

# HOW TO INTERPRET SIGNS AND WONDERS

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

By Ron Ritchie

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The studio audience at the Tonight show in Burbank is strangely silent, staring intently at the proceedings on the stage. A shirtless volunteer lies face up on a table, behind which stands a short, balding man with a fringe of white hair, a bushy beard and piercing green eyes. He kneads the exposed abdomen with both hands, presses one thumb down and draws it across the skin. A trickle, then a stream of blood appears. The audience gasps. Now his hand thrusts into the abdomen and, accompanied by a sickening, squishing sound, pulls up a clump of bloody tissue. Host Johnny Carson grimaces. A groan of revulsion sweeps the crowd; a woman faints.

Again the hands plunge down, bringing up more gore and then a tubular organ, which the bearded man stares at momentarily. "Oh, no! That doesn't come out," he apologizes, his eyes suddenly twinkling, and pushes it back into the body. The spell is broken and the audience roars, then titters nervously as he proceeds to remove additional gore. Finally he wipes away the blood, revealing an expanse of unbroken, unscarred skin.

What millions of people have just seen is a demonstration of "physic surgery." The blood had been donated by a volunteer before the show; the "diseased tissue" consisted of shreds of lamb heart, hidden in a tray behind the table and manipulated by the facile hands of a master magician: James ("the Amazing") Randi, conjurer, showman, crusader and America's most implacable foe of flummery. The props and the techniques are those used by the so-called psychic surgeons of the Philippines, who promise miraculous, painless, lifesaving surgery to lure desperately ill people to their clinics. But what the sufferers get is sleight of hand, not surgery, and Randi's goal is to spread that message. "These people go to the Philippines," he explains, "they spend their money, and they return home, in most cases to die."

Our secular humanist, high-tech, materialist world, with its lack of love, mercy, grace, kindness, and the human touch, has created a hunger for the supernatural that bypasses common sense. Today, signs and wonders are appearing not only in the New Age community but also among the Christian body. This phenomenon is causing confusion and division. Thus I want to address the subject of signs and wonders this morning as we look at the life of the apostle Paul from Acts 28.

We define signs and wonders as acts of God the Father invading his creation with supernatural signs of power and love through his prophets, his Son Jesus Christ, the apostles of Jesus, and his saints. In the Old Testament for instance, God performed signs and wonders through his prophet Moses to demonstrate to Pharaoh that He alone is the only living God. The miracles of Jesus, his death, resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, were all signs to demonstrate to the Jews that he was their Messiah and the Savior of the world. Nicodemus said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:2).

Through the apostles, God performed miracles among Jews and Gentiles as a sign his divine authority and endorsement of Jesus, and as a sign of Christ's resurrection and invisible presence leading toward redemption among unbelievers and spiritual maturity among his saints. Believers in Jesus Christ are given spiritual gifts of healings and miracles for the same purposes of redemption and spiritual maturity. Wonders, then, are the response of people who are amazed at the signs of God's power and love.

Every generation, however, struggles to discern between true and false prophets, messiahs, apostles, saints, gospels, and spirits. It seems every truth is immediately counterfeited by the enemy. Moses declared this some 4,000 years ago when he said in Deuteronomy 13: 1-5:

"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder and the sign or wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known ) and let us serve them, you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams ; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him."

And Jesus warned his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7: 15):

"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but are ravenous wolves.."

To the Pharisees who asked for a sign, Jesus declared,

"An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet."

(Here he was speaking of his resurrection).

The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4:

But I am afraid lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus, whom we have not preached , or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear it beautifully.

In our study in the life of the apostle, let us look then at the signs and wonders that occurred on Malta, following Paul's being cast up on the island after a shipwreck, as recorded in Acts 28:1-10, and see what we can learn about interpreting them. Paul, together with Luke and Aristarchus, was en route to Rome, following his appeal to Caesar after his two-year house arrest and a couple of trials.

The ship, together with the 276 men aboard, foundered and broke up on a reef off the island of Malta, some 500 miles south of Rome. The vessel was a total loss but the entire 276 men were saved by the hand of God as promised by the message of an angel who appeared to Paul in the midst of the storm, saying , "Do not be afraid Paul; you must stand before Caesar, and behold God has granted you all those who are sailing with you." (27:23-24).

How do we interpret signs and wonders? We first need to go back to the scriptures and look at the context in which they take place, and then we need to look within that context and try to see what God is really doing. Most people stop at the signs and do not bother trying to discover the reasons behind them.

Two events in Paul's life on the island of Malta will assist us develop some insight for interpreting signs and wonders, regardless of the age we live in.

