

The following Scripture passages are offered to aid beginning fellowships. The readings and commentary for this week are more in line with what has become usual; for the following will most likely be familiar observations. The concept behind this Sabbath's selection is *miracles*.

Weekly Readings

For the Sabbath of September 12, 2009

The person conducting the Sabbath service should open services with two or three hymns, or psalms, followed by an opening prayer acknowledging that two or three (or more) are gathered together in Christ Jesus' name, and inviting the Lord to be with them.

The person conducting the service should read or assign to be read John chapter 7.

Commentary: After healing the man who was an invalid for 38 years (John chap 5) and after delivering a message in the synagogue at Capernaum about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, Jesus did not have many disciples left (He had the Twelve), and He had Judeans seeking to kill Him (John 7:1). Not even His brothers believed in Him (v. 5) despite the miracles He had already done. So by any criterion, this period had to be a low spot personally for Him; for He knew He had to die, and he knew where and when it would happen, and He knew the "when" wasn't during the forthcoming Feast of Booths.

If the miracles Jesus had done up to this period were not sufficient cause for belief by any but the Twelve chosen by the Father and called by Jesus, then why have miracles? Why not leave the invalids lying in their beds and the sick in their beds and the demon-possessed to terrorize their neighbors? Were the miracles only for the person being healed? If that were the case, why are not more miracles recorded in Scripture—or why record any at all? And why would the miracles not continue beyond Calvary, beyond the end of the 1st-Century? Why are there no overtly public miracles today?

Luke records, "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" (Acts 19:11–12). But Paul writes, "You [Timothy] are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Tim 1:15). He writes to the saints at Philippi, "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (3:18–19). So the miracles Paul did were not enough to prevent saints from leaving Paul, or Jews at Ephesus and in Judea from wanting to kill Paul. The mixed Hellenistic peoples of Corinth questioned, at least for a while, whether Paul was of God, and the churches in Galatia quickly adopted a different gospel other than the one Paul taught. So Paul's track record of

bringing people to God and having them stay where he left them was not very good despite the miracles and mighty deeds he did.

Again, the question must be asked, why miracles?

The answer to this question of why miracles is found in two seemingly unrelated passages, the first being what Amos wrote,

For the Lord God does nothing
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.
The lion has roared;
who will not fear?
The Lord God has spoken;
who can but prophesy? (3:7–8)

The second is in John recording, “About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching” (7:14).

Jesus could no more not go to the Feast than a person can not feel fear when a lion roars nearby, or a prophet can not deliver the words committed to that prophet.

Healing one person and not healing another would seem to make God a respecter of persons ... even if Jesus or Peter or John healed every person with an affliction in Judea or in all of Asia or in all of the Roman Empire, a person with a similar affliction in China was not healed, nor was a person in the 3rd-Century BCE or CE. One person was healed because of when and where he or she happened to dwell in time and space. Another person who did not dwell in the same age or in the same geographic region was not healed, which would indeed make God a respecter of persons if healings came for the sake of the healed.

The miracles of Jesus were not capricious displays of supernatural phenomena such as plaster statuary “crying” or returning life to doves, neither deed being of any benefit to humankind or to God. The miracles were, rather, the healing of physical ailments or the casting out of demonic spirits or the feeding of thousands, all of which are acts immediately benefiting living persons. But if these miracles were not enough to engender belief; if these miracles did little more than benefit those directly involved, then it would seem that God favored those who lived in 1st-Century Judea more than He favored those who lived in 20th-Century Europe.

What has not been understood is why a miracle occurs: miracles come via the divine breath of the Father delivering in this world the speech-acts of the Father, with “speech-acts” conveying the entirety of communication occurring in an utterance. For example, if two people are silently sitting in a room, and one person glances at a clock on the wall, asking, “Well?” as the person looks at the clock, then the two people get up and leave the room, the actual utterance of the word well is only a portion of the communication or dialogue that took place between the two people. Little meaning can be denotatively assigned to the word well, but a question was asked with the one word, with the remainder of the question being contained in the glance at the clock which suggests that time is a factor as in asking the

question, Is it time to go?

