

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 5:12-16 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 5:12-16 ESV

12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 15 so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. 16 The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This is the second summary section in a short space, with the prior one also depicting a Spirit-filled community (4:32-37). The story of Ananias and Sapphira sits in the middle of the two summaries for it posed a threat. Hypocrisy threatened to infect the Spirit-filled community with the spirit of Satan (5:3), but faithful shepherding and supernatural power stymied Satan's plan. Acts 5:12-16 is thus presented not only as an answer to the prayer of 4:28-30 but as a result of the community's prioritization of holiness over hypocrisy. We cannot sustain a move of the Holy Spirit—without holiness. This does not mean we must be perfect, but it does mean we can't hide our own sin or sweep others' under the rug.

In the previous section about community, miracles are mentioned (4:33) but not emphasized. Generosity is emphasized (4:32, 34-37). In the present section, miracles and salvations are the emphasis. Unity leads to tremendous blessing—revival-like blessing—but only if we discern and destroy the devil's work.

Even when we experience revival, however, we should still be aware that no revival lasts forever. Seasons of extraordinary grace come and go, and we can be thankful for them, but ordinary grace sustains us in ordinary times.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.

—"many signs and wonders":

- A sign points beyond itself to Jesus. A wonder evokes awe.
- We have just read about "fear" ("awe") falling upon the whole church (5:5, 11). Here Luke extends the portrait. It's not just the story of Ananias and Sapphira that resulted in such awe. It's story after story of God at work.
- This combination of "signs and wonders" in Acts repeats in the following verses:
 - [Act 2:19, 22, 43 ESV] 19 And I will show **wonders** in the heavens above and **signs** on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; ... 22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and **wonders** and **signs** that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— ... 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many **wonders** and **signs** were being done through the apostles.
 - [Act 4:30 ESV] 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and **signs** and **wonders** are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."
 - [Act 6:8 ESV] 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great **wonders** and **signs** among the people.
 - [Act 7:36 ESV] 36 This man led them out, performing **wonders** and **signs** in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.
 - [Act 14:3 ESV] 3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting **signs** and **wonders** to be done by their hands.
 - [Act 15:12 ESV] 12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what **signs** and **wonders** God had done through them among the Gentiles.

- What do we learn about these other references to signs and wonders?
 - God performed them through Moses (7:36), Jesus (2:22), the twelve apostles (5:12), Stephen (6:8), and Paul/Barnabas (14:3; 15:12). Philip also performed them, but Luke uses the language of “signs and miracles” rather than “signs and wonders” (8:13).
 - Signs and wonders are to magnify the Person of Jesus (2:22; 4:30), bearing witness to the word of His grace (14:3).
 - We never once read that signs and wonders are given to authenticate the messengers of the Gospel. As signs they point not to us, but to Jesus. This contradicts the traditional cessationist argument that God gave signs and wonders to authenticate the apostles as trustworthy teachers of doctrine (and now we have the Bible, so we don’t need signs/wonders). But it wasn’t just the apostles who performed signs and wonders. Besides Stephen and Philip, we have the 120 in the upper room (2:1-11), the sons and daughters (and many others) who prophesy (2:17-21), the unnamed daughters of Philip (21:9), and many more.
 - The Father performs the miracles by Jesus (4:30) and through the Spirit (4:31; cf. 1:8; 2:4, 18, 33; 8:18-19, 29, 39; 10:19, 44-47; etc.).
 - Signs and wonders are an answer to prayer (4:28-31). If we don’t pray for miracles, we likely won’t see them (cf. James 4:2).
 - Signs and wonders are a foretaste of those to be observed at Christ’s coming (2:19; cf. 2:1-4, 22).
 - Signs and wonders mark the Spirit-filled community (2:43; 4:33; 5:12; cf. Gal. 3:5).
 - Signs and wonders are associated with bold gospel proclamation (4:29-31; 14:1-7; cf. 1:8; 15:12).
 - Signs and wonders helped Jewish leaders to discern the hand of God working amongst Gentiles, validating the Gospel of grace—that one does not have to submit to Moses’ unbearable yoke to be a Christian (15:10-12).

