

SNAKES, SIGNS AND WONDERS Acts 28:1-10

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This passage – with Paul's being bitten by what people presumed to be a venomous snake and then later being used by God in the healing of Publius' father and many others – can only rightly be considered in the context of two other Bible passages...

Mark 16:14-18

2 Corinthians 12:12

The Mark chapter 16 passage is, as most of your Bibles will note (either in the text or in a footnote) of some doubt, some question. That is, when many of the earliest copies of Mark's gospel have been found and looked at, these particular verses from Mark chapter 16 are missing. And so it raises the question if their **later inclusion** was possibly as a result of the kind things that later took place in early church life – the kind of things like we read of here in Acts chapter 28.

But we don't know.

And as for the 2 Corinthians 12:12 passage, this has become a principle "go to" kind of passage for those that would suggest that all "signs, wonders, and mighty works or miracles" were limited to the age of the apostles. For there Paul speaks of the "signs, wonders and mighty works" as being the "signs of a true apostle," implying or suggesting (or so it is argued), these signs, wonders and mighty works were LIMITED to the apostles.

So we have this rather interesting story about Paul on the island of Malta but an application of the text BEGS the question: Shouldn't we be seeing these sort of things today?

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As I consider you a fairly mature Christian audience, you will possibly appreciate it when I say to you that it is at about this point that I think I should take up painting for a living...or

maybe go into selling used car. Yes, I could do that and I think I could even enjoy that. I could do either of those things. For **almost ANYTHING would be easier** than having to stand before you all, with a microphone attached to my lapel, and a camera catching my every move and word, while trying to deal with the question raised by Acts chapter 28: **Shouldn't we be seeing these sort of things today?**

This past week I met with a younger man who has expressed interest in knowing more about our church. We had a great time of interaction as we discussed various theological finer points. At that time I referenced an article that I had written for the April 25th Heartbeat, our church bulletin, entitled "A Spirit Led Church." Whether or not YOU recall that article, there I dealt with the 1 Corinthians 14:29 verse that says, "Let two or three prophets speak and let the others weigh what is said." The gist of that article was that the modern church has divided into two groups:

- those that don't believe there are prophets today, and
- those that don't "weigh" or judge what the prophets (that they do accept and believe in) are saying.

Both groups, I suggested, are in the wrong.

The "there are no prophets today" (cesassionists) err in teaching that things like signs, wonders and miracles have all ended and no longer exist.

While those who do not weigh what their so-called prophets are saying err in being **gullible dupes** for every liar and charlatan that comes along.

The net effect of this is that between these two extremes is this near empty VOID...a near empty middle ground void of churches and void of many Christians. Or so it seems.

Well, it is into that nearly empty VOID that I believe we need to be traveling.

- abandoning any cessationist camp, but
- not throwing our lot in with the gullible charismatics.

So, that's where I am.

So back to our question: Shouldn't we be seeing these sort of things today?

I believe the answer is YES. Yes, we should be seeing these sort of things today.

Someone might say, "Well I heard of a church in Paducah, Kentucky where they handle snakes during the service. In fact, 60 minutes even did a show on them. One of the pastors was bitten and died, but they've had others who got bit and survived."

So is that it? Is that where we need to be heading?
Are we to become a snake-handler kind of church?

Someone else says, "And I've heard of a church in California where they teach that gifts of healing are for all of us. We just need faith to believe, and that God will bless that faith. It's there for all of us. Miracles are happening and we just need to get on board with it."

Ah, **the dilemma**: of staying true to scripture without becoming pawns in someone's chess game.

So here is why this text is so hard...

1. The early church, as evidenced by all three of these passages (Acts 28, Mark 16 and 2 Corinthians 12), viewed signs and wonders – even being bitten by a presumably venomous snake with no ill effect – as what might be expected in the life of someone walking closely with God.

We can try and limit it saying, "Well, that was only for the apostles," or "That ended with the apostles," but history shows us that those that came after the apostles, who were themselves taught directly by the apostles, were **not** of that conviction.

For we have in writing, texts that were either preached or written by some who were the **immediate disciples** of people like Peter or John. And while those writings reveal that these early Christians were clear that they **did not believe in a continuing role of apostle** (beyond the apostles mentioned in the New Testament) they **did believe in a continuing role of the Holy Spirit in gifting God's people to do miraculous things.**

So we're not off the hook. We may try and claim we're off the hook, or claim that gifts like tongues, interpretation of tongues, and healings all ceased with the apostles, but we have no biblical or extra-biblical basis for such a claim.

