

Sermon 11, The Signs of God, Exodus 4:1-9

Proposition: The Angel of Yahweh gives Moses three signs to bring God's people to faith in the reality of God's appearance to Moses.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we all associate miracles with the Bible. But actually, if you leave out conversations with God and His angels, the Bible does not talk about very many miracles. Almost all of the miracles are concentrated in the times of Moses, Elijah/Elisha, and Jesus. Yet though miracles are not a typical feature of Israelite history, any more than they are a typical feature of everyday experience for modern American Christians, they are still a very important part of the Biblical witness. And today we are going to talk about miracles and what they are for. Our passage tells how God gave Moses 3 miracles that he could perform to elicit faith from the hearts of his people. And brothers and sisters, that is what miracles teach. They vouch for the reality of God and genuineness of His messengers. Of course, the signs themselves also teach important lessons, and we'll look at those. But the biggest lesson of these miracles is that God really spoke to Moses at the burning bush, and the biggest lesson of miracles in general is that God is saving the world, turning it into a new creation through the work of His Son Jesus.

I. The Problem: Joe Israelite Might Not Believe, v. 1

Moses, having mounted two objections already, mounts a third. God had assured him that the elders would believe (see 3:18). But, like the rest of us, Moses was very keen to find any

loophole that could get him off the hook. And so he comes up with something that's agonizingly close to contradicting the self-subsisting Fire, but doesn't quite do so. He poses instead the question of what will happen if Joe and Miriam Israelite don't believe. Yeah, the elders will believe. They are spiritually mature and can be expected to have a greater degree of faith. But ordinary people who are ground down by slavery? What about them? They might say "Yahweh didn't appear to you."

II. God's Answer to the Problem: Three Signs that Might Help, vv. 2-9

But — and this is already something of a miracle — God takes this problem seriously. He patiently responds directly to the question asked, and indicates that He will provide supernatural, miraculous signs to authenticate the reality of His appearance to Moses. Brothers and sisters, have you ever been disgusted by a politician who is incapable of answering the question? Well, just notice with me that your God is perfectly capable of answering the question. In fact, He soberly responds not just to the letter of the question, thoroughly and capably, but to its spirit too. Moses wanted reassurance, and God gave it to him with these three miracles.

A. Miracles Are Designed to Teach a Lesson

Now, before we discuss the great lesson and the lesser lessons of the three signs God gave, I want to talk miracles in general for just a moment. Thomas Joseph White, in his theological commentary on Exodus, points out that chs. 4-11 are the great school of the power of God. God simultaneously offers salvation to Egypt and His people, and teaches them both that He is able to create and to decreate. The plagues show His power, and His resolution to save His people no matter what.

1. The Great OT Miracle: The Red Sea Crossing

The culmination of the plagues, and the high point of the book of Exodus in terms of its remembrance in the rest of Scripture, is clearly the dividing of the Red Sea. This fits into the pattern of "Through the waters, to the mountain, for worship" that we saw a few weeks ago with Moses at the burning bush. And here it shows us the reality that God has power over the chaos waters. The waters cannot drown His people or stop the Exodus that Yahweh leads. "Nevertheless He saved them for His name's sake, That He might make His mighty power known. He rebuked the Red Sea also, and it dried up; So He led them through the depths, As through the wilderness" (Psa 106:8-9).

2. The Great NT Miracle: The Resurrection of Christ

Similarly, in the New Testament the miracle that overshadows all the others is the resurrection of the Son of God. It is the end goal of all the miracles, just as the crossing of the Red Sea stands at the beginning of Israel's communal life. Christ's resurrection is the miraculous firstfruits of the New Creation, the sign that God is going to transform this whole world and His people to be like His Son.

Anyway, as we look at the miracles of the Bible, we must remember that they are not God's way of entertaining bored people. They are His way of vindicating Himself, verifying His message, and ultimately point to His saving work in Jesus and the New Creation that He will bring about in His own good time. They are over-rulings of the order of nature for the sake of the

order of grace, and thus they point ahead of themselves to that time when death will be swallowed up in victory and nature as we know it will come into its own, in the Age to Come. So never look at miracles apart from this context. Never think of them as isolated from the greater story God is telling of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Miracles are a sign of consummation within a fallen world that groans for the revealing of the sons of God.

