

Truth for Today

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The signs in John's Gospel: Signs 8 and 9 and conclusion

Preamble

This is the last of four talks on this magnificent, fascinating subject, The Signs of John's Gospel. It will be worthwhile to begin by refreshing our minds and hearts on the theme of the series.

In a very special way, The Gospel by the Apostle John highlights the personal glories of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In line with this, his treatment of the many acts of power and healing that the Lord Jesus performed in His public ministry differs from the other evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Incidents referred to by the others as miracles or wonders are invariably referred to as signs by John. This fits in very well indeed with the object in mind in each Gospel. It must be significant, and I do really mean to use that word, significant, that John uses the words "sign", "signs" and "signifying" at least 20 times in the text of his Gospel.

There is a clear distinction in emphasis between 'miracles', 'wonders', and 'signs'.

- A **'miracle'** is a supernatural event, act or deed beyond the power and capacity of natural man to perform or achieve.
- The term **'wonder'** emphasises the sense of awe or wonder produced in the beholder.
- A **'sign'** signifies or points out the kind of person performing the deed.

In particular, literally accurate translations confirm that deeds termed 'miracles' or 'wonders' in other Gospels are invariably called 'signs' in John's Gospel. This is clearly because John sets forth the Lord Jesus as The Son of God, God manifested in flesh.

In the first three talks, we have already considered in some detail the seven signs given by the Lord during His public ministry. We are now ready to consider lessons to be learned from Signs numbers 8 and 9, and draw appropriate conclusions.

The Eighth Sign: The miraculous catch of fishes (John 21:1-14)

The eighth sign, recorded in John 21:1-14, is about a miraculous catch of fishes. This sign was given after the Lord was risen out from among the dead (see John 20:1-18). In passing, let us not miss the lesson that there has been an immense harvest of spiritual fruit arising as a direct result of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a subject to which we shall return later. For the moment, let us remember what the Lord Himself said, as given in John 12:24, "*Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit*".

Jesus had died and risen again (John 19:28-20:18). The question now arose, had He still the power to perform miracles? Could He still exercise supernatural power? The circumstances were like this. Seven of the Lord's disciples were together. Their Master was no longer there to take charge. Peter, ever the man of action, evidently didn't enjoy sitting around doing nothing. So Peter said, "I can't sit around here like this. I am going fishing" (see John 21:3).

Peter, as usual, had voiced what all the disciples were probably thinking. "Yes", they said, "we quite agree. We can't sit around like this. We'll come with you" (John 21:3). So, without delay, they got into their fishing boat and went fishing. Perhaps they thought that with Jesus gone, they might just as well resume their previous occupation. They would be comfortable doing something they were good at and had personal experience of.

The record of the result is quite explicit. They toiled all night and caught nothing (John 21:3). Not a single fish! They had to learn that without Jesus they couldn't even rely on their own previously acquired professional experience and skill. Without their Lord and Master to direct them they were nothing and they could do nothing. The Lord allowed them to get to this low pitch without Him. Then, the Lord joined them, but withheld recognition from them. It happened like this.

When the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't know that it was Jesus (John 21:4). They had important lessons to learn. The first was to recognise and confess their own weakness and inability. "*Children, have ye any meat?*" He asked them (John 21:5). There was only one possible answer. "No!" Surely, open confession is good for the soul. Having brought them to this recognition of their own weakness and inability, the Lord was free to take control. "*Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find*" (John 21:6).

They did as they were told, and now they were not able to draw in the net, it was so full of fishes (John 21:6). But, at least one of the disciples knew instinctively Who it was. "*It is the Lord*", he cried (John 21:7). That comment is deeply significant in itself. It could be taken as an appropriate title for the whole of the Gospel of John.

