles period—even the ones recorded in the Bible.

So allow me to state up front that this topic raises more issues and questions than I can possibly address today. But there it is in scripture, right? And if we believe the Bible to be God's word to us, then challenging or not, this topic deserves our open-minded, open-hearted consideration.

⁶ Acts 4:30 (NLT)

In the time that remains, I hope we can make some good inroads into this topic by exploring **four aspects of miraculous signs and wonders**: *What they are, why they're given, who they're for, and how they flow.*

Just a heads up, this message will be a bit more densely-packed than usual. I will need to teach through a fair bit of biblical content along the way— content I trust God will use to motivate and encourage you to take some relevant action steps in prayer by the time we get to the latter part of the message.

So, signs and wonders. First, let's consider:

1. What miraculous signs & wonders are.

A "sign" is an event—miraculous or supernatural in character— that comes from God. Signs point to God and what he's doing in the world.

A "wonder" is basically the same thing. It's unexplainable by the laws of nature. It's a supernatural occurrence from God that inspires awe and, well, *wonder*.

When John the Baptist had second thoughts about whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told John's disciples to:

Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor.⁷

These were wondrous, God-given *signs* affirming Jesus' identity as Messiah— *signs* pointing to the fact in Jesus, God's kingdom—his rule and reign—has broken into the world.

The miracles of Jesus are *signs* pointing to God's ultimate intentions for creation when his kingdom comes fully to earth one day. For example:

- Jesus' miracles of nature—like when he calmed the storm—were signs pointing to the fact that when God's kingdom fully comes to earth, the whole natural order—all creation—will be completely healed.
- When Jesus cast out demons, it was a sign pointing to the fact that when God's kingdom fully comes, the spiritual forces of evil will be finally and forever vanquished.

⁷ Luke 7:22 (NLT)

- When Jesus healed the sick, it was a sign pointing to the fact that when God's kingdom fully comes, our bodies will be made whole, free from disease and disability, free from decay and death.

In the book of Acts, such miraculous signs continue to be demonstrated through the church — signs of God's ultimate future for this world breaking into the present.

From a biblical point of view, that's what signs and wonders are. Next let's look at:

2. Why miraculous signs & wonders are given.

Not unlike Jesus' miracles served to affirm his identity as Messiah, in the book of Acts signs and wonders are given to help authenticate and spread the message about Jesus. We read in Acts 14 that the apostles boldly preached about Jesus,

And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders.⁸

It should come as no surprise, then, that throughout Acts, signs and wonders are almost always directly connected with opening people's hearts to the gospel, to the good news of Jesus.

In Acts 5, we read of the apostles performing many signs, wonders, and healings. All of this leads to the message of Jesus spreading even further. One night an angel even shows up, and busts the apostles out of jail, telling them:

"Go to the Temple and give the people this message of life!"⁹

In Acts 9, a woman named Tabitha dies, but is raised to life again after Peter prays for her. The result of this miracle was that:

The news spread through the whole town, and many believed in the Lord.¹⁰

So again, to sum it up, **signs and wonders help authenticate and spread the message about Jesus.** I could list several more examples, but suffice it to say that in Acts, miraculous

⁸ Acts 14:3 (NLT)

⁹ Acts 5:20 (NLT)

¹⁰ Acts 9:42 (NLT)

signs and wonders go hand and hand with evangelism, with more and more people becoming followers of Jesus.

It's not that the message of Jesus cannot effectively be declared *apart* from miracles. It often is— more often than not. Still, in Acts, when we read about miracles, they're almost always given for the purpose of accelerating the spread of the gospel.

Of course, signs and wonders are given to show God's love and compassion towards those who need healing or deliverance. We'll talk about that more when we get to the fourth point.

But for now, let's move on to discuss the third aspect of signs and wonders:

3. Who miraculous signs & wonders are for.

Here is where some key issues and questions really start to emerge.

