

# Waking the Sleeping Giant - 11

*Awesome!*

**Acts 2:43** *“Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the Apostles.”*

The way we use words is interesting, to say the least. In each generation, there has always been a lingo that has been used to express the feelings of a particular group. Terms like HIP, COOL, FAR OUT, OUT OF SIGHT, RAD, GROOVY and others like them have all been used at one time or another. And today things seem to be changing so fast that it's hard to keep up with the latest slang.

There are probably many reasons why a group adopts a certain set of words for its own use, but one reason is that they want to express a common understanding or feeling quickly. These words serve as code words, a kind of short cut of expression. And people who are part of the 'in' group that uses these expressions know exactly what they mean.

The word AWESOME has been used a lot to express a certain feeling about something. To say something is awesome not only means it's something that by its greatness inspires high appreciation but also reflects how we *feel* about it. And most of these words used that way are valuable because they communicate more than just facts. They communicate feelings - how we feel - and how we feel about things is important to us, sometimes even more important than what we think intellectually.

Feelings are important to us, more important than we like to think. Feelings can literally cripple us physically if they are strong enough. And the reason is that feelings affect our mind. If strong enough, feelings can overwhelm a person. On the other hand, feelings can impact us positively as well. Feelings of confidence have been shown to be the difference in success and failure in athletics. One person who is confident will succeed where another person of equal, and sometimes greater ability will fail because he or she lacked confidence.

Our attitudes affect our relationship with God. Our attitudes do not change how God feels about us, but they do change how we feel about God. And how we feel about God will either enhance or impede our ability to trust Him and receive from Him.

What we see in our text today is an example of the kind of attitude that enables us to see and receive from God. This early Church exemplifies the kind of response to God that we need in today's church.

*“ ... many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the Apostles.”*

One of the first things that jumps out at you, when you read this verse, is the miraculous - the signs and wonders done at the hands of the Apostles. For some reason we like to focus on these amazing displays of God's power. There is something within all of us that likes to be amazed.

When I watch some magic shows, I am spellbound by how the tricks are accomplished. But the real thrill is the surprise of seeing the unexpected happening right before my very eyes. We are intrigued by the prospect of seeing signs and wonders. We would like for God to do a few for us.

In fact, some would turn God into some kind of cosmic magician to entertain us with His genuine magic show. This is what the religious leaders asked Jesus to do. It wasn't "*show me the money,*" it was "*show me a sign - show me a miracle.*" But Jesus refused to be manipulated by their self-serving requests. He did not do His miracles as a performance but did them for a purpose. God still does.

This brings us to a question: Why don't we see more signs and wonders today? Does God still perform signs and wonders? Is there something wrong with our ability to see them? Do we lack the faith necessary for God to work in our midst? What are the explanations for this?

Some people believe that wonders and miraculous signs passed away with the original Apostles. Their theory, known as cessation, is that the miraculous gifts were given to authenticate the message being preached by these Apostles and were not needed after that Apostolic age passed.

You must remember that this was a brand-new message. There was no New Testament section of the Bible in those days. The New Testament as we have it today is the message of those first apostles. They were writing it. So, how would people know that what they were saying is true? The answer, the cessationist gives is that the miracles served this purpose.

During the establishment of the early Church the miracles functioned, and after it was established and the New Testament completed, the miracles ceased. Now we are supposed to believe by faith in the authenticated word recorded on the pages of the New Testament. This is one theory.

Now this theory is partially true. It is true that miraculous signs were done in part to authenticate the preaching of the gospel. Paul alluded to this when he wrote:

**2 Corinthians 12:12** "*The things that mark an Apostle - signs, wonders and miracles - were done among you with great perseverance.*"

There is no doubt that God worked in a special and unique way through these original Apostles. They had, and will ever have, an honoured place in the Kingdom of God. But it is not true that signs and wonders by themselves are sufficient to authenticate a teaching.

