

## Declaring the Mighty Works of God by John Arnold

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 125

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

<sup>2</sup>As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the Lord surrounds his people,  
from this time on and forevermore.

<sup>3</sup>For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest  
on the land allotted to the righteous,  
so that the righteous might not stretch out  
their hands to do wrong.

<sup>4</sup>Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,  
and to those who are upright in their hearts.

<sup>5</sup>But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways  
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.  
Peace be upon Israel!

New Testament Reading: Mark 7:24-37

<sup>24</sup>From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.<sup>[a]</sup> He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,<sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.<sup>27</sup> He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."<sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Sir,<sup>[b]</sup> even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."<sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."<sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

<sup>31</sup>Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.<sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.<sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.<sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."<sup>35</sup> And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.<sup>36</sup> Then Jesus<sup>[c]</sup> ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.<sup>37</sup> They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

### THE SERMON

Okay? I want you to imagine for a moment that you go out to your mailbox one day, you find this envelope in there. You open it up and you discover that you have won the lottery. Yeah, right. Woohoo! You've won the lottery. There's like a, let's say a \$2,000,000 check in there. What would you do? I imagine you would get that check and be like, "This is amazing. This is astounding." You would start calling people. You'd want to run and show somebody that check and your brain would go into hyper

overdrive on all the things you could do with it and how your life was about to change. You'd be going, "Oh, I can finally get this car I've been wanting, or I can finally go on this trip, or I can pay the house off, or I can help my kids get in this school or I can help my mom with that." You'd start thinking through all the ways it was going to change your life and you'd be so excited that you would run and tell somebody.

I doubt that you would do this. I doubt you would grab that envelope, run over to your neighbor's house, knock on the door and go, "Listen, I got to tell you what I got. This is amazing. You're not gonna believe it. Look at what I got in the mail today." And then you reach in and you pull out the check and you stick in your pocket and go, "Look at this envelope. Have you ever seen an envelope like this? I've never seen a stamp like this either. Look, it must be new" And you start talking all about that, and they're like, "Well, what did you get in it?" "Well, I got this check, but look at this envelope." You'd never do that. Right? Okay, well what I want to propose to you this morning is that as absurd as that sounds, I think we behave that way all the time in the church and that I as a pastor am equally as guilty as anyone

In fact, I've gone into hyper overdrive telling people how lovely the envelope is sometimes and I'm confessing that we need to get over that and we need to stop doing that for God's sake and for the world's sake literally. I'm raising this today because I ran into that kind of nonsense in studying this passage. It made me really slow down and think about where we ought to be focused on as believers and where churches ought to be focused. We get distracted way, way too easily. Here's what I mean by that...

I'll start with talking about the texts and then I'm going to talk about how I think we do that as church. Then we're going to do what we ought to be doing to wrap the sermon up.

I've been preaching 25 years and I follow the lectionary. So this passage rolls around every three years and I don't like preaching it. It's not actually the text that I don't like. It's when I go and I try to do some research and study on it that I get really frustrated. Here's why. I challenge you to go look at some commentators are some sermons on this and I think what you'll find in the vast majority of them is that they spend all this time talking about the interaction between Jesus and the syrophenician woman. They hyper-focus on how it sounds like he was calling her a dog, you know, and they'll go back and forth and why did he say this and why did they do that?

I get that it is remarkable that Jesus was having this interaction. First off with a woman. He was a rabbi and that was kind of, you know, really off limits to just be sitting around chit chatting with some woman. And then on top of it she was a Greek woman. She was a syrophenician woman. She wasn't Jewish. She was a gentile, she would've been considered unclean just by being a gentile and that marks this contact doubly bad. Now he's talking with not just a woman but a Greek woman. And so yes, that's remarkable and it should grab our attention and I imagine within that there is an unspoken message, if you will, that the gospel is even for the gentiles. That God's grace, God's goodness is not just for the Jewish people, but that we were starting to see Jesus reflecting in his ministry, stepping out and ministering to other sheep. That's all important, but you know, what amazes me is how many commentators or sermons spend any time talking about the fact that Jesus just healed a demon possessed girl.