—“regularly done among the people”:

- In this season, miracles were part of the normal Christian life.
- Should we expect miracles to continue as a part of the normal Christian life?
 - As long as the mission of bearing witness to Jesus continues, we should expect power—in the form of signs and wonders—to accompany that mission (1:8). Otherwise, we are claiming that the power of the Spirit for mission was only for the early church. This is impossible. The coming of the Spirit was not just for them, but according to Luke’s emphasis, “for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (2:39). The Spirit’s coming in power was not just to kickstart the church; it was to empower the church’s mission until Christ returns!
 - But isn’t a miracle, by definition, an “abnorm” rather than a “norm”? This is true. But at least during this period, the “abnorm” was performed “regularly”—making it “normal.” What has been abnormal throughout world history and for most people and situations can be normal for the church. Yet it can still be labeled, “miracle,” because outside of the working of the Spirit amongst His people, it is abnormal.
 - I am reminded of Galatians 3:5. When challenging the church’s heresy, Paul says, “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” In a very ordinary church, God worked extraordinarily among them, and this became part of Paul’s argument against their heresy.
- Nevertheless, while miracles should be normal in the overall life of a church, that doesn’t mean that every prayer will be answered every time. It does not mean that we can decree and declare miracles in a way that obligates God to obey us.
- Furthermore, we should not conclude that “normative” miraculous interventions should always come with the same frequency we see in Acts 5:12-16. Not even the apostles—not even Jesus!—“healed them all” on every occasion.
 - Jesus “healed all” in Matt. 8:16, 12:15, Luke 4:40, 6:19, and probably also in Matt. 4:24.
 - Nevertheless, in His own hometown, “He could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them” (Mark 6:5). Why? “Because of their unbelief” (6:6). Even God in the flesh “could not” do miracles in an atmosphere of skepticism. Of course, God can do anything, but God has chosen to work in response to faith.

- In Acts 5:16, “they were all healed,” and in Acts 28:9, “the rest of the people” living on an island came to Paul and “were cured” of their diseases. At least on these occasions, the apostles experienced great power.
- But these seem to be special moments. In 5:15 Luke mentions the prevailing belief by some that even Peter’s shadow might heal. In 19:11-12, we read, “And God was doing **extraordinary miracles** by the hands of Paul, so that even 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.” The equivalent to Peter’s “shadow miracles” is Paul’s “handkerchief and apron” miracles. Luke characterizes these as “extraordinary”—even for miracles.
- The same Paul whose hankies could heal had to leave Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Tm. 4:20), he had to tell Timothy to follow a common medical prescription of the day for his stomach ailments (1 Tm. 5:23), and he couldn’t even heal his own eyes (Gal. 4:13-15).
- In short, we can say in one breath that miracles are normative for the Spirit-filled community, while in another breath leaving space for God to provide “extraordinary” grace in certain times and seasons.
 - Miracles should be normative for a Spirit-filled community because they are linked to the “Age of the Spirit” launched on Pentecost, whereby God’s people are empowered to testify to “the word of his grace” (14:3).
 - Miracles (including mass conversion) will nevertheless not be automatic, as though the church should expect to clean out hospitals and morgues on the daily. Rather, God grants seasons and moments of extraordinary grace, which go beyond the “normal,” even for a Spirit-filled church.

—“by the hands of the apostles”:

- I have already discussed above that many signs and wonders are performed by non-apostles at other times in Acts.
- Why then does Luke emphasize the apostles here? It is not, as some claim, to suggest that miracles were meant to authenticate the apostles as trustworthy teachers of doctrine. I have also addressed this above.
- It is also not to show that God intended most miracles to be performed by apostles. Again, the Spirit was given to all, not just apostles. Signs and wonders are performed by all, not just apostles. The mission is for all, not just apostles.
- Then why does Luke mention it here? Two reasons:
 - First, to show that Peter isn’t the only miracle worker. Peter is prominent in the healing of the lame beggar (Acts 3-4), in the fear of God spreading around Jerusalem (5:1-11), and in the belief among people that Peter’s shadow might heal (5:15). Nevertheless, it was not just a one-man show. All the apostles worked miracles (4:33; 5:12). Far from trying to limit miracles to the apostles, Luke’s point is to show that all—not just some—of them performed said miracles. Perhaps Luke is intentionally combatting the belief among the people that Peter had “special powers” relative to the others (5:15). In seasons of outpouring, we tend to make man central. Luke is striving against this.
 - Second, the story is developing. At first, only Jesus performed miracles, but then He disciplined the apostles to preach, heal, and cast out demons (Luke 9). That was never intended to stop with the Twelve, however, for Jesus also sent out the 72 with the same mission (Luke 10). The progression from Jesus to the apostles to everybody else is developed in Acts 6-8. There, as the apostles focus their energy on prayer and preaching, they appoint the first deacons (6:1-7), two of whom—Stephen and Philip—become preachers and miracle workers themselves. Thus, rather than limiting signs and wonders to the few, Luke is doing the opposite. He’s showing how this miracle-working power spread from the apostles to everyday table-servers like Stephen and Philip. It is, in fact, these two men who spread the Gospel to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Ethiopia)—in obedience to the original commission (1:8).