**2 Thessalonians 2:9-10** "*The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing.*"

In other words, there can be counterfeit miracles as well. Now, they are counterfeit not because they are not miraculous but because they are done by the power of evil. Jesus told us that toward the end of time "*false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible.*"

This theme is again emphasised in the book of Revelation, where it speaks of the deceiving power of the beast.

**Revelation 13:13-14.** "*And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth.*"

Signs and wonders in themselves can be the work of the enemy of God. They can be used by Satan to deceive people. So, we must beware. Even back in the Old Testament God warned the people:

**Deuteronomy 13:1-3** *"If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul."*

All things must be judged by whether they line up with the revealed word of God. This is the test for everything in the Christian life.

So, the miracles that were given to the apostles to do were not the sole verifying agent. They served an important purpose, but there is no reason to believe they were done simply to convince people. Paul, from whom we heard earlier about the signs of an apostle, explains it this way:

**1 Corinthians 1:22-23** *"Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."*

In other words, God will give faith to those who hear the preaching of the gospel. People will not believe simply because they see a miracle.

Another theory is that the reason we do not see more miracles today is because they never happened in the first place. Some have explained away miracles because they do not fit their view of the world. These people are rationalists and this is the view of what is known as theological liberalism. Attempts have been made by liberals to demythologize the life of Jesus - to remove the miraculous elements from the story of His life, which they believe were added by zealous disciples embellishing the story as they retold it in later years.

But it seems to me that if you remove the miraculous, you lose any reason to believe that Jesus was more than any other teacher. You see, when you remove the miraculous or supernatural, you remove the literal resurrection, without which Paul says, *"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."* (1 Corinthians 15:17). I have only one word to describe this view of theological liberalism - baloney!

Another view as to why we do not see more of the miraculous is because we do not understand God's ways. We see things from our limited perspective, not God's. Now, there is much to say for this view.

There are many examples from Scripture of how God's people missed what God was doing because of their limited vision and there is no doubt that God is up to more than we know. There is also no doubt that He does not perform simply because we want Him to thrill us. God works not to perform but to fulfil His purposes. We should not be surprised that we do not understand what He is doing at times.

But there is yet another explanation that our text suggests.

*"Everyone was filled with awe ..."*

God was at work in this group of believers. They had been saved by His grace and were now devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer. And their hearts were filled with awe.

Why were they filled with awe? Was it because of the miracles? Some would say it was. But perhaps that is not the only explanation. It could be that the miracles were done as a result of the atmosphere of faith that prevailed in these awe-filled disciples.

Remember Jesus' visit to His home town? When He arrived there, He encountered people who did not have faith in Him.

**Matthew 13:58** *"And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith."*

There seems to be a principle in God's word that God will withhold His miraculous power where there is no receptivity or where people's motives are wrong.

I personally believe that this is one of the reasons why we do not see more happening in our Western culture. We have bought into this rationalistic way of thinking that says that everything can be explained by scientific inquiry. We are simply not very open to the miraculous. We want to explain it away. Perhaps God will not cast His pearls before swine, so to speak.

One way this word **awe** can be translated is **fear**. To be **filled with awe** means that we are filled with a reverential fear before the presence of the Almighty. Some would say there is not enough of this in our Churches today. We need more of a sense of this awesome God. We need to be more awestruck by His glorious, holy greatness.

Now, by that I am not talking about the vacuous atmosphere of religious solemnity that still pervades many Churches today. In some Churches they have the idea that if you create an atmosphere more like a funeral service you are revering God. But this is not what being filled with holy fear is about.

As a matter of fact, there have been times when people were so overcome by God's holiness and their lack of holiness, that they fell to the floor under the burden of their sin, weeping and wailing ... and times when people have fallen to the floor so overwhelmed with God's love and grace that they lay there for hours just basking in his Glory. This kind of thing was seen in New England during the Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards. Being filled with awe can be very loud sometimes.