You know, that's the lead of the story. The other stuff is the envelope. The other stuff is the packaging and they don't take time out to talk about the power of Christ to be able to heal and mend lives. They don't take time out to go, "Man, look at this, Jesus, without even getting up from his chair, going

nowhere. Not even going to the girl, not even there, Jesus in a word because of this woman's faith, is able to release this girl from the bondage of this demon that was in her life. He completely transformed the life of this little girl in this family."

What amazing and astounding power God has, and that's where we need to be focused. Not that those other things aren't important, but at the end of the day, if we fail to tell people, "Jesus heals people", we kind of miss out. You know, we've lost the lead.

In journalism, there's a phrase "burying the lead." That's when you spend all this time talking about stuff around the story, but the real nugget of the story, you put it so far down in the in the article that it gets lost. I heard a journalism professor talking about this and he was teaching his students about writing good headlines. He said, "Okay, I've got a story for you and I want everyone to write a headline for it. That's your assignment", and he said, "Next Monday, our president is being recognized with an award nationally for blah blah blah and there will be no school on Monday", and then he said, "Go home and write headlines." So they all turned in their headlines and he's pulling them out and they've got, you know, "President receives awards", "So and so awards president with such and such", and they write all these headlines mainly focused around the award.

The professor reviewed the headlines and told them, "None of you, none of you got it right. You all failed. None of you got it right, because you failed to think about your audience. The news is "No school Monday" because that's what your audience is concerned about.

Let's translate that to the church. When someone walks through the doors of the church, they want to be spiritually fed. When someone walks through the church, they're here because they want to encounter the living God. They want to find a piece that's missing from their lives or they have gifts and they want to serve with their gifts, but they're here because of God.

We forget that and we start getting so hyperfocused on the church and selling the church, and how great our church is and how friendly our church is. Well, we can be all those things, but if God's not at the heart of it, then we might as well be like the bar Cheers where everybody goes and knows your name. But, that's not why people are here, are they?

Do you want to have a friendly church? Of course you want to have a friendly church. Do we want to have a nice facility that draws you into the presence? God, absolutely. We want to have those things, but God better be in the middle of all that packaging or we're just completely missing the boat. And so I said, I want to end on doing what we ought to do. And that is, I don't want to just sit here and give you a diatribe about how the church is missing the boat. I want to remind you that God heals people. I've seen it again and again and again. I've watched broken lives, patched back together by God in amazing ways.

When we were in Hot springs, I got the privilege of helping start and run a recovery ministry, and it was not only for people whose lives were wracked with the pain of addiction, but our lingo, our verbiage was anyone with hurts, habits and hang-ups that's making your life unmanageable.

So we had people who had anger issues. We had people with depression. We had people who were going through great grief. We had people assaulted on many mental, emotional, spiritual fronts in their lives who were coming there. And I watched God take and redeem lives again and again through that ministry. I've seen God heal.

But I know that Christ heals not just on the pages of text from 2000 years ago and not just in recovery ministry, but I know God heals in people's lives because I've experienced it in a couple of very, very profound ways. Over the course of my own life, a part of my story that I haven't told a lot of people is that about five years ago, I was serving in a church. Susan and I were Co-pastoring and somebody came in and wanted to talk with us. I went down to her office to meet with her and a chair of a committee. To make a long story short, he had some completely unrealistic expectation that we had failed to meet. He was hurt and angry and threatening to no longer be the chair of the committee.

I'd been down this road before. I don't know how many times. It's part of ministry. I get it. I get it. It's part of ministry that I'm going to have to deal with those situations at times. Sometimes it's completely valid and I have blown it and I have messed up. So, I always listened.

This was one of those times where it was in my mind and heart kind of needless drama that was distracting us from really good ministry and sucking away energy and time and for me it was a proverbial last straw. You know, that straw that breaks the camel's back. I had just been through so much what I call, Administrivia and drama. I was worn out. I was burned out.

