

THE LIFE OF JESUS - SIGNS

[Slide] Today we continue the series on key features of the Life of Jesus based on Luke's Gospel account. Today's theme is "Signs". So what do we mean by "signs"?

Luke doesn't use the word "signs" in this passage, but the word is used many times in scripture. Luke himself, in the Acts of the Apostles, records these words of Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost:

Acts 2:22: Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man *accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs*, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

Strong's Bible Concordance defines signs as "miracles and wonders by which God authenticates the men sent by him".

So for the purposes of our topic today, signs are those things that God did through Jesus that accredit Jesus, or authenticate him, as truly being the Son of God. As we look at today's passage we will see how the miracles of Jesus provide evidence that he really is the Son of God, the Messiah that the Jews were expecting.

[Slide] We will ask the same four questions that Chris has used throughout this series:

- Why has Luke included this in his life of Jesus?
- What is the Good News?
- So What?
- Now What?

[Slide] Why has Luke included this?

Luke himself is convinced that Jesus is the Saviour, the Son of God, and so it is natural that he wishes to provide his readers with evidence so that they too can come to the same conclusion.

And the evidence in this passage is all the more convincing because it comes in response to a question sent from John the Baptist in prison, who appears to be having second thoughts about Jesus:

Luke 7:19b: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

And if the answer Jesus gave was designed to reassure John the Baptist, then it can also serve to reassure us if we have doubts about who Jesus is.

Before sending messengers to Jesus, John had already been told of the things Jesus was doing. Our reading began with these words:

Luke 7:18a: "John's disciples told him about all these things."

What were "these things"? Presumably, the things that Luke had just recorded in the preceding part of the chapter. Jesus had healed a centurion's servant who was sick and about to die. Then he had raised a widow's son from the dead.

In the light of these very impressive miracles, we may wonder why John had doubts. But let's remind ourselves of the God-given message which John had preached:

Luke 3:15-17: ¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

So John's message included a strong element of judgment, which Jesus did not appear to be fulfilling.

In his commentary, R Kent-Hughes sums up the likely reasons for John's doubts far better than I could:

On the one hand, Jesus' marvellous miracles fit well with John's prophecy regarding the great work of the Holy Spirit. But in regard to his prophecy of judgment, that Jesus would "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire," nothing had happened. The Romans were still in firm control. Their lackeys, including Herod and Herodias, were living in comfort. The religious establishment was just as arrogant and self-righteous as ever. And John, sitting in prison, was getting no help from Jesus as far as he could see. Disappointed and puzzled, John sent his messengers to Jesus asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (v. 20).

So we can perhaps have some sympathy with John in thinking that all his expectations of Jesus were not being fulfilled.

[Slide] What is the Good News?

Firstly the good news is that Jesus did not rebuke John for having misgivings. It's OK to have questions, misgivings and doubts provided we seek answers.

And the content of the response Jesus gave is good news. I say "response" rather than "answer" because on the surface it may not appear that Jesus provides a direct answer. Remember that John's question was,

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus didn't answer "yes" or "no" directly. Instead he said this:

Luke 7:22b: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.

So what was John expected to make of this? After all, as we have seen he had already been made aware of the miracles Jesus was performing, so in one sense Jesus was not telling John anything he did not already know.

But Jesus, while not quoting directly from scripture, was alluding to a number of passages in Isaiah which declare what the Messiah would do. To take just one example:

Isaiah 35:5,6a: ⁵Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

John the Baptist would be familiar with passages such as this in Isaiah which foretell the coming Messiah and his ministry. So Jesus is inviting John to apply a little thought in order to see that Jesus is indeed fulfilling this role. People don't have the natural ability to perform miracles such as raising people from the dead. So Jesus must be empowered with something beyond human ability. And that, coupled with the fact that some 700 years earlier Isaiah had prophesied through the Holy Spirit that when the Messiah came he would do these very things, gives very strong evidence that Jesus really is the one. The signs are there, John, just make a little effort to see where they point.

John may still have wondered why Jesus wasn't bringing judgment on those who John considered to be evildoers, but he had to accept the fact that the one who was more powerful than him was not going to provide answers to all his questions. Neither we nor John are at liberty to advise God of what we think is the best course of action, or set God's timetable for him. He is God, and we are not.

We have the benefit of seeing a broader picture than John. We see that we are *all* sinners under God's judgment, so rather than expecting God to judge those we consider to be evildoers we have first to face up to the fact that our own sin needs to be dealt with and forgiven. The good news is that the Son of God can do exactly that, and in a later sermon in this series Chris will be preaching on the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

But even in today's passage the signs were there for John, and the signs are there for us that Jesus really is the Son of God.

Jesus rounded off his message for John with these words:

Luke 7:23: Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Jesus saw that John was in danger of losing heart and falling away because Jesus did not seem fully to meet his expectations of the Messiah. But the signs that Jesus drew John's attention to should have enabled him to stand firm and so be blessed, even though he was in prison. I'm sure many of us can testify to having received blessings through Jesus that more than compensate for any adverse circumstances that we may have been encountering.

[Slide] So What?

After John's messengers had left, Jesus spoke to the crowd about John the Baptist. Although *John* was struggling with the issue of whether *Jesus* was the one who was to come, the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament, *Jesus* was in no doubt that *John* had been foretold in the Old Testament as the one about whom it is written:

Luke 7:27: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

Luke rounds off today's passage by contrasting two types of response to the miracles of Jesus, the signs that point to who he is.

On several occasions earlier in his gospel, Luke had recorded people's reactions to Jesus' ministry. Many had reacted positively. A typical example is when Jesus forgave and healed the paralysed man who had been brought to Jesus by his friends.

Luke 5:26: Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

They saw the miraculous signs and understood well enough to respond by praising God.

And in today's passage we see again that many responded positively. There were those who, when confronted by John the Baptist's call, had been acutely aware that they were sinners who needed to repent in preparation for the coming Messiah. So they were baptised by John. Then in turn they accepted Jesus, and we are told that they "acknowledged that God's way was right." They saw what Jesus did, and saw that the signs pointed to who he was. This group even included tax collectors!

On the other hand, some had been antagonistic to Jesus. On one occasion Jesus had healed a man who had a shrivelled hand. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law objected because this was on a Sabbath. They had ruled that healing was work, and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. So they closed their minds to the possibility that Jesus could be the Messiah. It is worth noting that they could not deny that the miracle had taken place as they had witnessed it for themselves. But Luke records that "they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus." (Luke 6:11.)

A similar attitude was shown by the second group that Luke refers to in today's passage. They were full of pride. Why, thought the Pharisees and experts in the law, did *they* need to repent? After all, they kept God's law to the letter. Yes, they were waiting for the Messiah, but when he came surely he wouldn't require *them*, of all people, to repent! So they refused

to accept John's call to repent in preparation for the coming Messiah. And they refused to see that the miracles that Jesus did were signs pointing to who he was. And here is the tragic verdict on them: they "rejected God's purpose for themselves."

[Slide] Now What?

When we read about the life of Jesus, and see the miraculous things that he did, what is our response?

Does our pride prevent us from acknowledging that we are sinners and need to come to repentance and receive Jesus on his terms? If so, we are like the Pharisees and teachers of the law who "rejected God's purpose for themselves."

Or do we accept that the miracles act as signs that point to Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God? We may not understand everything Jesus taught or did, and when we are suffering hardship, like John, we may even have doubts. But if, like many of the people in today's passage, we acknowledge that God's way is right, then that response opens the way for us to receive all the blessings that God longs for us to have through Jesus his Son.