That disciple's name isn't given. How is he identified? "*That disciple whom Jesus loved*". Now, this expression is used five times in the Gospel of John (John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20). There can be no doubt that it was John himself who delighted in that description and made the wise observation. Certainly, he loved the Lord. To him, it was perfectly understandable and right that he should. But what he marvelled in was that Jesus loved Him. We do well to view things in the same way that John did. What was important to John was not what he was in himself, but what he was to the Lord.

What happened next was entirely predictable. Peter accepted John's words. He saw that it was the Lord, and immediately sprang into action. He put on his fisherman's coat and plunged into the water (John 21:7). The other disciples followed his lead. They dragged the net, full of fishes, in to the shore (John 21:8). They were greeted by the sight of a fire already blazing. Not only that, but there were fishes already cooking on the fire, and bread, too (John 21:9).

Jesus now resumed personal, direct control. "*Bring of the fish which ye have now caught*" (John 21:10). That's interesting, and touching, too. They had been obliged to demonstrate that in themselves, without Him, they could do nothing, and catch nothing. But, having directed them where to cast the net, the Lord graciously gave them the credit for the catch they had secured. "*Bring of the fish which ye have now caught.*" The description of the catch is very instructive, too. The net was full of 153 great fishes (John 21:11). First of all, the net was full. The Lord Himself set no limit as to what He could do through them.

The only limit was the capacity of the net which the disciples themselves had provided. The other thing of note is the description of the catch. 153 great fishes! They must have been big to be described in this way. Normally, a catch of smaller fishes would be described by weight or the number of boxes containing them. Here, the fact that the fish were described by specific number and size confirmed that they were, as the text says, great fishes. Such a catch would normally stretch a net beyond its breaking point. Yet, as we read, in the Lord's mercy the net was not broken.

The Lord wanted them to enjoy the fruit of their work; the work they couldn't have done without His direction, help and control. "*Come and dine!*" (John 21:12). By this stage, none of the disciples needed to ask Who it was Who had taken charge. They knew now that it was indeed the Lord (John 21:12).

Having now taught them the lesson, He took open control. He distributed the fish and the bread to the disciples. We are told here that "*this was the third time that Jesus had showed Himself to his disciples, after that He was risen out from among the dead*" (John 21:14). However, on this occasion He had withheld recognition from them until He had taught them these necessary lessons. In particular, His power, in resurrection, was undiminished, no less than that demonstrated throughout His public ministry.

The Ninth Sign: The death and resurrection of Christ (John 2:18-22)

For the ninth, and last, sign, we need to turn to John 2:18-22. While I refer to it as the ninth and last sign, it is certainly no afterthought. It is the greatest sign of all, the basis of all the others.

We often get help from using the telescope as well as the microscope. That certainly applies to John 2. The layout is very instructive. In John 1:1-18, the Lord Jesus had been shown to be the only-begotten Son of God, in full possession of deity. John 1:1 tells us, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*". John 1:2-51 is taken up expanding on that immense statement. Then in John 2, there are three main sections.

First of all, in John 2:1-11, in the marriage at Cana of Galilee, we have an illustration of the fact that the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, is the true dispenser of true joy and true blessing to those who put their trust in Him. Mary, His mother, evidently recognised this when she drew the need, in this case wine, to His attention. She simply said to Him, "*They have no wine*" (John 2:3). Then, she said to the servants, "*Just do what He says*" (John 2:5). In scripture, wine is consistently used as a picture of joy. Examples are given in Judges 9:13 and Psalm 104:15. It is so here, too.

Then in the second section, John 2:12-17, we are instructed by way of contrast that the Lord Jesus, as well as being the True Blessor, will also be the Final Judge. He is the True Administrator or Executive of True Justice and True Judgment upon those who refuse or decline to accept the blessing that only the Lord Himself can give. Read also John 5:22-23 for confirmation of this.