—“and they were all together in Solomon’s portico”:

- This reminds us of 3:11, where the lame man was healed.
- The church community was still meeting in the temple at this time. This “temple narrative” will continue through Stephen’s speech in Acts 7, which accuses the temple leadership of being corrupt and reminds them of God’s greater temple, made without hands.

13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

—Luke presents two contrasting responses. Some dared not to join them, but others held them in high esteem. The Gospel divides like a sword. Those who believe become part of God's family, and those who disbelieve remain condemned.

—Their fear of joining is probably related to the incident with Ananias and Sapphira. The response is understandable. If God is going to strike down people in sin, some sinners will run from God rather than to Him. What they fail to understand is that the same God who strikes sinners down also saves them. As long as they don't walk in hypocrisy and unrepentant sin, but rather come to the light, they will know the kindness of God.

—Stott: "The presence of the living God, whether shown through preaching or miracles or both, is alarming to some and appealing to others. Some are frightened away, while others are drawn to faith."

—Salvations are connected to signs and wonders, here and throughout Acts.

—I would like to expand on the normativity of God's miracle working power for bearing witness to Christ. This is the express purpose for the giving of the Spirit in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you to be My witnesses..." The rest of Acts displays the connection between power for miracles / revelation, on one hand, and testimony / conversions, on the other.

- Three thousand were added to their number as a result of the miracles on Pentecost followed by Peter's preaching (Acts 2:1-41).
- People were saved daily in the context of miracles and preaching (2:42-47).
- The healing of the lame beggar (ch. 3) leads to thousands of converts (4:4) and testimony before the religious leaders (4:1-22).
- The prophecy and sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira led to "great fear"—the fear of God—spreading to the church and region (5:5, 11).
- An angelic jailbreak leads to more proclamation before religious leaders and the people (5:17-42).
- Stephen performs signs and wonders, which facilitate his preaching a sermon which culminates with an open vision of Jesus and a prayer, which leads to the conversion of Saul (6:8-7:60; 9:1-19).
- Philip performs signs and wonders, which spread the growth of the church to Ethiopia and Samaria (ch. 8).
- Saul's miraculous vision, conversion, and healing lead to bold proclamation of the Gospel in Damascus (9:1-22).
- The healing of Aeneas the paralytic leads many to the Lord (9:32-35).
- The raising of Dorcas "became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord" (9:42).
- Multiple visions and spiritual impressions lead to the conversion of Cornelius and his household (ch. 10-11).
- Conversions and testimony are not mentioned in Acts 12, but Peter's second angelic jailbreak no doubt bears much gospel fruit.
- The Holy Spirit speaks to the church in Antioch, setting apart Barnabas and Saul for missionary endeavors that will result in many conversions (13:1-3).
- The proconsul in Cyprus comes to faith because Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, pronounces blindness over a false prophet (13:4-12).
- Paul and Barnabas lead many to the Lord through preaching, signs, and wonders (14:1-7).
- The healing of the lame man in Lystra leads to bold proclamation (14:8-18).
- Paul is stoned and left for dead, but healed, and he continues preaching (14:19-23).
- Peter, Paul, and Barnabas tell stories of God working miracles amongst the Gentiles and opening a door of faith to them (Acts 15).
- God gives a dream that leads Paul's team to Philippi, resulting in the conversion of Lydia's household, deliverance of a demonized slave, miraculous earthquake, conversion of a jailer and his household, and the most joyful church in the New Testament—the church of Philippi (Acts 16).
- Paul continues bearing much fruit in Corinth after Jesus appears to him and encourages his perseverance there (18:1-11).
- God performed "extraordinary miracles" through Paul (19:11) so that some "counterfeits" tried to imitate him by casting out demons—it goes terribly for them. The demons overpowered the counterfeits and sent them running. Luke remarks: "And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled." In fact, revival breaks out in Ephesus, as people repent and burn their magic books (19:11-20).
- Eutychus is raised from the dead. No conversions are mentioned, but the church is edified (20:1-7).