B. The Great Lesson: God Really Did Appear, v. 5

And these signs that God gave Moses were within the order of grace ordered toward convincing the people that Yahweh, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had indeed appeared to Moses and promised to deliver them through Moses. The goal of convincing the people, of course, was so that they would follow Moses out of Egypt and to the promised land, along the way meeting with God at Sinai, entering into covenant with Him, and constructing a tent for Him so that He could travel along with them and be their God for the rest of eternity. The point of the signs, in other words, was not just intellectual assent: “Oh, I guess God really did speak to you from a ‘burning bush,’ whatever that is.” The point of the signs was to elicit belief and thus obedience to God through His prophet.

C. The Other Lessons

But in looking at the overall point of these signs, it is highly valuable to see what the signs taught in particular. We should believe in God because He can do miracles. We all agree with that statement. But brothers and sisters, the miracles teach us more about God than that He can do miracles.

1. Obedience to the Word of God Grants Power over Serpents, vv. 2-5

Notice the specific content of the first miracle. Moses is carrying the tool of his trade — a shepherd’s staff. It’s an ordinary piece of wood. Except that under God’s power, it becomes a snake, a terrifying reptile that Moses doesn’t want to go anywhere near. So God tells him to pick it up by the tail. If you think for half a second, you understand that any snake you seize by the tail will be able to whip back around as quick as lightning and sink his fangs right in your leg. No question about it. So Moses does the bravest thing he’s ever done in his life, and he grabs that snake by the tail in obedience to the word of God. Boom! It’s a staff again.

What is the lesson in this sign? Simply that obedience to the word of God grants power over serpents. Now, this is not a literal lesson. God did not intend for Moses to go find every poisonous snake in Africa and arrange a little snake-charming session with them. The lesson was not about power over ordinary snakes.

a) Pharaoh, Who Wore a Snake on His Head

Rather, its most obvious implication had to do with Pharaoh. If you have seen any Egyptian artifacts, you’ve seen the headdress Pharaoh wore. It has a hooded cobra on it, with its head thrust forward. Imagine an American dissident being given power to clip the wings of a bald eagle. I don’t think any of us would need an advanced degree in interpreting symbols to recognize what that might mean about this fellow’s power as regards the United States of America. In the same way, Moses’ ability to grab a snake and turn it back into a stick in obedience to the word of the Lord signals that Pharaoh, the lord of the cobra or whatever his

headdress says, is actually not going to triumph over Moses. Moses will boss him, and not vice-versa.

This does not come about just by God being God and Moses being Moses. It doesn't just require Moses to say "I would like a miracle that will allow me to conquer Egypt." It required Moses to obey. God said "Put out your hand and pick it up." Only when Moses did so did the snake turn back into his staff. The miracle signified that there is no spiritual power without obedience.

Have you learned this lesson? Are you praying for a miracle to overcome your besetting sin? And as you pray for this miracle, are you obeying God to the very best of your ability? Or are you hoping for a miracle with no obedience on your part? This, the first miracle in the Bible, says "Fat chance."

b) The Devil

In a more extended sense, of course, the serpent symbolizes not only Pharaoh, but also that ancient serpent who is the Devil and Satan. The servant of God who is obedient to God will have power over the Devil. That does not mean, just as with the literal snake, that you and I will have power to tell the Devil "Go tempt so-and-so." What it means is that we have the power to tell him to buzz off and stop attacking us. When we resist Him in obedience to God, he will flee from us.

That's what the first sign, the staff into a snake and back into a staff, means. It means that God's obedient servant has power over Pharaoh and over the Evil One. In terms of the connection of this sign to the larger purpose of belief, the message is clear: You should believe that God appeared to Moses because no magician can change a stick into a snake. Yes, later on the enchanters do the same, but Moses' snake swallows up the rest. It is a bigger, fiercer, more powerful snake. And it can turn back into a staff at God's command. That's why you should believe in God and that He appeared to Moses. Staves don't just do this on their own.

