

Why no signs and wonders?

The great disappointment

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” (John 14:12-13 AV)

During his earthly ministry the Lord said that once he had ascended to his Father, they that believe on him would be able to do greater works than he had done. He had healed the sick, driven out demons, raised the dead, miraculously fed thousands of people and walked on water. Well the Lord ascended to his Father around A.D. 30 (Acts 1) and the last raising of someone from the dead by a believer was in about A.D. 56.

“And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead. And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him. When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed. And they brought the young man alive, and were not a little comforted.” (Acts 20:9-12 AV)

I was greatly disappointed when I looked around Christendom late in the twentieth century and saw many claiming this kind of power but they were unable to demonstrate anything greater than a kind of hypnotist's show. They made people giggle and/or fall over. One Pentecostal preacher even claimed to have healed a cow's 'white eye'. Far out. Such wonders as the healing of a cow's clouded eye never occurred while I was looking. I never saw a withered hand restored to normality in front of a live audience, and I never will.

And I remain sceptical about what passes for 'speaking in tongues' today. A fellowship I attended for several months were very keen for me to join in the tongues speaking. A guest preacher from the U.S.A. gave us newbies personal instruction and advanced tongues speakers were placed next to me in the congregation. I was awaiting a spontaneous outpouring and stubbornly resisted bursting forth in the copied and rehearsed variety. I must confess that the first time I was 'slain in the spirit' was quite genuine. I lost consciousness for a short time. But on the next occasion I remained conscious but went down so as not to embarrass the preacher.

If believers today had powers greater than the Lord during his earthly ministry, they would be in the news every day. We would see television coverage of Christians walking across the ocean and feeding the millions of starving people in Africa out of their duffle bags. But no – it is all very mundane. Christians do things the same way as everyone else. They get sick and need operations in hospitals. They feed the poor in

the same manner as atheists would - by raising money. They only drive out demons in the movies. They treat their and their children's demons with counselling and medication – same as everyone else, except that they add prayer to the treatment.

Jesus promised that those who believe on him would do even greater things than he had done – but they don't. Today there are millions who believe on Jesus, but don't hold your breath waiting for any of them to walk on water. They have spiritualised all of the miracles. To step out in faith and get a better job is the spiritualised walking on water. But spiritualising is a copout. It eradicates the supernatural. We all know what Jesus said and meant. He said and meant that those who believe on him will do supernatural stuff.

I really, really wanted what Jesus had promised for his believers to be true. But I came to the sad conclusion that modern Christendom is totally devoid of the kind of supernatural demonstrations that followed the Lord during his earthly ministry. I do not doubt that the likes of Benny Hinn have power over their congregations but if it were anything greater than the power of a great (and very rich) hypnotist, Benny would be front page news every day.

I lived in a constant state of great disappointment. Through my reading of the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I had come to know and trust that Jesus is Lord, yet I was confronted with the crushing mundane reality of a world devoid of the supernatural gifts he promised to those who believe on him. And those Pentecostal preachers who claimed supernatural gifts seemed such nasty and money-minded people; and those 'prophets' who burst forth during the service seemed such scary and angry people – not at all like the longsuffering and compassionate Jesus I had come to know and love through my reading.

The great solution: No Israel – no signs and wonders

The solution to my disappointment came after I got saved in 2006. The eyes of my understanding were enlightened.

“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,” (Ephesians 1:18 AV)

If our apostle Paul had come along 500 years after Calvary it would not be so hard to see that God introduced a new dispensation through him – just as God introduced a new dispensation of the law through Moses about 500 years after Israel was founded through Abraham. The dispensation of the law was fulfilled in Jesus Christ's first coming.

God's new dispensation with the house of Israel, his New Covenant, commenced with the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The law was no longer a set of written commandments to be obeyed but was “written in their hearts” with the Spirit of the living God.

“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34 AV)

Spirit-filled Stephen was a fine example of God’s New Covenant blessings and gifts to the house of Israel. The Jewish council at Jerusalem murdered him in a frenzy of religious piety (Acts 7). In so doing they had committed the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and signalled to God their contempt for his New Covenant (though Stephen’s prayer for them must have secured Israel’s eventual forgiveness - Romans 11:26). With establishment Israel’s unworthiness so plainly manifest, the Lord “concluded them all in unbelief” (Romans 11:32), thus putting Israel on the same footing with him as the heathen, Gentile nations.