- Paul is prepared to suffer for the Gospel through prophetic impressions (20:22-23; 21:1-11).
- An angel appears to Paul, guiding him for how to manage the shipwreck, leading to testimony before the Romans and 276 prisoners and the preservation of their lives (Acts 27:23-44).
- Paul survives a viper bite, heals Publius' father, and he also heals "the rest of the people on the island who had diseases" (28:1-10).
- Almost every chapter in Acts portrays a miracle or a revelation that leads to testimony or conversion. The book ends with Paul in prison but the Gospel spreading—"without hindrance" (28:30)—the last two words of the book. Luke's point is that the story of Acts is still being written. What is that story? It is the story of Jesus continuing "to do and teach" (1:1) on behalf of the Father and through the Spirit-filled church. Jesus did not cease doing the things He did in the first century, any less than He ceased reigning from His throne. Because Jesus reigns, the Spirit empowers us to continue the expansion of the kingdom through bold witness, miracles, and revelations.

15 so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. 16 The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

—I have commented on this several times above.

—Luke does not tell us that Peter's shadow actually did heal people. Perhaps Peter displayed more power than the other apostles, but Luke wants us to know that all the apostles moved in power.

—Whether the rumor of Peter's shadow was true or not, Luke nevertheless portrays extraordinary grace. On this occasion "they were all healed." As noted above, we see similar displays of power in the ministries of Jesus and Paul, yet the display of universal healing (aka, all are healed) was not universal (aka, on every occasion), even for them.

—It seems to me that there are two ditches to avoid.

- On one hand, we should avoid relegating this story to the first century, as though extraordinary grace such as this will never again return. In the flow of the narrative, signs and wonders multiply through the hands of non-apostles as God extends His mission until His return. Miracles should be normative for a Spirit-filled, Gospel-proclaiming church. Otherwise, one of God's chief purposes for giving us the Spirit is null and void (cf. Acts 1:8).
- On the other hand, we should avoid making normative extraordinary grace such as this. While we can expect God's miracle-working power, that doesn't mean that we should expect to clean out hospitals and morgues on the daily.
- In short, miracles should be normative because we live in the Age of the Spirit, whose mission continues. While miracles are normative, however, revival is not. Seasons of extraordinary grace come and go—and necessarily so. When the land suffers drought, we welcome a downpour, but Noah's flood would be too much. We live in the Age of the Spirit, but we don't live in the age of 24/7 mass outpouring. Such a view will only lead to disappointment. Furthermore, 24/7 revival would be exhausting. At some point we must return to normal life. Ordinary grace sustains the church. Extraordinary grace awakens it.

—Stott: "It was a remarkable demonstration of the power of God to heal and free human beings—just as the Ananias and Sapphira episode had been of his power to judge them."

—"so that":

- "As a result" (NIV, CSB); "to such an extent that" (NASB); "thus" (NET)
- Luke connects the mass conversions of 5:14 to its apparent consequence: people being brought into the streets to be healed and delivered of demons. This seems to imply that Christians can be demonized (which I know to be true from experience and from other passages) and set free from them.
- Schnabel: "If this connection is interpreted in a strict sense, the people who expect and experience healings from illnesses and liberation from demons are believers in Jesus."

—"from the towns around Jerusalem": this is the first time we've seen people outside Jerusalem being affected by the Jesus movement.

COMMUNITY GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever experienced “extraordinary grace” before—an outpouring of God’s Spirit, of miracles, of salvations, etc.?
- Have you ever experienced a “revival culture”—where churches try to manufacture a move of the Spirit? How did you realize what was happening? How did God move you away from that?
- How can you live with consistent expectation for God to move in power without being disappointed when God doesn’t act? How have you processed disappointment with God when He hasn’t intervened miraculously?
- The Spirit sovereignly moves as He wishes (John 3:8), yet the Spirit’s activity here is tied to their prayer (4:28-30), faithful witness (4:31, 33), unity (4:32, 34-37), and weeding out a satanic attack (5:1-11). How do we walk in the tension of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, as it relates to revival?
- In 5:13, the Gospel divides. Some resist the work of the Spirit while others embrace it. How have you seen the Gospel / work of the Spirit divide in your own life? In our culture? How do you deal with it?
- The implication of “so that” in 5:15 is that Christians can be freed from demons (see study guide). Have you ever seen or experienced this?
- In 5:16 we read that “they were all healed.” This happens on occasion throughout the ministries of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, but it doesn’t happen on every occasion. Jesus couldn’t do many miracles in His hometown because of unbelief (Mk. 6:5). Paul had to leave Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Tm. 4:20), he had to tell Timothy to follow a common medical prescription of the day for his stomach ailments (1 Tm. 5:23), and he couldn’t even heal his own eyes (Gal. 4:13-15). What do we make of such diverse biblical data? How do we interpret the sometimes-universal healings/miracles in light of other occasions that ended without a healing?