Being filled with awe means that we have transcended our earthly view and have caught a glimpse of the eternal glory of the living God. It means that we have caught a vision of His greatness, His holiness, His power and His love. Like Isaiah in the temple, when we see the Lord high and lifted up, we fall at His feet in humble surrender and worship.

This is the kind of atmosphere where God begins to work in power. This is the kind of attitude we need in our lives today. This is the kind of attitude we need more of in our Churches today. This was what the early Christians experienced as they began to follow Jesus and to share Him with others.

This also highlights an important truth we must grasp. God was at work through the people in order to bring people to Himself. These Christians were sharing with others and bringing people to Christ. Perhaps we do not see more of God because we are not doing what they were doing - we are not really sharing Jesus with anyone.

The sad truth is that there is a powerless Gospel being preached from many pulpits today. Jesus never intended that. To the contrary, the Church that He established on this earth is called to preach the Gospel and to see the preaching of God's Word confirmed in Holy Spirit power, with supernatural signs and wonders following.

**Mark 16:19-20** *"After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it."*

That is the pattern that Jesus gave to His Church - that is, we preach and teach His word throughout the world, and He faithfully confirms it with supernatural signs, healings, and miracles.

Sad to say, many Churches in our day are content with only preaching the word of God, but have no expectation of supernatural gifts of the Spirit to confirm the word preached. This type of word-only ministry would have been completely foreign to the apostle Paul.

**1 Thessalonians 1:5** *"... because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction ..."*

The manifestation of Holy Spirit power is absolutely essential to effective ministry as Jesus intended it. Signs and wonders will follow the preaching of the Word of God.

**Hebrews 2:3-4** *"... how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."*

Our job on earth is to "announce" to the world this "great salvation" that Jesus has provided for all who will receive it. God's trustworthy promise is to testify to and confirm the Word with *"...signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit."*

If you study the first ten spiritual awakenings or revivals in the Book of Acts, you will discover that nine of the ten were definitively linked to a notable sign, healing, or miracle. Contrary to much that is practiced in Churches today, after Jesus returned to heaven the Church that He founded continued to preach and teach the word of the Lord with visible power. Not just power in their preaching, which of course we all desire, but also power to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons in Jesus' name, and more. It was this combination of word-and-power that dramatically expanded the kingdom of God on earth in the early years of the Church.

**1 Corinthians 2:4-5** *"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."*

The truth stated in the above verses has motivated me strongly during my 40 plus years as a Spirit-led minister of the Gospel. I have exhorted many of my fellow preachers, not to be content with speaking *"wise and persuasive words ... [of] human wisdom"* from their pulpits – but to preach God's word and expect a faithful God to faithfully confirm His word *"by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit."* (Hebrews 2:4).

So how about it then? Do you and I really have a zeal to share Jesus and expect God to confirm our words with signs and wonders? Have we become complacent in our Christianity? One of the greatest Christian songwriters, Keith Green, said it best when he sang: *'the world is lost in the darkness, while the Church is asleep in the light.'*

I heard of a preacher many years ago who began a sermon by saying, *"The sad fact is that there are thousands of people around us in this very city who are lost in the darkness and most of you don't give a damn. And what is even sadder is that you will now be far more concerned that I said 'damn' than you are that these people are lost!"*

The Apostle Paul had more "wise and persuasive words" than any of his peers, but the reason revival followed him wherever he went was due to the demonstration of the Spirit's power, which always accompanied his words.

We hear of many miraculous signs and wonders going on in parts of the world today where God's people are sharing Jesus and preaching the gospel - and many people are coming to Christ. Revival is going on in a number of third world countries right now. Are people coming to Christ because of the signs and wonders or are the signs and wonders happening because God's people are focused on what is God's heartbeat, seeing people delivered from darkness to light? If we want to see God's power, we need to share the good news about His Son with others.

May God fill us with the holy awe that comes from seeing Him in all His glory, and may He reveal His miraculous power as we share Jesus with others!