For example, were miracles *only* for Jesus and the apostles? Were they *only* for the church in the New Testament era? Or are they also for God's people today—for *us*, even?

One thing's for sure. According to Acts, most of the signs and wonders were done through the apostles—the original leaders of the church who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection.

Just like we read earlier in Acts 2:

... the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.¹¹

This pattern carries throughout the book of Acts. And as if to underscore this point, Paul also says to the Christians in Corinth:

When I was with you, I certainly gave you proof that I was an apostle. For I patiently did many signs and wonders among you.¹²

So the New Testament shows us that the apostles were especially gifted in the miraculous. The question is, were miracles done by anyone *other* than Jesus and the apostles?

¹¹ Acts 2:43b (NLT)

¹² 2 Corinthians 12:12 (NLT)

Well, for starters, Acts directly states that Stephen and Philip worked miraculous signs and wonders, and they weren't apostles.¹³

Later in the New Testament, we read in 1 Corinthians that the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to various members of the average church include gifts of healing and the power to perform miracles.¹⁴

Those who want to argue that such gifts are not for today have to explain why they believe that the other non-miraculous gifts listed in the exact same passage— gifts like teaching and leadership and the gift of helping others—are still valid for today. Good principles of biblical interpretation say you can't just cherry pick from gifts lists like that.

As Bible scholar Jack Deere writes:

Where in the Scriptures are we [taught that] you may copy the things that are non-miraculous, but you cannot copy or expect the miraculous events for today?¹⁵

At the end of the day, there is nothing in scripture itself to suggest that miracles were not meant to continue beyond the period of the New Testament.

While we may not expect the quality and quantity of miracles that took place during *apostles'* ministry, that doesn't mean God isn't using his people to do miracles and healings today. There is nothing to preclude it—at least not in the Bible itself.

Jack Deere goes on to say that:

If you take a new convert, who prior to his conversion knew nothing about the history of Christianity and the New Testament, and you lock him in a room with a Bible for a week, he will come out believing that he is a member of a body that is passionately in love with the Lord Jesus Christ and a body that... experiences miracles and works miracles. It would take a clever theologian with no experience of the miraculous to convince the young convert differently.¹⁶

The reason why many Christians today don't expect God to work miracles is because they've never experienced the miraculous before. But just because you haven't personally experienced or witnessed something doesn't mean it isn't real or doesn't exist.

¹³ See Acts 6:8 and 8:6.

¹⁴ See 1 Corinthians 12:9-10, 28-29.

¹⁵ Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today*, p. 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 114.

Here's where many of us—Christians included— bump into the Western, naturalistic worldview that most of us have been shaped and educated in. Those of us who have grown up in the modern West have been taught to believe that there is a natural, scientifically explainable cause for every effect. Period. And science is great, don't get me wrong. But quite unlike people from many other cultures and regions of the world, many of us have been taught to be skeptical of anything supernatural— maybe even dismissive of it.

And sometimes we should be, because not all accounts of the supernatural are true.

But in our part of the world, an anti-supernatural bias has pervaded most disciplines for a very long time. This is beginning to change in some ways, but for well over a hundred years now, even many biblical scholars have been chronically skeptical about the credibility of the Bible's miracle claims.

A highly-regarded New Testament scholar named Craig Keener has set out to challenge that bias in his landmark work, [Miracles](#). This is a 2-volume, 1000-page academic work, heavily footnoted, and it can be yours for just \$91 on Amazon. The author's main goal is to show the plausibility of the New Testament miracle accounts, but he does so in a unique way.

In this massive body of research, Keener painstakingly documents hundreds of eyewitness accounts and personal experiences of Christians—from ancient to contemporary—who claim to have experienced the miraculous in some way. Some of these accounts, he acknowledges, don't deserve as much credibility. But many of the accounts are very hard to just explain away or deny—things that happened publicly with many eyewitnesses who had no motive to lie, and incredible healings that were medically documented with great care.

