

Miracles and Healing

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[0 : 0 0] So, in our evening worship, over the last number of weeks, we've been looking at the gifts of the Spirit. And last week we looked at tongue speaking, and this week we're looking at miracles and healing.

So, I want to read a couple of verses from the passage that Esther read, and then also one or two other verses, just by way of introduction. Hebrews chapter 2, and we read from verse 1 to 9, and I just want to read verse 4, which is putting into context part of what we'll be looking at.

Speaking about the salvation that is declared by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to His will, important verse for us.

But also, can you turn to, we just read an account of some of these miracles in Acts chapter 19, and it's just a few verses from Acts chapter 19 from verse 8 to verse 12.

And He entered the synagogue, and this is Paul in Ephesus, and for three months He spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation, He withdrew from them and took the disciples with Him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tirenus.

[1 : 3 4] This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hand of Paul, so that even the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched His skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

And then the passage in 1 Corinthians that we've been using, much of the time as our base passage, in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, which speaks about spiritual gifts in verse 10, it says, to another faith by the same spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues and so on.

And then again in verse 28, it says, appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administering, and various kinds of tongues, our all apostles, and so on.

That passage that we've looked at several times. Like today, a slightly different tack this evening, and I say that at the beginning probably because I also need to apologize because I think my sermon is all mixed up tonight, so I'm really sorry about that, not because I don't, well, I maybe don't know what I'm speaking about, but just because of the way this week panned out, I don't feel as ordered as I normally do, so I feel very vulnerable up at the front this evening.

So I am taking a slightly different tack, so a huge area obviously, and again probably one where there's more of a divergence between us and our charismatic brothers and sisters in terms of their theology, generally speaking, and obviously in any of these discussions, I can only be making generalities about what I say.

[3 : 33] I would argue that many of the principles that I mentioned last week in the sermon about tongue speaking would hold true today, and if you wish to follow up on that, then the sermon's online.

But this evening we are looking at the gifts of miracles and healing. And we recognize that the church in the New Testament, particularly the historic message, or the historic references that are given to the church, of the church in Acts, particularly, are so amazing and so encouraging, the church in Acts, this prototypical early birth of the church in Acts is remarkable as it's recorded for us. And it's absolutely clear and undeniable, and we would never want to deny it in any way, that there were amazing, miraculous gifts that accompanied the Word of God in the church as it's recorded for us in Acts.

And we rejoice in that. We rejoice in the accounts. We rejoice because it's the same church that we are part of, the New Testament church, the New Covenant church is the Covenant church that we belong to and recognize.

And that in these times there was remarkable and amazing miracles and healings recorded, and they're recorded for our encouragement and for our praise, to praise the God who allowed these miracles and these healings to happen, and to mark the authentication of the message of good news as it went out with the apostles.

And these were outrageous miracles and healings that we see recorded in the New Testament, raising the dead, healing people's blindness, making people blind, aprons that had been touched by Paul's skin and taken to the sick, and they touched them and they were made whole. Remarkable healings and remarkable miracles that are on a different level to anything, really, that we are aware of today. And they're very similar in many ways to the miracles that Jesus Himself gave when He was ministering for the three years in His public ministry to testify to who He was, to seal the fact that He was the Son of God, and to be a sign to them of who He was. It says that in the... doesn't it after the first miracle He created when He turned the water into wine in that remarkable miracle which was a huge and dramatic miracle, it was to be a sign to the disciples that He was who He said He was, turning water into wine, walking on water, stilling the water, healing the dead, raising the dead, healing the sick. Many remarkable and outstanding miracles that we believe in their historicity and the significance and the importance and the centrality of them.

[6 : 52] And we recognize that whatever the interpretation is that is given to them today from different theological strands, we recognize that they are undeniably linked to the foundational ministry of the apostles.

We read that and we'll read that again later. They were really significant gifts of healings and miracles that were appropriate to the time that they were given, appropriate to sealing and testifying to the centrality and the genuine uniqueness and supernatural message of the gospel that was going to change, was going to turn the world upside down.

And that's the gospel that we believe in and that we share today. Now we remember and also recognize the gifts, all the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we've been looking at.

They are all fused into and related to and surrounded by the truth. They're all related to the truth of God's Word as it's revealed, whether it's an outworking of Jesus' love and Jesus' grace, whether it's focusing on the Word and on the teaching and revelation of His truth, which we now have in its completed form in the Bible.

