

Signs and Wonders

Reading Matthew 12:38-45, Text Exodus 4:1-9

What does it take to believe God's word? Many don't believe you know! Many others don't really take it very seriously. Why not? We heard from Paul Murphy at Saturday's evangelism conference that all people by virtue of the fact that we are image bearers of God are hard-wired for God. In other words we were made with a certain inbuilt knowledge of God which explains why foreign missionaries have testified to some form of religion among all the nations and tribes of the earth. This inbuilt knowledge of God and the fact of God's handiwork in creation, shows forth the creative genius and power of God. Yet as Paul put it in Romans 1:18 because of sin men suppress the truth about God and hate God (Romans 8:7)

The amazing thing is that God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve but is patient with all not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance and faith. Furthermore he knows our weaknesses and frailties and often helps us to repent and believe as he helped Moses and his people with signs and wonders.

So the theme for the sermon is that the Lord provides signs and wonders to reveal his power and strengthen faith in him. We look at it in three parts

1. Our weakness.

Moses was instructed by God to tell the Hebrews in Egypt that the Lord saw their suffering, was concerned about them and would deliver them. He would bring them into a good land flowing with milk and honey and a place where they would be free.

We notice in chapters 3 & 4 that Moses was rather hesitant about this and asked the Lord a series of questions. Who am I that should go to Pharaoh? ... and... Who are you? Who should I say has sent me? Well the Lord appearing as he did in the burning bush and promising the he would go with Moses might have alleviated Moses doubts but no Moses still had them as we see in his third question "What if?" "What if they don't listen don't believe me?" What if I tell them about the burning bush and they laugh at me and they say you've been in the sun too long. You must have been seeing things, "the Lord has not appeared to you!"?

Perhaps we can understand Moses reservations. He was the only person to witness the burning bush and previously when he tried to assume some kind of authority over the Hebrews in Egypt they said, "who made you ruler and judge over us?" So why would they think any differently now?

Well, they would think differently! In chapter 3:18 God said to Moses "They will pay heed to what you say" So it could be that Moses forgot that detail or simply did not fully trust in the word of God. That seems to have been the case because later on when Moses continued expressing his hesitation the Lord became impatient with Moses. In fact as verse 14 says "the anger of the Lord burned against him."

The lesson for us here is to believe God's word. To believe his word is to act on it without demurring, doubting or contradicting God's word. For example we often hesitate or fail to share our faith with our neighbours because we have similar fears to the ones Moses had. We pretend not to know what to say and are afraid we won't be well received. Whenever that happens we fail to obey the Great Commission and trust the Lord's promises such as; "Do not be anxious about what you are to say for it will be given to you in that hour what to say for it is not you who speaks but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." (Matthew 10:19 & 20) Or the promise given to the disciples in Matthew 28:20 when they were sent out to make disciples of all nations and Jesus said "I will be with you to the end of the age." Like Moses did we are prone to make excuses *not* to go. We avoid taking up opportunities to share our faith or encourage a fellow believer who needs encouragement because we are fearful. Well love drives out fear and God has promised to use His word to save people from their sins and to *use us* as those who are his ambassadors. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5 "We are ambassadors from Christ as though God were entreating through us we beg you on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God."

2. Revelation of God's power an encouragement for God's people

So Moses had his weakness and doubts just like we do. His complaint was "What if they don't believe me or listen to me?!"

We see here that the Lord was gracious with Moses. He answered Moses questions by giving him two demonstrations of his power and promising a third. First he said "what is that in your hand? A staff Moses replied. Then the Lord said "throw it on the ground". Moses threw it on the ground and to his horror it turned into a writhing snake. When God told Moses to catch it by the tail the Hebrew word used suggests that Moses reached out cautiously or snatched at it to avoid being bitten.

In Egypt the snake was a symbol of power no doubt because of its deadly venom. You may have seen images of Egyptian kings with the cobra, its hood raised ready to strike adorning their headdress. Moses having been raised in Egypt will have been familiar with the cobra image and the kind of power it symbolised. So when the Lord turned Moses staff into a snake and back again he was showing Moses His power was greater and that those who trust him need not be afraid of any malignant powers. As Jesus once said to his disciples "Do not fear those who are able to kill the body but are unable to kill the soul. Fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

Grabbing a snake by the tail would help Moses trust God in all kind of situations; some dangerous ones. He needed to trust God that he wouldn't be bitten and trust in God's power. It was a test of Moses obedience because obedience is the pathway to victory.