2. Moses' Uncleanness, vv. 6-7

The second sign is, at first glance, more puzzling. Obviously it's extremely portable, in that Moses doesn't need anything at all to perform this one except his own body. But what does the sign mean?

a) Moses Is Even Less Qualified than He Thought, v. 6

Quite simply, it means that Moses' objections to serving have not gone anywhere near deep enough. Moses has no business serving God as the one to bring the people out of Egypt, because he is deeply polluted in his fundamental being. He thinks that he is inadequate, not a good speaker, etc. God says "Actually, you are totally wretched, sick, and unclean. You are a revolting sight, Moses. You are infected by sin just as your hand is infected with leprosy.

b) God Can Cleanse the Deepest Uncleanness, v. 7

Yet though God exposed Moses' uncleanness to him, He also showed that He had the power to cleanse it. As we will see next Sunday, the point once again is not Moses' qualifications, but God's calling. Of course you are unfit to bring the people out of Egypt, Moses! You are so infected and sick that you have no chance or ability to save your people. But that doesn't matter,

because I, your God, am able to cleanse you of this nasty disease. My power can overcome even your sin!

Brothers and sisters, do you know this about yourself? Are you sensitive to your own corruption? Do you know the plague of your own heart? And do you know that God can and will heal it when you call upon Him?

3. God's Power over the Life of Egypt, v. 9

The final sign is not power to turn water into blood in general, but specifically power to turn Nile water into blood. Herodotus, many centuries later, called Egypt "the gift of the Nile." Egypt's fertility and life was an oasis within the barren wastes of the Sahara. That oasis was created by the plentiful water and fertilizing sediment of the Nile. And if Moses could take that water and turn it into blood, then he was able to pollute, ruin, and destroy everything that the Nile had done for Egypt. God has power over Egypt's life. Therefore, the people would have even more reason to listen to Moses, this polluted but divinely-healed messenger of God.

4. Not Even Miracles Compel Belief: God Does Not Promise Success, vv. 8-9

Those are the lessons that these miracles taught God's people. And yet the story further makes clear that the miracles very well may not be enough. As we will see, the people at first believe Moses, but when the going gets tough, over and over they rebel and suggest that Moses is not a good leader and that he is not taking them in the right direction.

So notice how God speaks in vv. 8-9: In terms of maybes, perhapses, ifs. God Almighty who knows everything speaks in terms of hypotheticals and probabilities! What is the deal? Why does He do this? Because He is not promising that the signs will produce faith in the hearts of Moses' countrymen. Maybe they will and maybe they won't. God, of course, already knew that the signs would help the Israelites believe but that they would repeatedly lapse into doubt. But in speaking to Moses, He does not primarily reveal the future, but Himself. He does not promise success. Instead, He says "If they listen."

Moses had to step out in faith. Yes, he was armed with signs that should have been enough to convince the people.

5. God's Bare Word Should Have Been Enough for Moses — and for Us

But the fact of the matter is that God's bare word should have been enough. Moses does not come out of this conversation looking like a canny, knowing fellow who really showed up God Almighty. Rather, he looks whiny and deliberately perverse. Come *on*, Moses! Why can't you just accept the word of God? That's how we think. The answer is that Moses is no better at taking God's word for it than we are. We constantly want verification, proof, evidence — now! God, you say this, but I'm not sure I believe it. How about a sign? How about showing me that you are correct? And God gave signs. But the signs themselves are gifts of the word of God, as God verbally describes them.

Do you believe God's word, or do you need to see me do something miraculous before you'll believe? Yes, many people who are not from God claim to be speaking His word, and Moses later gives a test for that: If the words don't come true, the message is not from God. But

for now, know this: God did miracles so that you would believe. Those miracles were recorded here in Scripture by eyewitnesses. They are signs that vindicate God and reveal our need for His salvation.

Don't turn away today from the miracles. Accept them for what they are — signs in the order of grace, intended to turn your heart toward believing in God's salvation. His salvation is real. It's coming. Amen.