

# **“Mighty Works and Wonders and Signs”**

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — February 8, 2015

## **Mark 5:1-43 NIV**

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had come out of the boat, there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who lived among the tombs; and no one could bind him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been bound with fetters and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out, and bruising himself with stones.

And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped him; and crying out with a loud voice, he said, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!”

And Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” And he begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country.

Now a great herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him, “Send us to the swine, let us enter them.” So he gave them leave. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The herdsmen fled, and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus, and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. And those who had seen it told what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their neighborhood.

And as he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. But he refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled.

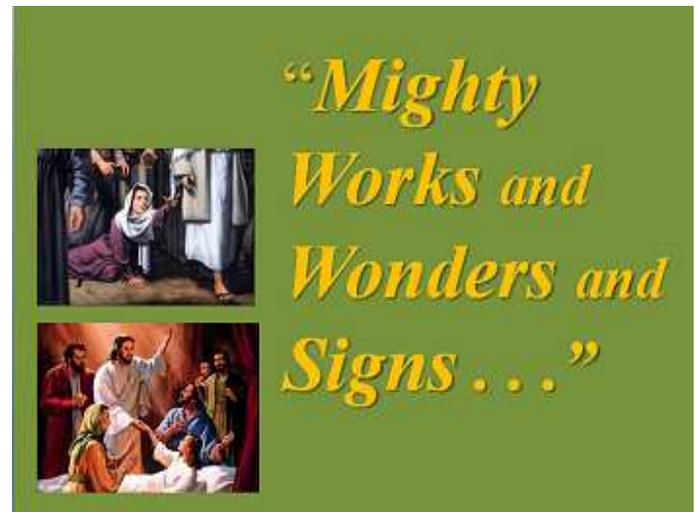
And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him; and he was beside the sea. Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and seeing him, he fell at his feet, and besought him, saying, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

And he went with him. And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. And there was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, “If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well.”

And immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, “Who touched my garments?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’” And he looked around to see who had done it.

But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler’s house some who said, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?” But ignoring what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James.

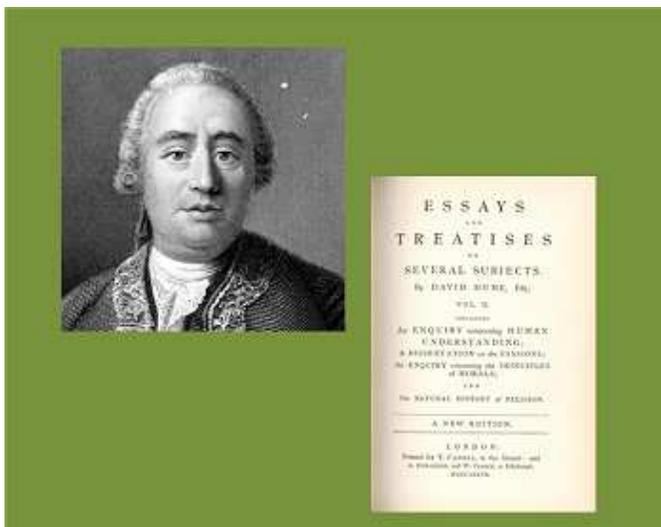


When they came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, he saw a tumult, and people weeping and wailing loudly. And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a tumult and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi"; which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise."

And immediately the girl got up and walked (she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

---

An important author during the 1700s was the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Among his most influential writings was his "Essay on Miracles." In this essay, Hume assumed that no one had ever actually observed a miracle, such as a dead man coming back to life. No reports of such miracles, Hume claimed, can be true; such reports are either written by someone who intends to deceive people, or they're based on the false testimony of people claiming to have witnessed a miracle. Hume based his assertion on his own experience, and the experience of people in his own cultural environment. He stated his conclusion this way: "It is contrary to experience that a miracle should be true, but not contrary to experience that testimony should be false."



Hume was not the first person to deny the existence of miracles, but his writings were the most influential in creating the widespread skepticism about miracles that permeates Western civilization today. Disbelief in miracles, such as healings or people being raised from the dead, is so pervasive in our culture that many people, when they hear the reports of Jesus' miracles like those in our passage from the Gospel of Mark, simply cannot believe the stories are true. Nor, of course, can they believe in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. My late brother was a Unitarian minister, and as you know Unitarians don't believe in the Bible and the miracles it records. His widow, my sister-in-law, once told me that when she was growing up her Sunday school class was singing "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam." Ridiculous, she thought, even as a child.