## **I. Question what is behind the snake, Acts 28:1-6**

And when they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us extraordinary kindness, for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and had laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. But when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they

began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been sad from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

Malta (the name means "refuge"), is a small island of some 18 miles long by 8 miles wide. This is where Paul, his companions and the entire company of the ship found themselves safely beached by the waves following the breaking up of their ship. Wet, cold, fearful and exhausted, Paul discovered that all the soldiers, sailors and prisoners, as well as his beloved Luke and Aristarchus, had survived the wreck. What a witness this was to all of these men who had heard Paul testify that God would save them. This same God who had spared their lives could and would save them spiritually if they would place their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The natives of Malta ("barbarians," Luke calls them), "showed us extraordinary kindness," the text says. Some of these people must have been standing on the cliffs overlooking the beach, watching as the 140-foot grain ship foundered and broke up on the reefs. The word went out, and many others ran down to help the survivors. Luke was so impressed by their unusual kindness he refers to it as "extraordinary." As we will see in a moment, the Holy Spirit had gone ahead of Paul and the others, warming their hearts. By building a fire, the natives sought to warm their wet and cold bodies.

As the fire started to burn down, Paul, the servant of Jesus Christ, who, like his Master, sought to serve rather than be served, began gathering wood. As he put the wood on the fire a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. Once again the apostle was being attacked indirectly by the evil one. Ever since Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road, Satan, directly or indirectly, through a variety of individuals and events, on 12 different occasions had sought to kill the apostle. Now the thirteenth attack against his life is caused by a poisonous viper.

When the natives saw the creature hanging from Paul's hand, they began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." These barbarians had a theology of a just god in the heavens dispensing final justice to all evildoers. No one gets away with anything, in other words. Someone has commented that the islanders had a poor philosophy and an even worse theology.

Here we get some insight into the people of this island. They were heavily influenced by the Greek and Roman religions as well as the various cults and their own special brand of "folk religion." They observed life through a very small window. Thus they said that if a man was bitten by a snake, he could only be a murderer. He escaped the sea, but justice got him on land. Justice wins every time, they held. When Paul threw the snake in the fire and didn't die as expected, however, the barbarians changed their minds as well as their theology and declared him to be a god.

What was going on behind the snake bite? May I suggest the following.

First, it served as an opening for the gospel to be preached to these islanders. God had commissioned the apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit to witness to Jerusalem, Samaria, and the rest of the world so that the Gentile world be given the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Part of that world included the island of Malta where these barbarians, men and women, boys and girls, whose lives were filled with fear and superstition, caused by the demon gods whom they served.

Secondly, I see this incident as yet another example of spiritual warfare. Satan was seeking to kill Paul and his companions, as well as all the others on board the ship, and thus prevent the apostle from witnessing to the gospel in Rome. But the Lord saved all of them and defeated Satan by using his servant Paul to witness to the barbarians. Satan responded by trying to kill the apostle with a snake bite, but God overrode that attack and used it to get the attention of the pagan people to consider Jesus as the one and only living God. This is the second time Paul was called a god. Earlier, in Lystra, when he and Barnabas healed a lame man, the people there had called him a god.

Thirdly, this incident has caused a lot of misunderstanding in church history. Many cults practice snake-handling as part of their worship services. Even to this day there are churches in the hills of Kentucky and Tennessee which include snakes in their worship. Unfortunately several people are bitten each year and die. These people take their authority from a text in Mark 16:14-18 which says, "And these signs will accompany those who have believed ; in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them, they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

But in this context the risen Lord was taking to his eleven doubting and unbelieving apostles who were going to be the foundation for the new spiritual church of Christ. If they believed that Jesus arose from the dead and that he was their Lord and Savior, they would be given the resurrection power to speak prophetically in new tongues, fulfilling Isaiah 28:11; power over evil and death, demons, snakes and poisons; and power to heal the sick. The apostles did all five ministries in the following thirty years. Mark 16:20 says, "The Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed." Luke 10 records the story of Jesus sending out seventy of his disciples with "authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall injure you." These men returned later to confirm what God had done among them. That does not mean that any Christian can do these things. Second Corinthians 12:12 says, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles."

How do you interpret signs and wonders? In this instance, you must question what was behind the snake. Here, God was using the snake so that the people of Malta could hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in the age of the Spirit. Secondly, God used this incident to establish divine endorsement of Paul's spiritual ministry as a apostle of the Christ. He was bitten by a poisonous viper and yet did not die. In this case the risen Lord, not Paul, performed the miracle. This is the first witness of Jesus Christ for the barbarians and the second witness for Paul's shipmates.

So we must question what was behind the snake. We must move beyond the physical sign, by which the Lord preserved the life of the apostle to witness to his own power and presence, so that others might be encouraged spiritually to place their faith in the only one who could deliver them out of the kingdom of darkness and death to the kingdom of light and life.

Secondly, we should.

## **II. Question what is behind the fever, Acts 28:7-10**

Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. And it came about that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. And after this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. And they also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.

The Roman centurion Julius is forced to stay on the island of Malta for the following three winter months along with his mysterious prisoner Paul, as well as the rest of the prisoners and crew, until he can hire another ship and sail on some 600 miles north toward Rome.