I confided with a colleague. I said, "Bruce, I'm at point where I feel like I could do anything other than pulpit ministry and actually get more ministry done. I could go get a job at Walmart, checking people out and do that for 40 hours a week. And then the other 20 (because I was busting my neck, you know, 60, 70 hours thrown into the church) If I went home and just volunteered doing almost anything, I'd get more ministry done than I get done in the 60, 70 hours I'm doing right now. I was fed up with it. I got out of that meeting, I walked down the hall, I went in my office, I closed the door, I pulled out my laptop, I opened it up. And started writing a resignation letter.

I dated it June 20th, 2015, which would be two years down the road. That Day would be my 50th birthday and I decided by the time I hit my 50th birthday, I will be out of pulpit ministry. I will be done with this. I'll be doing something else. And I sat there and I wrote a resignation letter and said, I've loved being here, da Da da Da da, you know. And I am now serving at blah blah blah. I'm going to continue my ministry through the practical disciple and working with a friend of mine, Allison Lewis at the seven minute life. And my wife is now doing.... And I didn't know what she'd be doing... So I put in blanks. and

I printed the letter out and I put it in an envelope. I decided that I didn't have to leave on my 50th birthday, but within the Year of my 50th year of existence, I would be out of pulpit ministry. I would move onto something else. Now. I think God's got a really kind of crazy sense of humor. In the middle of all this, I'm reading one day, my Bible, and I think it was in numbers. It's either numbers or levticus. I always want to mix stuff up in those. Um, I'm reading along and I find where God said Temple priests at the age of 50 should retire from doing their temple duties and only instruct younger priest.

So, I came to my life and I'm like, "Look, it's here in the word of God. Who am I to argue with the Lord? be. It's right here. I need to quit at 50." And, I didn't resign on my 50th birthday, but I did about 6<sup>th</sup> months in to my 50<sup>th</sup> year. By February I was gone and I had stepped out of pulpit ministry that I'd known for 20 some years. I still want it to be of service to the church.

There was a little church about our size, 25 to 30 people on a Sunday morning. It was an hour and 20 minutes away. Trinity Presbyterian Church of Boosier City. They needed somebody to preach. I needed extra income because I had left my job. It seemed like a wonderful win-win blessing. And so I started

preaching for them. All I had to do was every Sunday come and preach. That's all I was doing. I moderated session once a month and we didn't even meet in the summer. So I didn't do that even every month. But I just came and preached and we had no programs, literally none. We did not have dynamic pastoral leadership because literally I was just showing up to preach.

The last fall I went through some really serious heart issues. I got to a point where it was everything I could do just to come in and preach and I didn't know what in the world was wrong with me. At first I couldn't think clearly because I wasn't getting enough blood flow. I remember one Sunday was so muddle headed I came over, I got out the little lighter, I clicked the lighter over and I started to go light the microphone on the lectern instead of the candles on the communion. Wait a minute, that's not right. That was our profound dynamic leadership. Okay. Me Up there lighting the mic on fire.

But I watched as God moved in this little body of folks and I saw 25 and 30 start becoming very regularly, 30 to 35 and then 35 became 40 and then 40 became 45 as a very baseline norm to have. I can remember the organist coming up to me one Sunday and he said, "You know, we've been getting almost 40 people now. That's pretty cool." Well then I remember hitting a point where if we didn't have at least 40 to 45, I was like, "Where is everyone? What happened? Did I not get a memo?"

I watched God move in that place and that body grew from 25 to 30 to 45 regularly. There were no programs. But I think what we were doing and what we're doing well is every Sunday we were keeping the main thing, the main thing. We were honoring God and we were honoring God joyfully. And there was so little drama going on because we were keeping the main thing, the main thing.