Keener's intent in this book is not to *prove* the truth of the New Testament miracles accounts per se, but to show that the commonly accepted bias against even the *possibility* of miracles lacks intellectual integrity in light of the evidence. He's trying to say that scholars and people in general need to understand and grapple with the fact that these things do happen in the world, they are well-documented, and so we need to at least consider and be open to the possibility that miracles are real, and that the New Testament accounts are accurate records of actual, historical events.

How much *more* open should those of us who claim faith in the Creator of heaven and earth be open to the possibility of God working miracles—even today— in and through his people for the sake of his mission to redeem this world through Christ?

Signs and wonders. So far, we've looked at what they are, why they're given, and who they're for. I'm suggesting that while they probably won't flow for us like they did for the apostles, God can still work miracles in and through his people today, in Jesus' name. So now let's go ahead and talk about:

4. How miraculous signs & wonders flow.

In a nutshell, they flow by prayer and in love.

Let's talk first about how **signs and wonders flow BY PRAYER.**

Throughout the book of Acts, the release of the Spirit's miracle-working power is linked with prayer.¹⁷

But remember the verse I had you look up at the beginning of the message— the believers' prayer in Acts 4:30?

Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.¹⁸

Referring to this prayer, New Testament scholar Ajith Fernando writes:

It is very biblical to pray for this. If the church were to take this kind of prayer seriously, who knows what kind of outpouring of signs and wonders in revival that God might be pleased to give us?¹⁹

We've been providing little prayer or scripture cards in connection with certain sermons lately, and today as you leave the worship hall after service, we'll be handing out cards with Acts 4:30 printed on them: *Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.*

The application step I'd like to give— for all those so inclined— is to use this card to help you pray this verse for Cornerstone in the weeks to come. Post it on your fridge. Stick it to the dashboard of your car. Use it as a bookmark. Whatever it takes for you to see that card,

¹⁷ For example, Acts 4:30, 9:36-42, 16:16-40, etc.

¹⁸ Acts 4:30 (NLT)

¹⁹ Ajith Fernando, *Acts: NIV Application Commentary*, p. 179.

and be reminded to pray this prayer often. It shouldn't take you long to memorize it. Once you do, pray this verse every time it comes to mind.

What do we have to lose? Let's be praying Acts 4:30 over Cornerstone, and watch what God might do. Maybe we'll see God do miracles in and through us that will accelerate the spread of the gospel message in Markham-Stouffville, and beyond.

Having said that, I think it's important that we don't fixate on the whole supernatural aspect of things. Shall we pray for miraculous healings of physical ailments, for example? Of course, why wouldn't we?

But let's not discount other ways that God's Spirit can work with power through our prayers that might not technically meet the definition of biblical signs and wonders. I think there's still something miraculous about many other things God does too:

- When God restores a broken marriage, there's something miraculous about that.
- When someone who is emotionally broken, or who has an addiction, finds healing and wholeness in Jesus, there's something miraculous about that.
- When someone who doesn't know Jesus comes to love, serve, and follow him, there is something miraculous about that.
- When someone is given all-sufficient grace to carry on in the face of adversity, and finds the hope and peace and joy of the Lord in the midst of hardship or illness, there's something miraculous and oh-so beautiful about that.

The point we're trying to make with this sermon and in this series is that the Holy Spirit's power is released and a whole range of amazing things can happen when God's people get serious about prayer. That's why we don't want to be a church that's content to just learn *about* prayer. We want to *actually be a praying people*.

So please keep that in mind as you pray Acts 4:30 over Cornerstone in the weeks to come.

Okay, we've talked about how miraculous signs and wonders flow by prayer. It is also essential to note that **signs and wonders must flow IN LOVE**.

In the New Testament, we read about the Corinthian Christians, who were very impressed with the spiritual gifts that we tend to think of as more dramatic— speaking in tongues, prophecy, healings and miracles. In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul was all for

this stuff. But he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 that if you have all these impressive gifts, and they're not motivated by love, they're altogether worthless.²⁰

In praying for miracles, we do so not just to see God do some really, really cool stuff. We do so *in love*, to see people—who God loves so much he gave his Son for them—made whole by the power of Jesus Christ. We do so *in love*, to see people who don't know Jesus yet come to serve and follow him (remember, miracles were often given to accelerate the spread of the message about Jesus).