In the third section, John 2:18-22, we see that the basis and foundation of all true blessing and all true justice is the real death, and personal, actual, physical, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. After He had driven the merchants and money-lenders out of the Temple, saying, "*Don't make My Father's house a house of merchandise*" (John 2:15-16), the Jews challenged His authority to do so. "*What sign do you give to prove you have the authority to act like this*" (John 2:18). Their vocabulary was absolutely accurate. It was indeed a question of demonstrating His personal right to act in this authoritative way. What sign did He have to give? Without their knowing it, they were directed to use the exact word that fitted the situation.

Let us recapitulate! He had given seven signs of His authority in the course of His public ministry. He had shown in the eighth sign that His power was no less effective in resurrection than it had been before He had died at the Cross of Calvary. But, here, early in the record of these signs, which signify the personal authority of the Son of God, He highlights the basis and foundation of all the blessing and all the judgment to be administered by Him on behalf of the Blessed God. That basis, that foundation, is His personal death and resurrection.

The death of Jesus was essential to make due sacrifice to God in respect of every sinful thought, word and deed perpetrated by man. As we read in Hebrews 9:26, "*Once, in the end of the age, hath [Christ] appeared, to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*". Then, the personal, actual resurrection of Christ was essential to demonstrate that God had been fully vindicated and fully honoured in the death of Christ. He was fully satisfied with the value to Him of the sacrificial death of Christ. As we read in Romans 4:25, "*[He] was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification*".

What was the figure that the Lord Jesus used to bring home this lesson? "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*" (John 2:19). Now, the Jews were very sensitive to the fact that their Temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed twice already in their history (see 2 Kings 25:8-12).

They did not really want or need to be reminded that this had been in judgment for their national and personal sins. They flashed back in derision. "What? Destroy it and rebuild it in three days? Ridiculous!" The rebuilding of the Temple commissioned by Herod had taken 46 years (John 2:20). Who did this man think he was, boasting to demolish and rebuild it in only three days? The Temple would indeed be destroyed, in AD 70 as history records, and, indeed, by a Gentile power, and for their Jewish national sins. But the scriptures are plain, giving us the significance of the Lord's telling reply.

He wasn't talking about the Jews' temple at all. He was talking about His own body (John 2:21). "*You destroy this temple, the temple of my body, this body that I have taken so that I can die the death of the Cross, and I will raise it again*". As He says in John 10:18, "*I have power to lay down My life, in death, and I have power to take it again, in resurrection*". The Jews did not want to know that, but it is a vital twin truth, without which there would be no righteous basis for salvation for us.

As often happened, at the time the disciples of Jesus did not appreciate the full significance of what the Lord was saying. They would understand, fully, when He had not only died and risen again, but also ascended to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit into their hearts to guide them into all truth. How grateful we should be that the Holy Spirit indwells all who believe in Jesus. We, too, can enter into the true significance of the words that Jesus said when He lived on earth. We, too, can be guided by the Holy Spirit into the truth of the whole of scripture.

Interestingly enough, and again significantly, these three incidents are followed by what we have in John 2:23-3:12. Those verses teach us that only new birth opens the door for the believer on the Lord Jesus to enter into this blessing.

Climax and Conclusion (John 2:11; 20:30-31)

So, where does that leave us? The scope and detail of the signs are indeed fascinating. But what is the major significance of them. What is the point? This takes us back to the start. What was their **purpose**? John 2:11 tells us. 'This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory'. What was their **motive and objective**? John 20:31 tells us, "... *that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*". What was the **intended result**? John 2:11 says that they did indeed believe and John 20:31 goes further, "... *that believing, ye might have life, eternal life, through His Name*".

How clear the lesson is! When the disciples first went fishing, relying on their own strength and experience, there was no catch, (John 21:3). When they obeyed His voice, they caught 153 great fishes (John 21:6, 11). As ever, blessing followed obedience to His clear command. For us, and spiritually, we should be keen to fish people out of the sea of sin and death. Let us go forth, in response to His bidding, in answer to His promise, *"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men, if you follow Me"* (Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17). Praise be to God!

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