The concept of a speech-act includes all of the connotative meaning conveyed by an utterance, with the context of the utterance having as much importance as the utterance itself. A speech-act is, therefore, an expression of both the text and the context of utterances.

A red sky at dusk is in a different context than a red sky at dawn; thus the same sign has differing meanings. And this is the case with uttered words: the context supports the assignment of certain meanings to a word and inhibits the assignment of other meanings to the word. Hence, the context is an essential part of a speech-act, with the context being, too often, naïvely dismissed by restricting utterances to denotative or literal meanings for inscribed or uttered icons.

The prophet Jonah records:

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (4:5–11)

Is not the plant that grew overnight part of the Lord's answer to Jonah, who was angry that Nineveh had repented? It is, isn't it? For when Jonah said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (4:2), the Lord asked Jonah if his anger was justified (v. 4). But His question to Jonah was only the beginning of what He would "speak" to Jonah. The remainder of what He would say would come after the plant withered and died. Thus, in answering Jonah, a plant grew, shaded Jonah, withered and died in a day.

The Lord did not answer Jonah by creating a classical Aristotelian argument about why He should spare Nineveh, but rather by a speech-act that took two or three days to complete. The Lord did not answer as a man or woman would answer another man or woman, but by asking a question then speaking into existence a plant, then a worm and a hot, dry wind, then returning to ask the same question but with the plant in the previous unspoken position of the people of Nineveh. And because the growth and death of the plant is framed

by the same question, the plant is structurally part of the same speech-act of the Lord.

In the example of the two people in the room with the clock, how much meaning can be assigned to an only audibly heard, Well? Not much? The word only raises questions, for the word alone was not being used for a water or oil well. But when the word is coupled to a glance at a clock, the glance gives a defining context to the icon (this is an example used by the 20th-Century Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin). And so it is with the speech-act that has a plant growing and dying in the middle of the Lord's answer to Jonah. The words actually spoken are only a portion of the speech-act. And in cases of Jesus speaking the words of the Father, words conveyed by the Father's divine breath (i.e., the Holy Spirit), Jesus' actually uttered words are too "small" to convey all that the Father said; hence, the miracles Jesus did provided the context for His utterances as the plant that shaded Jonah for a day provided the context for the Lord asking Jonah why He should not pity the city.

The not uttered portions of the speech-acts of God are the miracles Jesus did, with these miracles having as much importance to the message conveyed as the glance at the clock or as the plant that grew overnight.

When miracles are not occurring, neither Jesus nor the Father is speaking.

Disciples, on their own, are not able to speak words that are of God except for the words that have already been spoken. When miracles return, disciples will again speak the words, "new" words of the Father.

Today, in this age preceding when miracles return, disciples will either speak what has already been spoken in Scripture, or they will speak of themselves. If they speak of themselves, as the assembled bishops at the Council of Nicea (ca 325 CE) did, then their words must be judged against Moses, who wrote of Jesus. Sabbatarian Christendom's rejection of the Nicene Creed comes from judging the words of the Creed by the words of Moses, of Jesus, or the first disciples, or Paul, and finding that the words of the Creed are those of men and not the words of God; for the doctrines developed by, especially, the 4th and 5th Century Christian Church were contrary to the doctrines of the 1st-Century sect of the Nazarenes. These late doctrines (late as in after the age of miracles ended) are not of God; they do not come from the speech-acts of the Father or the Son. They are of men, and of the prince of this world.