So we never seek miracles for the sake of miracles. We pray for miracles as just one expression among many of what it means to share God's *love* with people—to see his *love* break through to transform the lives of others.

Sometimes you hear about people chasing revivals. An article by Pastor and theologian Greg Boyd talks about a couple who travelled to Lakeland, Florida where a "healing revival" had purportedly broken out. When their pastor asked them if they were going because they needed healing, they replied that they just wanted to witness "God doing stuff." Here's what Boyd said in this article, and I think this is so wise:

If we can't discern God's presence in our day-to-day lives, it's unlikely that we'll find him at a revival or some other spiritual event. We may find a lot of excitement, great speakers, superb music, and maybe even some "signs and wonders." But unless a person learns to find God as much in the ordinary as in the exciting, the exciting will do nothing more than serve as a momentary distraction.²¹

Let's be using those prayer cards to be praying for God to work in miraculous ways in our midst. Absolutely. But above all, let's make sure to be seeking God in prayer in the everyday, ordinary stuff of life, because more than anything, that's what will enable us to learn how to *love* like he loves.

And so in addition to praying Acts 4:30, I encourage you to check out our prayer resources at www.cornerstonechurch.ca/prayer to help you in your daily prayer life.

For those who would like to read more on this subject, I highly recommend a book by Dr. Jack Deere called [*Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*](#)—it's super-helpful and very accessible and readable. *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Jack Deere)

²⁰ See 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

²¹ Greg Boyd, <http://reknew.org/2016/03/the-god-of-the-here-and-now/>.

I'll now close with a story and a few final words.

10-12 years ago, a woman in this church was miraculously healed of lung cancer. Her prognosis had been very grave. But we gathered for a prayer meeting, anointed her with oil, and prayed earnestly for her healing.

Very soon thereafter, she and her husband reported that the cancer was gone. The doctors couldn't explain it. The images from before had very clearly showed cancer. Now the images were just clear. She was cancer-free. We all rejoiced and praised the Lord. It was a miracle.

This woman's life was extended for quite some time after this—I don't recall exactly how long—a couple years maybe—but sadly, the cancer eventually returned and this time it took her life.

And so there was this ambiguity about her healing.

I close with this story to talk about the *already* and the *not yet* of the kingdom of God.

As I said earlier, in Jesus, God's kingdom has broken into the world. It's here *already*—but it's *not yet* here fully. Sometimes, like in the case of this woman's healing, the *already* breaks through, like when the sunshine punches through a thick bank of clouds and brings brilliant brightness and warmth where there had once been darkness and gloom. And yet often, the clouds roll in again, and we're reminded of the *not yet*—that this fallen world is *not yet* what Jesus will make it one day when he comes again.

But we know the sun is still there, even though we can't always see it. We know that one day, all clouds will roll away, and as scripture says, the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.²²

Prayer can help us see a lot more of the *already* of God's kingdom than we would ever see without it. But prayer isn't magic. It doesn't keep every cloud away. The apostles, for all the signs and wonders that God did through them, knew great adversity and suffering, and they learned how to pray through it and find the peace and joy of the Lord in the middle of it.

Prayer is what keeps us connected with Jesus, who is the source of all our strength and power, whether we see a miracle, or whether he gives us the grace to carry on when the

²² See Habakkuk 2:14

clouds roll in. And as I said before, the carrying on, in itself, is something of a miracle, and our Lord Jesus himself is in no way a stranger to carrying on in the midst of suffering.

Indeed, Jesus prayed earnestly through his greatest suffering, and won salvation for us. And he calls us to pray, too. So that's what we're going to do at the end of the service...

Prayer Ministry (at the end of the service)