They're all given for the common good, these gifts, that we can serve one another with them. We glorify God with them, that we are using them to equip the saints and to bring us all to maturity.

[8 : 28] So the spiritual gifts that you are given and the spiritual gifts that you have are to be used for the common good, to be used for the blessing and benefit of the church of Christ.

We're all given the gift of the Holy Spirit as believers, every one of us, and we all have other gifts from the Holy Spirit that we are to use for His glory.

And there's diversity in these gifts, we've seen that. And we'll repeat some of these things. And God is sovereign in His distribution of these gifts. We recognize that from the passage we read and from many other passages.

So can I go back briefly to the gifts of healing and miracles? We recognize, as I said, that in Acts they were outstandingly powerful miracles. Even then they were rare and out of the ordinary.

And they were clearly given at that point, and it's spoken of in Scripture, to authenticate the verbal message of the gospel of the apostles, the foundation that was being laid by the apostles and the prophets, was authenticated and testified to by these amazing miracles that were happening, that were primarily foundational.

[9 : 45] We read that in Hebrews in the passage that we read together in Hebrews chapter 2. God bore witness to this great salvation by signs and wonders and various miracles.

And by gifts of the Holy Spirit, they were there as a witness to what was happening. And we still have that. And that's so significant for us that when we think about the gospel, we also have the testimony of these great miracles that remind us of the authenticity of what was being said.

So we have that in Hebrews chapter 2 where we read. We also have it in Romans chapter 15 where he goes on to say, when Paul is speaking about his own gospel and his own ministry, he said that, I will venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me by bringing the Gentiles to obedience, by word indeed, by the power of signs and miracles, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem all the way around to Ilaricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.

And he had that great ministry that was testified to by these signs and miracles, which he also speaks about in 2 Corinthians. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

So we recognize that before the Scriptures were completed, these particular and amazing and remarkable gifts of verification and testifying were given to partner the ministry of the apostles, primarily.

[11 : 25] But we also recognize then and now that these gifts could be counterfeited. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

So there's a remarkable statement there that signs and wonders can be done, remarkable miracles and remarkable healings can be done, but they can be done with a supernatural power that does not belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We recognize that, that the New Testament clearly teaches a world of light and a world of darkness. And a world of darkness that sometimes reveals itself as an angel of light.

And so there's always a need for us to be discerning and to seek verification of anything that we might regard as supernatural in the remarkable evidence that they might present.

I think today, possibly, there is just too little objective verification and discernment within the current signs and wonders movement.

[12 : 42] And often it can be, not exclusively of course, but often it can be linked to a prosperity gospel that does tend toward sensationalism and materialism that is not of the essence of the gospel.

Test the spirits we are asked to do and recognize and seek God's guidance and these things. Primarily, and the focus is seeing these things, authenticating the New Testament message of the gospel.

So I ask the question, are there miracles and healings today? And this is where it's all a bit higgled to big, I've just put various points in and they're not in a great order, so please forgive me for that.

I would say absolutely, of course, of course there's miracles and healings today. I want to nuance that and I want to put some caveats within that and hopefully explain where we come from in our understanding.

There is miracles, there are miracles and there is healing. We recognize that in the supernatural faith that we believe in and in the Christ that we trust in.

[14 : 03] But we do have to be aware and I'm going to explain some things, what I've said here, some caveats. The pursuit of signs and miracles as a central pillar of faith, these so-called supernatural gifts of the Spirit, can be very dangerous because it can become a distraction from the power and centrality of God's Word, which is given to us, the sufficiency of Scripture, the completed canon of Scripture where God reveals Himself to us and as all that we need for our life and for our faith and for our witness, as it is the sealed and signed and delivered message of God's Word, the centrality of God's Word.

Why do I say that? Well, because there's always a danger of thinking that signs and miracles are what people need to believe. But the Bible says that evidence is not the problem of people.

It's not they need more evidence, more signs and more miracles. It is unbelief that's the problem. In other words, it's a spiritual problem people had. Remember the Pharisees? The Pharisees were aware of and they saw Jesus raising people from the dead.

The Pharisees saw the miracles of healing. They didn't deny the miracles but they were not willing to believe. It wasn't the miracles that were significant.

It was their hard heart of unbelief. As it was, I think I mentioned this last week, the parable of the rich man in Lazarus, where the rich man is in hell and he says, please send Lazarus back to my brothers, because if they know of someone raised from the dead, then they will believe.