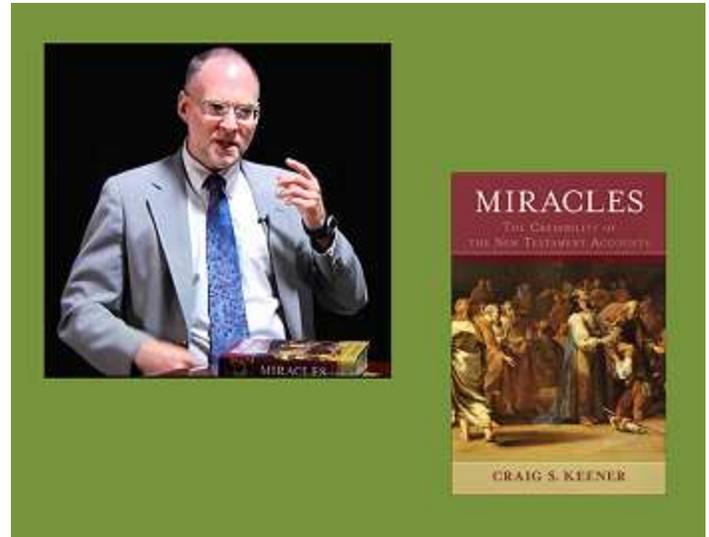
"Jesus doesn't want me to be anything — *Jesus is dead*. People don't rise from the dead." As you can see, the legacy of David Hume is still with us.

But there was just one little flaw in Hume's thinking. Miracles don't happen, he claimed, because no one he knew of had ever witnessed a miracle. Therefore, he said, no testimony about miracles could be true. I think you can see the flaw here; if you decide in advance that miracles *can't* be real, then of course you won't believe anybody who claims to have observed one. You've ruled out the testimony, and the evidence, before you've even heard it. The world in which Hume lived was limited to Great Britain and France, where he thought no one could testify to a miracle. But if he had been able, or willing, to listen to the testimony of people the world over, he would have had to revise his opinion.

Not only that, but skeptics apply a different criterion to evidence about miracles from what they apply to other questions. The astronomer Carl Sagan famously asserted that "extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence." But that's logically absurd. Claims about extraordinary things demand the same kind of evidence as any other claim. And the evidence for the miracles of Jesus is far greater than the evidence for many other events in the ancient world. Historians don't doubt that Alexander the Great conquered the ancient Near East, or that Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C. Yet the ancient sources for these events are far fewer, and much later, than the sources for the events we read about in the Gospels. Those sources are more numerous, and much closer in time to the original events, than the sources for other commonly accepted

happenings of ancient history. It's only the prejudice of some historians that causes them to reject the evidence available to them.

Today, contrary to what David Hume thought, testimony about miracles is pervasive in many parts of the world outside the limited scope of Western civilization, with its anti-miracle prejudice. The widespread witnessing to, and experiencing of, miracles today has been documented by Professor Craig Keener in a massive, heavily footnoted two-volume work simply called *Miracles*. In these volumes, published in 2011 by a respected academic publisher, Keener documents thousands of reported miracles not only in what he calls the "majority world" — Africa, Asia and Latin America — but also in regions where European culture prevails, such as North America. In our culture, when people have life-threatening medical conditions they can usually obtain treatment by physicians and hospitals, involving medication or surgery or other procedures. But in many parts of the world these things simply are not available to most people. They have no other option but to pray, and to seek the Lord's miraculous intervention. Without modern medicine, they have to *depend on miracles*.



Perhaps this throws a new light on what we've read from the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Based on Keener's research, it shouldn't surprise anyone that Mark, and the other Gospel writers, believed and wrote down what others had reported about the healings and other miracles that Jesus performed. Let's not misunderstand this; ancient people weren't ignorant and gullible. They were no less skeptical than people today. They didn't just believe anything somebody told them. They knew that people don't rise from the dead, or get miraculously healed, under ordinary circumstances. But when Jesus appeared they had to face the facts (which David Hume was unable, or unwilling, to do). People who encountered Jesus had to deal with what they heard credible witnesses report, or what they saw for themselves. They couldn't ignore the testimony and the evidence; they had to take it seriously, and so it became included in the four Gospels of our New Testament.

The miracles of Jesus were central to his message about the emerging kingdom of God. They weren't just window dressing to attract an audience; they were evidence that God is on the move, *restoring his creation to its original goodness*. Jesus' miracles are part of the Epiphany, the manifestation or revelation of the Messiah of Israel. And so they became part of the church's message about Jesus and who he is, as we find in that first Christian sermon recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. For on that Day of Pentecost, when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter began his speech to the bystanders this way: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know . . ." (Acts 2:22). The "mighty works and wonders and signs" of Jesus were common knowledge in Jerusalem, and they revealed Jesus for who he is — the Son of God.