When the Lord saved an ignorant, unbelieving, blaspheming individual (Acts 9, 1 Timothy 1:13-16) who was consenting to Stephen’s death (Acts 22:20), he began his new DISPENSATION OF GRACE. His dispensation of the New Covenant to the house of Israel had been in effect less than two years before the Lord concluded them all in unbelief and made his New Covenant blessings available to ALL (Gentile and Jew) via his new dispensation of grace. It is hard to see this switch to the grace dispensation after less than two years of the Jewish New Covenant dispensation. Those who can see the switch can see the mystery (Ephesians 3:9).

This former blasphemer (Saul, later Paul) got the most hazardous task of dispensing God’s grace among the heathen, Gentile nations. Things are different under the dispensation of the grace of God and the difference that affects the topic of this study is that **Israel has been set aside for the duration of it. No Israel – no signs and wonders.**

Salvation in this present age is an ‘inside job’

“And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21 AV)

God still does supernatural stuff among his believers but he does it in secret. In this dispensation God is not using signs and wonders to invoke belief in unbelievers (as he did with Israel in time past). No. God is done with impressing people into belief for the time being. Now you must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. And you may have to persevere with diligently seeking him for years before he reveals himself to you.

“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6 AV)

Far from trying to woo us with signs and wonders, in this present age the Lord responds to persistent and pressing solicitation (importunity). I persisted with a simple prayer every day for about three years, “Lord please show me your will for me today.” I often added “Yeah right” as I could not see how God was going to change me. My bitter and twisted mind was set in concrete. So he first gave me enough rope to hang myself with and then, much to my surprise, I got saved. But that’s another story.

“And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth. And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” (Luke 11:5-10 AV)

Don’t expect others to get excited about it when he reveals himself to you. It is an inside job. You won’t look any different through their cameras but the view through your camera will be transformed. Some will be jealous. Elders and deacons will talk over the top of you and try to get you under their thumbs. They would even talk you out of your own salvation if it were possible. (I thought those guys should be happy that I am saved. Why are they always such aggressive control freaks?) You will probably lose, or deliberately part company with, a lot of ‘friends’ who were more comfortable with the pre-salvation you. In the words of Tom Petty – “everybody’s had to fight to be free”.

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14 AV)

Signs were connected to Israel, not to a particular dispensation

The risen Lord had declared specifically the signs which would follow them that believe;

“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” (Mark 16:17-18 AV)

I initially tried to attach these signs to the twelve’s initial great commission and detach them from Paul’s commission to the Gentiles. It became apparent that this was an incorrect association. I make mistakes. I admit them and learn from them. Hopefully my mistake has not caused anyone to fall into hell. Signs and wonders persisted among fellowships of Gentile believers who had been saved by grace through faith in Paul’s gospel of Christ. So the Spirit did not cease from manifesting them in conjunction with the introduction of the dispensation of grace.

“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another *divers* kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-11 AV)

The signs followed our apostle Paul (the dispenser of the grace dispensation) more than anyone else.

“And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked: The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.” (Acts 14:8-11 AV)

“I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all:” (1Cor 14:18 AV)

“And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.” (Acts 19:11-12 AV)

“And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid *them* on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the *venomous* beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.”
(Acts 28:3-6 AV)

The signs persisted for as long as the Lord persisted with stubborn Israel

On closer inspection of the scriptural evidence it seems that the signs remained among believers for as long as the Lord was trying to win over the Jews. He manifested signs through the early Gentile church to provoke the Jews to jealousy.

“But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by *them that are no people*, and by a foolish nation I will anger you.”
(Romans 10:19 AV)

“For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:” (1 Corinthians 1:22 AV)

The Gentile Cornelius and his household burst into tongues (spontaneously) after receiving the Holy Ghost - in front of a delegation of Jewish believers.

“And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” (Acts 10:45-47 AV)

God had used signs and wonders to persuade Israel throughout his 2000 year relationship with them. He made the Jews a people who were special to him and the Jews' faith was always reinforced by a recounting of the great miracles God had wrought on their behalf. For this special status to also be given to the Gentiles was God's way of trying to win them over to Christ - by provoking them to jealousy.

The signs departed along with the Lord's attempts to win Israel

Through Paul, the Lord declared that he had finally ceased from trying to win the Jews as a nation. This final declaration came in Acts 28. Individual Jews were, and still are, eligible for salvation on the same basis as everyone else.

“And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with *their* eyes, and hear with *their* ears, and understand with *their* heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and *that* they will hear it. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.” (Acts 28:25-29 AV)

Paul’s epistles written after Acts 28 make no mention of the gifts of Mark 16. This does not signify a change of dispensation (as some believe) – just that the Lord has ceased from trying to provoke Israel to jealousy.

“Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:” (Ephesians 4:8-12 AV)

1 Corinthians was written by Paul in about A.D. 56. Ephesians was written only about five years later, around A.D.61, yet there are some notable gift omissions in the later epistle. Paul’s final words to Israel were spoken in between the writing of these two epistles.

The gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 are the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Most of these gifts are for convincing unbelievers, not for the edifying and perfecting of believers.

“Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe. If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?” (1 Corinthians 14:22-23 AV)

The gifts listed in Ephesians 4:8-12 are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers - people who are given for the perfecting of the saints, the work of the ministry and for the edifying of the body of Christ. The last apostle died around the end of the first century so we are left with prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. In this present age the supernatural gift of prophecy remains though it is not the gift of

foretelling as it was in Old Testament times. It is the gift of intuitive insight into the hearts of others. There is nothing supernatural involved in being an evangelist, pastor or teacher except in that the genuine ones are chosen, directed and inspired by the Spirit. Mature Christianity has put away childish things and is getting on with the business of preparing the saints for their eternal destiny.

“But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.” (1 Corinthians 13:10-14:1 AV)

So there we have it. Faith, hope and charity now abide in our hearts. The greatest of these is charity because faith and hope will become redundant once we see face to face. The spiritual gift we should seek is prophesying for the edification of the church – insight into the spiritual state of the saints around us. And let's not think that charity consists of purely practical good deeds for the less fortunate - the selfless demonstrations to the world that allow worldly Sunday Christians to sleep better at night. The charity we need is the charity that only God sees - a charitable heart attitude; looking for the good in others, seeing their needs and limitations and waiting with a patient and longsuffering heart for an opportunity to evangelize, minister and/or edify.

God is still supernatural

In this present age God is not in the business of signs and wonders to impress Israel or anyone else. But he is still God, the creator of all nature, and therefore cannot help but be supernatural. I received the wonderful gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit in my everyday experience when I came to believe the gospel given by the risen and glorified Lord to our apostle Paul. It is a presence that both blesses and chastises – all to do with getting me where God wants me. He is giving me the mind of Christ through the inner, supernatural working of his word.

“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13 AV)

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 2:14-16 AV)

I believe that God still works healing miracles, but quietly and in mysterious ways these days. I received nocturnal, supernatural healing of my alcohol damaged, ultra-depressed, painfully negatively-charged brain, after prayer for EXACTLY THAT by a Christian pastor - but nobody believes me! And it is very mysterious that he saved me.

And lets not forget that we are saved by grace through faith in the greatest sign of all – the sign of the prophet Jonah.

“But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:39-40 AV)

“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4 AV)

I also believe that our eternal life in heaven is not ‘pie in the sky’ or the ‘opiate of the people’ but a simple matter of fact. Our bodies will be transformed from vile and corrupted flesh to glorious and incorruptible celestial (angelic) bodies. The realm we dwell in will be equally glorious. It is hard for us to conceive that we are not in our ultimate state or living in our ultimate environment. We are like caterpillars clinging to caterpillar life, not believing or trusting that we are destined to fly about in beautiful places as beautiful butterflies. The first caterpillar so transformed into a butterfly returned to our caterpillar community and promised us we too would be like him, but most of us didn’t believe him. We wanted to prolong our life as caterpillars!

“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:35-36 AV)

“But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.” (Luke 20:35-36 AV)

“*There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.*” (1 Corinthians 15:40 AV)

“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory?” (I Corinthians 15:51-55 AV)

“Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.” (Philippians 3:21 AV)

“Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (2 Peter 3:13 AV)

All Israel shall be saved – the great return of signs and wonders

After the rapture of the saints of this present age, God’s dealing with Israel will resume, for he has promised that all Israel shall be saved and that Israel are to be his holy nation of priests for planet earth. The twelve and Paul fulfilled this role in their day but the Sanhedrin and most of Israel wanted no part of it.

“And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:” (Romans 11:26 AV)

“And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These *are* the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.” (Exodus 19:6 AV)

The tribulation saints will be gathered from the four corners of the earth in spectacular fashion.

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (Matthew 24:29-31 AV)

Christ will return to earth with all his saints during the battle of Armageddon and shall stand upon the mount of Olives.

“And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard *speeches* which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” (Jude 1:14-15 AV)

“To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.” (I Thessalonians 3:13 AV)

“Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?” (I Corinthians 6:2 AV)

“Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which *is* before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, *and there shall be* a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.” (Zechariah 14:3-4 AV)