Until miracles return—and they will—the words disciples are to speak are the words that have already been spoken by Moses, by the prophets, by Jesus and the first apostles, by Paul. But the words Paul spoke, even when accompanied by miracles, were not enough to prevent unbelief from ravaging the mid 1st-Century Church. So it will not be miracles that convince liberated and empowered Christians to believe God. Miracles are not able to long convince anyone of anything. After all, Jesus told the crowd that followed Him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26); so according to Jesus it wasn't even the miracles that caused the crowd to follow Him, but the simple act of being fed bread and fish. But neither the miracles nor the food was enough to keep the crowd following Him when Jesus said that disciples must eat His flesh and drink His blood to have eternal life (v. 66).

If public miracles do not come except through the speech-acts of the Father (i.e., when the text and context of His utterances enter into this world), then miracles indirectly identify who speaks the words of God by giving to that person's words a differing context, with this difference denoting one Thus says the Lord from another Thus says the Lord.

Throughout Babylon's siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was a lone voice speaking for the Lord, but the context of his speech, his prophesying did not include miracles. Thus, the people of Israel (Jerusalem was all that remained of Israel — see Ezek 12:9, 22–28) had no contextual means to distinguish between the words of Jeremiah and the words of Hananiah (Jer chap 28): there was no difference that was outwardly discernable, other than Jeremiah seemed to be preaching treason. However, when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar breached Jerusalem's walls and razed the city and the temple, Jeremiah's words received a context they previously did not have: they were proved to be true.

Although from a human perspective, Nebuchadnezzar's sacking of Jerusalem would not seem like a miracle—it would have taken a miracle for Jerusalem to avoid being sacked—only those things that God permits will happen to Israel; therefore, yes, Babylon's conquest was miraculous for Babylon could well have had the same fate happen to its army as happened to Sennacherib's army when Hezekiah prayed for deliverance (Isa chaps 36–37).

So difference exists between hearing the words of the Lord spoken in a vision and the direct delivery of these words into this world as Jesus delivered them and as Paul delivered them ... delivery via a vision or a revelation coming via realization will see the words of the Lord given their context at some later time, but when these words are being spoken directly as was the case when Moses spoke to Pharaoh, or when Jesus spoke to the crowds that followed Him, or when Paul preached Christ, miracles created the context in which the words were delivered and received. Even when Jesus went up to the Feast in the middle of the week (John 7:14) and began to teach, the context of His teaching remained the healing of the invalid of 38 years (John chap 5); for Jesus said to the Jews,

I did one deed, and you all marvel at it. Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? (7:21–23)

Both the context of Jesus not going up to the Feast with His brothers, and the context for everything Jesus said at the Feast, including what He said on the last great day (the 8th day) about living waters (an allusion to Ezekiel chap 47, and an allusion that has Jesus being the temple), is the healing of the man who was an invalid for 38 years. So the “words” spoken by the Father when Jesus asked the man, “Do you want to be healed” (John 5:6) and when Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water”” (John 7:38) are uttered within the same context as part of one speech-act by the Father that extends from Sabbath to Sabbath and that has the stirring of the pool of Bethesda by the breath of God being a shadow and type of the waters that flow from Ezekiel's temple. Therefore, Jesus feeding the 5,000 as well as walking on water lay

within this same speech-act.

A person thinks of uttered words being ephemeral, here this moment then dissipating into thin air, whereas inscribed words have more permanency, lasting as long as a text survives. Thus, Christian disciples and theologians see “the word” Jesus left with His disciples not as their judge (John 12:48) but as the permanent utterance of God, but they encounter this word outside of its context of being delivered to 1st-Century Judeans who clung to the commandments as endtime Christians cling to the cross. Although it’s not easy to profess that Jesus is Lord yet reject believing the Father and the Son, Christians do so by taking the word Jesus left with His disciples out of its context as a healing message delivered to early 1st-Century Jews, none of whom were keeping the law (John 7:19) even though all of them were diligent law-keepers, thereby again making a difference between one thing and the same thing that can only be “seen” by the context in which the thing is encountered.