Let's look, then, at the three events recorded in Mark, chapter 5. For here we have three sorts of "mighty works" of Jesus: casting out demons, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

Jesus and his disciples had sailed across part of the Sea of Galilee, apparently from Capernaum to the eastern shore. As they got out of the boat they encountered a man who lived in the local graveyard. No one could restrain him; he broke the silence of the night with his piercing cries. Today most people would call this man crazy, or insane, but the Gospels make clear that he had a different problem. He had an "unclean spirit"; he was under the control of evil spiritual forces that tormented him. When the man saw Jesus he ran to him



and fell at his feet, and the evil spirit cried out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

What was it about Jesus that caused the evil spirits — for they were many — to react that way? What clued the unclean spirits in to the truth about Jesus? They knew something people didn't know — and even Jesus' disciples were still waking up to the whole truth. In their voyage across the Sea of Galilee, Mark tells us, Jesus had just calmed the storm that threatened to swamp their boat. When that happened the disciples asked themselves, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" They didn't

quite understand yet, but the demonic spirits that possessed that poor man knew well enough who Jesus was. They knew they had at last met their match in the Messiah, the Son of God.

You'll recall the rest of the story. The demons begged Jesus not to send them out without a body to possess. So he complied by sending them into a herd of pigs, which proceeded to drown themselves in the lake. This side of the Sea of Galilee wasn't Jewish territory. I'm sure the Jews present weren't concerned about the loss of all that pork, but the local people, who weren't worshipers of the God of Israel, were certainly upset. They asked Jesus to get out of there. I don't think that was only because their local agricultural economy had just taken a hit. I think it's because they had seen what Jesus had done for the possessed man. Mark says, "They came to Jesus, and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the man who had had the legion; and they were afraid." This incident isn't just about Jesus helping a poor soul get free of some oppressing situation. It's an Epiphany, a revelation of who Jesus is. When the Son of God shows up, that ought to strike fear in the heart of anyone who isn't serving the living God.

Let's go now to the second event in our passage from Mark's Gospel. Actually, this is a story within a story. It starts out where Jesus is back in Jewish territory, apparently in Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was his home town at this point. Jairus, one of the leaders of the local synagogue, has come to Jesus for help. His twelve-year-old daughter is gravely ill, and death seems imminent. Jairus is an important man in Capernaum. I've seen the ancient ruins of the Capernaum synagogue — or one that was built for the same Jewish community a few centuries later — and even the ruins are impressive. I'm sure Jairus, as a "big man" in this congregation, wasn't normally the type to go around begging uncredentialed local teachers for help. But he's desperate, and word about Jesus has been spreading through the whole territory. At his appeal, Jesus starts for Jairus's house and the little girl whose life is in danger.



But on the way they get interrupted. In the crowd following them there's a woman who's been suffering from internal bleeding for years. No doctor has been able to help her; in fact, her condition has worsened and all her money has been used up. But she's heard the word about Jesus and she believes that if she even touches the edge of his clothing she'll be healed. So as Jesus passes by she reaches out, brushes her hand against Jesus' garment — and immediately knows that the bleeding in her body has stopped for good.

This incident is often taken as an example of how our faith in God is a critical factor in whether or not we can be healed of our diseases. That's because of what Jesus says to the woman afterward: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." But there's more to it than the woman's faith. And sometimes the Gospels tell us that Jesus had compassion on the people he ministered to; he helped

them because he felt sorry for them. But how Jesus feels about this woman isn't mentioned at all in this account.



No, Jesus doesn't even know she's there till she reaches out to touch him. Then he knows. How? Because, as Mark tells it, "Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, 'Who touched my garments?'" The older translation says Jesus knew "that virtue had gone out of him." It wasn't just by this woman's faith that she was healed, or because Jesus felt sorry for her. She got healed *because of the power, the virtue* that flowed from the person of Jesus, even through his clothing. This is another Epiphany, a manifestation of who Jesus is, the Messiah or Anointed One of God. As the apostle Paul says, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19). And that fullness dwelling in one man, the Lord Jesus, has power to heal other people.

But we're only halfway to Jairus's house, so let's go there and see what happens. While Jesus is still speaking to the woman, some people rush in with a sad message for the leader of the synagogue: "Don't bother this Teacher any more. Your daughter's dead." (Really tactful, huh?) But Jesus doesn't let this stop him. He turns to the alarmed Jairus and says, "Don't be afraid. Just have faith."