2. Times have changed and the cultures have changed, and so the idea that the work of the Holy Spirit may have also changed seems reasonable. Let me explain...

When we open the New Testament to the gospel accounts of the life of Christ, on almost any page we will find Jesus encountering either the devil, or someone with a demon, or Jesus being accused of having a demon. That is to say, the whole realm of the demonic or evil spirits, was a seemingly regular part of life. And when we come to the book of Acts that same kind of experience seems almost normal. Even here in Acts 28, on the island of Malta, the fact that Paul was bitten by a snake was interpreted by the locals as evidence of something spiritual (in this case "Justice") going on.

If you or I were today gathering sticks and a snake bit us on the hand I doubt that ANYONE would think anything about it other than, "Oh, man, that is too bad. I hope you will be alright."

That is, **we don't live in the spiritual realm, or the demonic realm, like people did long ago.** We don't have witch doctors. Times have changed and the culture is quite different.

Due to these differences, the work of the Holy Spirit, it seems to me, has also somewhat changed...at least here in the Christianized west.

Years ago I gave a series of sermons on healing. One of those sermons was entitled **Grace for our Race**. It was a sermon about how, **because of the spread of the gospel** of Jesus Christ, a form of COMMON GRACE has been expanded to many nations. We in the west, with our wonderful healthcare, are the recipients of many centuries of Christian compassion, evidencing itself in the development of care for the sick on a level unknown in countries that have not been so marked by the gospel. And as that GRACE has spread, it **has brought with it TREMENDOUS HEALING** to people's bodies: not instantaneous healings as we read of in the New Testament, but having exactly the same effects: the lame walking, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing and so forth.

The advances made in medicine are absolutely phenomenal.

Many years ago now I visited the World Trade Center and there went up to the observation deck in one of the two towers (I don't recall which one). But at that time they had a display – a timeline marking off various **medical advances** going back to the time of Hippocrates. Here and there, through the centuries, some discovery or advancement in medical knowledge was noted: the discovery of penicillin, a vaccine for smallpox, the first kidney transplant and so forth. On and on. And, of course, it has been since the middle of the last century that these new discoveries and developments have **skyrocketed**. And then...and here is what struck me as being presumptuously arrogant...it had...at an unnamed date **yet in the future**...one word: IMMORTALITY.

The final enemy, the final obstacle: death. But here was the suggestion that even death itself will someday be conquered by medical advancement.

So while Paul was used to help Publius' father, and many others on that island who were sick, today most if not all those same sick individuals could likely be treated or helped with a bottle of pills, or maybe a change in diet or hygiene. This is the result of Grace for our Race: a bi-product of Christian compassion coupled with scientific and medical advances.

3. Nevertheless, the question is still outstanding: are these gifts – are these signs and wonders and miraculous works – still here today and are they something that we can have or receive or that we should even seek after?

And it is here that I truly do part ways with my anti-charismatic brethren. For although I may agree with them about their concerns, and about their warnings about the innumerable charlatans found within the charismatic community, I believe we are on the wrong side of scripture, and the wrong side of God's workings, to dismiss this.

So while I remain particularly skeptical of those who have made a name for themselves by claiming supernatural gifts, I believe in those gifts and believe **we should pray for them** to be evidenced.

Matthew 6:16-18

Yes, this is about fasting, and not about healing.

But I tend to think of them in a similar way.

Reese Howells was a Welsh Christian from 120 years ago who prayed earnestly that God would use him for the healing of others. But his method wasn't to hold "healing services" whereby he would ask people to come forward so that he might lay his hands on them. Rather, he would visit the sick (like Jesus told us to in Matthew 25), and there he would pray that, if necessary, that person's **sickness might be transferred** to being upon him...for him to bear. He saw this as part of what it meant to be an **intercessor** for that sick individual...that just as Christ interceded for us, bearing in his body our sins, so too we might intercede for the sick, bearing in our body their illness.

I don't know that Reese Howells nailed it. But it sure seems to me that he came a lot closer to what we might seek after than what we have likely seen on television.

4. Lastly, then let us pray now both for those who are sick as well as that God might grant us the gifts and faith to exercise the gifts necessary to see people healed.

Yes...let us pray.