[15 : 42] God says to them, if they do not believe the Word of the Moses and the prophets, they will not turn. Now we have that message and we have that good news and that is the significant and hugely important reality that we are to share with others.

People need, what do your friends and my friends need? Do they need signs and miracles and healings? Primarily no, they need the miracle of a new birth if they're not Christians.

They need a new heart. They need a new understanding. They need to be born anew. They need to have their eyes opened by God. And only God can do that. That's God's great work, because it is the heart that needs changed.

What's our role in that? Our role is prayer, pleading, as we do our 70s of prayer, is holy living, so that we're an example to people and it's testifying to Jesus, pointing people to His Word, telling them this great good news and we leave God to do the impossible work of new birth in our lives.

So the temptation might be that we're not content with the breath of God, because that's what the Bible is. The Bible is the breath of God. It's the living Word of God.

[17 : 01] It's His living Word. He's breathed His life into it. A dry, dull history, simple history of the Christian church or of God's working.

It is His living Word which He breathes life into and His Holy Spirit speaks to us through it. That's where our weakness is. That's where our folly is as believers, is that we underestimate the Word.

We underestimate its power. We think it's powerless and weak and insignificant, but it is the living Word of God, the breath of God. We must testify to the supernatural effectiveness of the Bible.

It's unsearchably rich and powerful and beautiful and insightful and life-changing. So we recognize and see how important that is.

But we recognize and know that miracles and healing still happen through prayer, through the answer to prayer, all the time. All the time these things happen. And we mustn't and shouldn't and never try to deny that.

[18 : 07] In any shape or form. Miracles that we see, miracles that we don't see, people who come to Christ. That's a great miracle, the greatest miracle of all. Healings that are clearly an answer to prayer and out of the ordinary.

We have experienced it in our own family. You've experienced it in your own lives where God answers prayer and heals people and does miracles. Absolutely, of course.

Now I don't think, I think that's different from having a specific Holy Spirit gift to heal or do miracles. But nonetheless, we recognize that and that is very important.

And also we recognize, and again this is slightly different from healing, from the gift of the Holy Spirit. But God does give gifts of healing in a medical context to Christians.

I don't think it's a miraculous gifting at that level. But it's a gifting that can be used to God's glory. And it's a vital ministry where people in medical professions have great gifts of healing.

[19 : 09] And they can use that to the glory of God, whether at home, in hospitals here, or on medical mission work, or whatever context. We also see, and these are some of my caveats and nuances, that spiritual healing is, and I mentioned this briefly, spiritual healing is miraculous and is far greater than anything physical in terms of physical healing.

And we know it happens at every conversion that there is new life. But sanctification, which is what we must recognize as our calling and discipleship as believers, is the healing work of the Holy Spirit.

Powerful healing. If you don't think as a Christian, and if I don't think that we are constantly in need for the power and healing of the Lord Jesus Christ in an ongoing way in our lives, and I think we've misunderstood the gospel, that is where we focus our energies and partnership in the Holy Spirit.

A deeper healing in our hearts, spiritual health, both for ourselves and others, that is a great challenge. You know, we can have physical healing, and God can give physical healing, but that doesn't necessarily bring spiritual healing to our hearts.

We hope it would point people towards the one who does a much greater work of spiritual healing. And as a further caveat here, we mustn't and can't deny the theology of suffering.

[20 : 53] Jesus said, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. Count it all joy, James says.

My brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, steadfastness, how it's full effect, that may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, because there's this huge and significant reality of spiritual suffering that sometimes an emphasis on miracles and healing would deny.

I'm not saying that that is always the case far from it. But we are in a spiritual battle, we are in a struggle, we are children of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are followers of the one who has taken up his cross, and we also take up our cross.

We are to mortify and to root out sin in our lives, and that is part of what we are, and that spiritual reality involves, of course, as I said, spiritual healing.

There is a future. There is a future without tears. But it's not yet. There is a future.

[22 : 10] There will be a day where God and Christ will wipe away every tear. But we do lose friends. We lose husbands. We lose wives and children.

We do suffer from cancer. We bear pain. We are opposed. We do live by faith and not by sight.

And suffering for us isn't random. He is with us through it, and he still loves us. Even though we may cry for healing and for miracles, it may be that that is not his purpose for us.

I think there are many ways in which we have spiritually damaged people sometimes by our thinking and by our attitudes, and by not putting into practice faith, by minimizing the significance and power of the word, by being graceless or not being generous.