The ship had been wrecked on the reef near the land belonging to a leading man on the island named Publius, who welcomed all the survivors. The man's father was afflicted with illness, and Paul visited him and healed him. This sign confirmed that Paul was a true servant of the risen Jesus Christ.

Jesus was confronted with this same type of fever in the case of Peter's mother-in-law in Capernaum (Mark 1:29-31), and also with the royal official in Cana who said that his son had a fever unto death (John 4:46-54). Jesus rebuked the fever in the woman and it left her; and in the case of the official's son the Lord healed the

son in Capernaum, based on his father's faith, while he and the boy's father were talking in Cana, some 25 miles away. John tells us this was the second sign Jesus performed that men might "...believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." (John 20:31).

What is behind the fever? Paul was moved and then empowered by the risen Lord to have compassion and bring physical healing to this father. This was an outward sign of what could occur spiritually in the heart of every man, woman and child on that island if they would place their faith in the risen Jesus. They could be immediately healed spiritually, have forgiveness of their sins, and receive the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit.

This outward sign of physical healing was used by the risen Lord, as the text goes on to say: "And after this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting healed." The Greek text uses two different words here, one denoting miraculous healing, the other describing a process of getting cured. It seems Dr. Luke also became involved in treating and healing many of the islanders.

This physical healing led to spiritual healing and redemption. Although there is no recorded conversion in this passage, tradition tells us that Publius became the first Gentile Christian on the island of Malta. Catacombs which have been discovered on the island dating from the fourth and fifth centuries have many drawings of Christian symbols.

Some believers today try to duplicate the steps which Paul took in this instance with Publius. They visit the sick, pray that God will heal them physically and lay hands on them, expecting healing to occur. Sometimes this works and sometimes it does not. But that is the rub. For when Jesus and his apostles applied their healing gifts, either by their word or by touch, the healing was instant (although on one occasion it happened in stages). And it encompassed organic defects (feet, legs, eyes), and diseases of all kinds. They even raised the dead. All of their attempts at healing were successful, except on one occasion when the disciples did not understand that some demons needed to be cast out after prayer and fasting (Mark 9:17f). All their healings lasted and there were no relapses.

Most modern faith healers have no such record. I believe this is because they do not have the biblical gift of healing. These people are self-seekers who are looking for power, fame, and fortune among the people of God. God allows them to continue for a while and then eventually exposes them in one way or another, as he did with Simeon the magician in Samaria, during Philips ministry; Bar-Jesus on the island of Cyprus during Paul's ministry; and the seven sons of the high priest in Ephesus during Paul's ministry.

The TV evangelist Peter Popoff is a modern example of this kind of thing. Many of you used to watch this man, who claimed to be guided by the voice of God, until he was exposed as a fraud a couple of years ago. Popoff would race around the auditorium, striding up to dozens of people he had never met, greet them by name, reciting their addresses, diagnosing their illnesses and then pretending to heal them with a laying on of the hands. But one evening Randi, whom we quoted at the outset, came to a meeting and saw some of Popoff's people with a video camera and a radio frequency scanner. He also discovered that Popoff's wife Elizabeth toured the audience before the service began and engaged in seemingly causal chitchat. In her oversize purse was a radio transmitter that carried the conversations backstage where Popoff transcribed them. Then the evangelist later made his rounds of the audience with a hidden miniature receiver in his left ear that enabled his wife to direct him to those members of the audience she had already pumped for information. Randi said after he exposed Popoff, the man claimed that God spoke directly to him because he is an anointed minister. "But two things amazed me," said Randi, "God has a radio frequency of 39.170, and second, God is a women who voice sounds exactly like Elizabeth."

The true spiritual gift of healing, which would include physical, emotional and spiritual healing, appears to be demonstrated among us today more on emotional and spiritual levels. We must remember that the Holy Spirit is free to heal as he wills through truly gifted men and women to bring physical healing to some, either as a step towards their redemption, or to believers as a step towards their spiritual maturity.

At our board of elders meeting last week a young man asked us to pray for physical healing for him. To make sure he understood what would happen, Bob Roe set out for him what the Scriptures teach about healing,

saying that we were not the healers but merely men who believed that God could heal him. The young man shared about himself and we all rejoiced over his humility and maturity. His sickness had resulted in a Christlike character. Now we are waiting on the Lord to heal this man in His own time and way.

How to interpret signs and wonders? In the context of this story from the book of Acts, we must ask what is behind the snake and what is behind the fever. Satan performs signs and wonders in every age. During the tribulation he will do false signs and wonders through the beast and the false prophet, for he will always try to counterfeit everything God is doing in the world as well as in the church. This he will do especially among people who really do not want to know that there is no tooth fairy, no Santa Claus and no Easter Bunny, resulting in their discouragement, disillusionment, and destruction.

On the other hand, when our risen Lord works through his people by signs and wonders in the Age of the Spirit, whether in the world or in the church, it is always towards redemption and spiritual maturity, and to the glory of His Father.

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