And as I said, it was also a demonstration of God's power. If he has the power to make a deadly creature subordinate to those who possess an obedient faith in God what else won't he do for you? It says in Romans 8:32 "he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also with him freely give us all things."

That doesn't mean that we can go around picking up deadly snakes and expect never to be bitten. That's the wrong meaning of these verses for the Christian today. What it means for us is obedience to the revealed will of God in the Bible. That is the clear pathway of blessing for the Christian which no one need have any doubts over.

The second sign God gave Moses was as remarkable as the first. God told Moses to put his hand inside his tunic and take it out again. When he took it out it was covered with leprosy, a highly infectious and incurable disease. According to the historian Cassuto leprosy was widespread in Old Testament Egypt. It was highly infectious and the only way to prevent its spread was to quarantine lepers in colonies. As with the cobra anyone who saw a leper would do well to stay away. Here God was showing Moses that he had the power to inflict or cleanse disease.

We see that power very clearly in the Lord Jesus Christ and the healing of the leper in Matthew 8. One came to Jesus, bowed down and said Lord if you are willing you can make me clean! Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him saying I am willing, be cleansed." And so it was.

That and the many other miracles remind us of God's power over Satan and a sin affected world. Though limited in number and scope they provide us with a glimpse of what restoration of God's good order will be like. They also give us a sure hope that one day God will right all of the world's wrongs and make all things new.

The third sign God gave Moses would become the first of the plagues. The Lord said, "If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign they may believe the witness of the last sign" Moses was to take water out of the Nile and pour it on the ground. The water would then turn into blood. For the Egyptian the River Nile provided the life and vitality in what would otherwise be desert. It virtually had the status of some kind of deity being described in ancient Egyptian inscriptions as "The father of life", "The mother of all" and the "manifestation of the divine spirit which blesses the land". Again as is typical in pagan culture the creation is worshipped rather than the creator. With the pollution of the Nile by turning it into blood God was once again revealing his power over all creation. He was showing Moses that life doesn't depend on a river but on God alone.

So then, the point of these signs and wonders was in the first place an **act of God's grace** to help Moses overcome his doubts and weakness. They were given to help Moses rely on God who alone has the power over nature, life and death and all other man made powers.

Secondly the miracles served to **authenticate Moses as God's prophet** to the people. When Moses performed them in front of the Hebrews they became convinced that Moses was the Lord's appointed prophet and Israel's leader at that time.

Thirdly the signs demonstrated **God power** over and above the tricks of false prophets, conjurers and magicians. Moses didn't cast spells, incited no incantations and didn't make any dramatic gestures. He didn't need to invoke God's name endlessly or slash himself as the false prophets of Baal did on Mt Carmel in their vain attempts to attract the attention of their fictional Baal.

What happened to Moses staff, his hand and the water of the Nile was clearly all of God's doing and Moses was as surprised as anyone else would be at these miracles. They were unmistakable proof that the Lord is God and is supreme over all other powers.

So how should we view this today? Must we still expect to see such dramatic examples of signs and wonders in this day and age?

In some Christian circles today there are people who do They still look for some kind of sign from God before they are willing to believe in God. They want God to do something for them. They want to see some evidence as if to say "Lord show yourself to me so I can believe in you."

God's answer to them would be similar to the one Jesus gave the scribes and Pharisees who also demanded a sign. Jesus said "an evil and adulterous generation looks for a sign yet no sign shall be given but the sign of Jonah the prophet. Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale so shall the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

The truth of the matter is we have a clear and unmistakable sign of God's power over sin, over creation and over death and decay today. That sign is Jesus own resurrection.

His death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. He was buried in Joseph of Arimathea's grave. If he had remained in the grave his death would have meant nothing. But he rose again and His resurrection signified God the Father's acceptance of his sacrifice as being sufficient for our justification. Furthermore the sign itself cannot be questioned. The women saw Jesus after he rose again. So did the disciples and so did more than 500 other eye-witnesses. The impact of Jesus resurrection on the world is further proof that it happened. No other empire or organisation before or after has ever surpassed the power to transform than the church has. Why? Because the church's head is Jesus Christ who lives forever more and hold the keys to death and hades. . Finally we can believe the resurrection because God's word says it happened and as Jesus said God's word cannot be broken. SO, just as Moses could trust God's word so can you and I trust his word to us today. Just as Moses was God's witness in Egypt with the promise that He would be with Moses always so too Jesus calls us to be his witnesses today with the promise I will be with you till the end of the age.

Amen