All of the above might well seem as so much double-speak, a word that actually has relevance to Scripture, an inscribed text that references and pertains to the things of God by naming the things of this world ... when Jesus a second time said that He would only give one sign that He was from heaven, the sign of Jonah, He placed this one sign in the context of a red sky, with the context giving meaning to the sign of Jonah, especially so when He calls Peter the son of Jonah as discussed in last Sabbath’s reading.

The first mention of the sign of Jonah is in the context of Jesus healing the man with a withered hand (Matt 12:9–13) and many others (v. 15), and this introduction of the sign of Jonah pertains to healing as in making alive what was dead so that in the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word spoken (v. 36) for by the words the person spoke, the person “will be justified” or “will be condemned” (v. 37), with Jesus’ introduction of Jonah being three days and three nights in the whale conveying to the person when the judgment of Israel would be revealed ... but is this reading too much into what Jesus said? No, it is the context that gives meaning to Jesus’ words. Taken out of their context, or limiting their context to the denotative meaning of the words on the page is as debating about what the man meant who said, Well, when glancing at the clock. Did the man mean that he was not sick? Or did he ask if the other was sick, assigning to the linguistic icon well a meaning that pertained to health? Or did the man refer to a pit of some sort? Or was the man somehow satisfied? Without that glance at the clock, what the man meant by well could never be determined. And so it is with Scripture: without seeing the miracles and understanding to whom Jesus was speaking, meaning cannot be well assigned to Scripture. And these things are really not knowable unless a person believes the writings of Moses and hears the voice of Jesus (John 5:46–47). Context simply eludes the reader.

It is all too easy to claim to be a Christian and to not believe anything Jesus said ... a simple sleight-of-hand has the Christian teacher saying, Yes, Jesus kept the Law, but He was under the dispensation of the Law, not under the dispensation of Grace. But because Christians are under the dispensation of Grace, we do not have to keep the Law to walk as Jesus walked. We only have to invite Him into our hearts. And because He kept the Law and because He lives in us, we do not have to keep the Law. Um-huh, do you really believe that Jesus is going to buy that reasoning when He said that the word, the message He left with His disciples will judge and condemn the person who rejects Him—and a person rejects

Him when the person does not strive to walk as Jesus walked.

Jesus said that the context for His earthly ministry was not to judge disciples but to save, to heal them (John 12:47). But all judgment has been given to Him (John 5:22), and when He comes again He will reveal judgments that have been made while He was absent (1 Cor 4:5); for as the Lord made sin alive at Sinai when he gave to Israel the law, and as the Lord gave sin an opportunity to slay the nation that would not listen to Him in Egypt (Ezek 20:8) by taking Moses up into the cloud for 40 days, God will give Sin (the third horseman) the opportunity to slay filled-with-spirit disciples—and he is today giving to disciples the context in which endtime prophecies can be better read than ever before, for the miracles will return with the first of these miracles being the liberation of Israel from indwelling sin and death when the ransom for this Israel, a nation circumcised of heart, is paid at the second Passover.

Unfortunately, we are in a period very much like Jeremiah's time in Jerusalem ... since miracles result from the speech-acts of the Father, with only a portion of these words of the Father able to be conveyed through the utterances of men and with the remainder of these "words" manifesting themselves as miracles that don't necessarily happen in a moment but over days (as in the case with Jonah) or over three and a half millennia (the period between the first and the second Passover) or over the period represented by the 430 years Israel was in Egypt (the period between Noah and when a time like the days of Noah; a period of, probably, 4,300 years). Disciples have not been left without the context for the words of the Father, for they form the context regardless of whether they like being "spoken" into existence by receiving a second breath of life, the breath of the Father. Disciples are the living word that Jesus left in this world; they are the "commandment" (John 12:49–50) that the Father told Jesus to speak. And this will, most likely, take a moment to digest.

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The person conducting the Sabbath service should close services with two hymns, or psalms, followed by a prayer asking God's dismissal.

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