This incident is different from the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage. This time, the faith of the participants plays a more important role. Jesus sends the whole crowd away and takes with him only his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John. They've been with him in his travels and they've seen what God can do through him. They've seen him heal Peter's mother-in-law, and raise up a paralytic, and deliver demon-possessed people, and now heal this woman who touched him. They *expect him* to be able to raise the dead to life.

When they get to the house the hired mourners are already there, wailing away, and when Jesus tells them the little girl isn't dead they laugh at him. But Jesus goes to the little girl's bedside and takes with him not only his three disciples, but also the girl's parents. He takes the biggest stakeholders in this matter. The parents of course, are the ones most personally involved. But the disciples have a stake in it, too. They've given up everything in their former lives to follow Jesus, and if this little girl doesn't come back to life they'll have to face the fact that it was all for nothing, their high expectations were unfounded. Our faith, what we *expect of Jesus*, makes a difference in what he's able to do for us.



So Jesus takes the little girl by the hand and simply says, in Aramaic, *Talitha cumi*— "Get up, girl!" And she gets up and walks. What Mark says next sounds odd to us: Jesus "strictly charged them that no one should know this." He had also told the man with the unclean spirits not to tell anyone about his deliverance. Why not — shouldn't people know that the healing power of God is present in this man Jesus? Interpreters have pondered this strange situation in the Gospels, but one thing we can say about it. Jesus has come with one central message: "The kingdom of God is here." His healing ministry is part of the appearance of the kingdom,



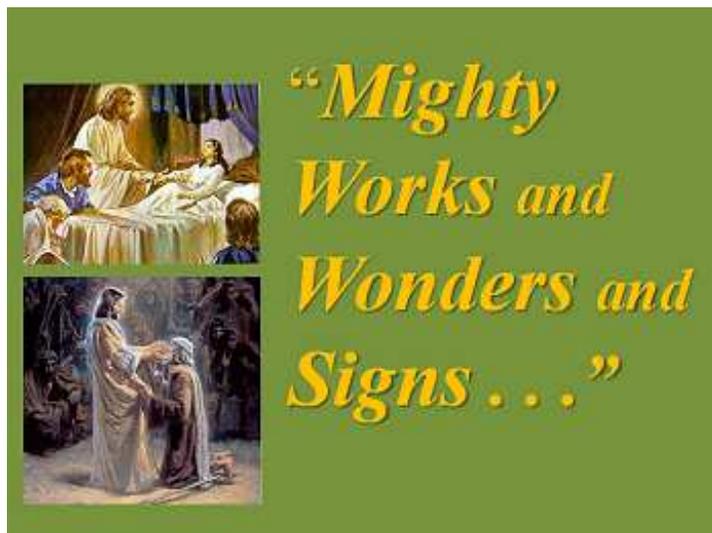
but if people start focusing exclusively on his “mighty works and wonders and signs” and see his ministry as just a traveling clinic, they’ll miss what he wants to tell them about the rule of God in their lives.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ “mighty works and wonders and signs” are part of the gospel of the kingdom, the revelation of the Messiah. And they don’t stop when Jesus is raised from the dead and returns to his Father. At the end of Mark’s Gospel he tells his followers, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; . . . They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:17-18). Jesus didn’t heal people as some kind of ethereal, disembodied spirit; he healed people as a

flesh-and-blood man — as the New Testament affirms — and he gives the same power to other men and women who are filled with the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Acts we read that people were healed when Peter’s shadow passed over them as he went down the street, and when cloths were taken to the sick from the apostle Paul’s body.

We don’t read in the New Testament that this ever stopped, nor has it stopped in the centuries that have passed. The living Christ still heals today, through men and women who trust and obey him — as thousands the world over have testified. I don’t want to misrepresent this. Healing doesn’t come just because a certain person has prayed. In fact, in many cases Craig Keener cites in his book *Miracles*, neither the person who was sick nor the person who prayed really had much faith that their prayer would be answered — but it was. And healing doesn’t come as the result of some particular sure-fire, “magical” formula for prayer. Whether or not we get an answer to our prayers is still up to the sovereign decision of God in each case. Nevertheless, prayer does get answered and miracles still occur.

If you don’t believe this, I’ll be glad to loan you my copy of Craig Keener’s book. But I suspect all of you do believe this, and you want this church to be a place where people can expect to witness the “mighty works and wonders and signs” of our Lord Jesus Christ.



Text ©2015 Richard C. Leonard  
Images from Internet sources