But I also do feel that tremendous spiritual damage has sometimes been done when people link miracles and promises of healing to levels of faith.

[23 : 25] So the challenges sometimes, people say, well, you don't believe enough. You don't have a strong enough faith. And rather than encouraging someone who is ill or feels the need for healing or a miracle, it discourages them.

It makes them look at themselves and think, oh, I wish I had more faith and can almost destroy them because they feel that they are simply not up to scratch and it's their fault that they're not being healed.

I would encourage you, if you want to read more detail, or more depth into that whole issue, read a great book called A Place of Healing by Joni Erickson.

And Joni Erickson has always been significant because in my life, because right from when I was young, she was writing books that were really powerful and she was, I think, a 17-year-old who had a diving accident and became a paraplegic.

And has a wonderful testimony of faith and of God's goodness to her. And it's called wrestling with the mysteries of suffering, pain and God's sovereignty.

[24 : 36] She doesn't underestimate it. She doesn't cheapen it. She doesn't dismiss anything. But she wrestles with the theology of suffering and the reality of a God who loves her.

Even though there was times she felt almost destroyed by people coming up to her in car parks and saying, you don't have the faith, it's your fault that you're not being healed.

And there was times that almost destroyed her. So just in conclusion, I've only been able to dip into this evening, what should be our emphasis in this area of gifts and healing?

Well, as with all the other gifts, the centrality should always be the most excellent way. Remember Corinthians 12 and 14, the passages that speak about gifts and maybe particular tongues and prophecy, is the sandwich of 1 Corinthians 13, which is the most excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels but have not love, if I can move mountains but have not love. So we simply cannot get away from the significance and the importance and the centrality of God's grace in our lives the most excellent way and how that is unfolded in Scripture through the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

[26 : 04] That is what you are challenged with tonight and I am. How are we living? Are we living this most excellent of ways?

Because everything else will be subsumed into that. Our understanding of gifts, our use of gifts, the tradition that we come from, all of these things will be subsumed into the centrality of the most excellent way.

You have no excuse and I have no excuse from living in a loveless, graceless way. I think it is very important for us in our tradition to have a much higher view of the Bible.

In theory we have it, in our theology maybe we have it, but I think in our practice we cast the Bible aside like it is a comic so often.

Like it is irrelevant, insignificant, unimportant. It is the living breath of God, not just in theory but absolutely in practice.

[27 : 08] If we believe that then we need to be students of that word. Because it is the living word of God, God speaks miraculously through that. It is His only infallible revelation for us.

It gives us all we need to know for our lives. It is sufficient for us. I think we need to take it far more seriously. Obviously we skim through it. We reject it, we maybe do not reject it, but we treat it lightly.

We do not give it that huge place in our lives. We fail to recognize it so often as the revelation of Jesus, the unsearchable riches of Christ that He gives to us.

Where He speaks to us, where He reveals to us, where He guides us, where He rebukes us, where He challenges us, where He encourages us, where we know and understand what He wants us to know and understand.

What else should we emphasize? The importance of generosity. Generosity towards others who have a different understanding and experience of the gifts of the Spirit.

[28 : 18] But also to be discerning and biblical in what we do and think. And we should also emphasize using the gifts that God has given us.

Not the gifts He hasn't, but the gifts He has given us. Use them to glorify. Remember the most important gift you have as a Christian is the living breath of God in the presence of His Holy Spirit.

Wherever you are, whatever you do, we have that remarkable gift of God's presence in us through the person of His Holy Spirit. And we are to use that gift powerfully.

I'll say a little bit more about that just as we close. We should also emphasize the reality of the supernatural rather than dismiss it or think it insignificant.

If you're a Christian here this evening, your conversion is and has been supernatural. It needed the work of God in a remarkable way.

[29 : 25] It needed the miracle of new birth that nobody human could give you that isn't simply just your choice or decision. You're spiritually dead and God brought you to life. It might not have been dramatic or outward, but nonetheless that's what He says.

And there's that desperate need of the Holy Spirit. And for the supernatural power of God in your life daily for renewal and transformation. It's not a moralistic to-do religion.

It's not if I do this and try that, then I will be able to move forward. We need God's presence in our lives. We need His Holy Spirit. It's a supernatural work of God's grace. We can't sit still.

We can't be Christian and think we can please God in our own strength or in our own knowledge or our own understanding. We are lost sinners that have been saved by grace. We have no excuses to live for ourselves anymore.

We need to live for the one who gives us life and who gives us grace. And therefore we need to be people who keep in step with the Spirit.

[30 : 31] That's what we need to do. Keep in step with the Spirit. That's what we need to emphasize because we are sealed with this Holy Spirit of God and there's two particular passages, one in Ephesians and one in Thessalonians that tell us what we are not to do.

Ephesians says, don't grieve Him. The Holy Spirit is not an it. It's not a force, it's the person of the Godhead, the Spirit of the living God and we're not to grieve Him.

And what is that command surrounded by in Ephesians? By remembering He's our friend that we are not to be careless in what we say.

We're not to live in the darkness. We're to be kind and compassionate. We're to live in His goodness and His righteousness and in truth.

That is how we don't grieve the Holy Spirit. These are everyday things we can all do. In our lives by His strength, living in His goodness, His righteousness and truth in our kindness and compassion in the way we speak.

[31 : 46] You will go tomorrow and you will speak many words and you'll have opportunities to be kind and compassionate and to live in His goodness, righteousness and truth. That is how we don't grieve the Holy Spirit.

In your daily lives and in mind. We have made it all too ordinary by thinking we can do it without Him. So we need to keep in step with the Spirit and in Thessalonians we are not to quench the Spirit.

We're not to put out the Spirit's fire. We're not to... It's not a great verse. We are not to put out the Spirit's fire by being prayerless, disobedient or careless.

That's how we quench the Spirit. We dampen Him in our lives. We just pour water. Well, that's not a very good illustration because He's the water of life in many ways.

But we just put out the Spirit's fire by that kind of living. We are not to quench the Spirit. We are to stay close to the source of heat, which is God in His presence.

[32 : 57] We are not to neglect the spiritual gifts He's given us. We are to serve God by serving one another. We are not to be selfish and self-centered. And we are to do so with joy and with commitment.

And lastly, as the last emphasis, can I just say that God is sovereign. God remains sovereign.

So God gives gifts, as He determines. Always remember, all the gifts are His. He gives them in His time and in His way.

We need to be open to our need of reformation and a humble acknowledgement of His work in different ways, in different traditions, in different cultures and with different needs.

We need to be aware of these things and not seek to be sovereign ourselves. He is very big. We are very small.

[34 : 04] He is sovereign. And we recognize and admit and confess that this evening. So may we seek to use the gifts we've been given and remind ourselves the supernatural nature of our faith.

And if you're not a Christian, recognize that it's not simply a moralistic way of living. Trying to live in a certain way.

This remarkable need to be born anew from within as we seek salvation because we are sinners who are separated from a holy God and only recognizing what Jesus has done for us.

And coming to trust in Him is where we will find this remarkable miracle happening that allows us peace and joy and hope. Amen. Let's bow our heads in prayer.

Father God, we ask and pray that You would help us to understand You. We thank You for the gospel. We thank You for its diversity.

[35 : 13] We thank You for what we strive to understand from Scripture. We recognize there's many times we get it wrong. And we also admit and recognize that we are foolish and proud and separatist so often from our fellow brothers and sisters.

Remind us, Lord God, of Your sovereignty. Remind us of the importance of generosity. Help us to see and know and understand that You give gifts as You choose.

And yet help us to humbly seek to understand the way You have chosen to distribute these gifts and the people that have them.

We thank You for those who, from different traditions, show such holiness and godliness and passion and desire that often puts us to shame.

We thank You for them and we pray and ask that we would learn from each other and that we would grow in unity and in grace together as people and that we would love one another as indeed Christ as love does.

[36 : 27] Help us to live with passion, with zeal, with truth and with integrity and with commitment.

And may we rejoice that we can keep coming to the source of all power and energy and strength and never find that our God has his power as dried up or he is disinterested in us.

You are our Father, Lord, and You love to hear our cries and You love to hear our voice. And we ask for forgiveness for the number of times that we are silent before You, that we choose our own way, that we rubbish Your Word and that we keep our Bibles closed and we are not listening to Your guidance and to Your voice and to the challenge of conviction and of the call to repentance and to faith.

Give us that vibrancy that is from Your Spirit, we ask, and fill us with that most excellent way of living, which is the way of Your great love.

Not in a sentimental or in a soft and sappy way, but in a courageous, strong and life-changing way for young and old men and women and for all who are part of this community.

[37 : 48] May that be what marks us and sets us apart, we ask, in these days. We pray that in Jesus' name, Amen.