When I left that congregation I likened my experience of those two years to the experience of the women who touched Jesus robe and was healed. When I left, that was the Sunday that the text was the story of the woman who came up and touched Jesus' robe and she was healed. And to me it was like every Sunday I was coming down and I was getting to touch Jesus' robe just a little bit and God slowly began to heal me from the pain and the wounds and the disappointments and the anger that I carried toward the church.

Now don't get me wrong. Where I had been before, where I got so burned out was actually a place where I saw amazing things happen. I look back and there's a legacy of some really good ministry that happened while we were there. There's no doubt about that, but I got to a point where I told someone I felt like I was playing a ministry slot machine. What do I mean by that? It was as if I was going in every day and I was just feeding it and feeding it and feeding it, and I would get a payoff just enough to keep me one wanting to play. I was thinking, there's going to be a big pay off someday. But in the end, you know what happens with nine tenths of those slot machines -- the house wins and you walk away, looking at empty pockets wondering what happened here? I felt like that's what was going on in my life and ministry.

Yet, God through the little body of folks in Bossier City healed me. and I am standing here today able to look at you guys and preach and find words because God still heals people today. He still heals people today and it doesn't matter if you're in the church or out of the church, whether he will reach out and touch your life if you need it. The syrophoenician, she was one of the people who shouldn't have been within the framework of blessing, if you will, but she had faith and God said, "I'll heal you. You've got faith. Your daughter's going to be healed."

God may have you do weird things or do strange things that you don't understand. You know the second story in the reading today, we've got this whole thing about spit and Jesus touching his tongue and mud and all this stuff. It's just kind of weird, if we are honest with ourselves., I don't get why Jesus had to do all that stuff.

I'll tell you to be honest, when I got called to trinity in Boosier City, I didn't know what in the world God was doing. I felt like I had mud and spit all over me. It was what I felt like as I was driving down an hour and 20 minutes every week, but two years later I have a healed soul and now I get to walk in here. I don't have to. I don't wake up going, "Oh, I've got to preach tomorrow." I wake up going, "I get to preach" and I feel privileged and honored to be here because God heals still today.

So, I don't know what you or someone in your life may have going on, but go from this place today with a lot of hope in your heart because God still heals and it may not be you here today. You may have walked in with something today you've got to be freed of and God may call or ask you to do weird things, to kind of see that go out of your life and for you to let go of that and to be healed.

Or, it may not be you. You may be like the syrophoenician woman. It may be a family member or a friend who your heart is breaking for that you desperately want to do something for. Just cry out to Jesus and be patient. That syrophoenician woman was patient. She asked several times. It wasn't a one shot deal. Be patient. God still heals. Praise God that God does. Amen.

Let us pray together as a family. Holy God, we can get in places where it seems hopeless. I imagine the syrophoenician woman, she thought that unless Jesus did something, nothing was going to happen. Who knows what she had done and who knows how long her daughter was afflicted and and yet she came to you and she put her cause before you and even to the point of basically begging and out of faith her daughter was made well.

God, we have broken things in our own lives or in lives of people that were deeply concerned about that we're passionately concerned about, and we take a moment right now to bring those to your feet, if you will, to come before you and know that you are an exalted king on a throne who has power over heaven and earth and over the spiritual and the physical and that you still have the power to heal. It's not something trapped on pages of a book, 2000 years old.

You are a living God and you have power and you call to us to come to you. Your word tells us, "Cast your anxieties on me. I care for you." and we do that right now. We lift up to you the anxiety of our heart that we may have brought, whatever that may be, whether it's mental, emotional, physical, spiritual healing that we need.

We lift up to you the people in our lives that are struggling. Maybe they are trapped with addiction or maybe they're trapped in despair, depression. Maybe they're going through something physical like they have lost their job and they have no idea how in the world they're going to make ends. God, we acknowledge this morning and we bend our knee...We bow our heads..We acknowledge that you are greater than any circumstance that we're facing or that one of these friends or family members are facing and we call on you and we trust in you to transform those situations God.

We listened in the deepest part of our being for any way you might be calling us to be a part of that healing. In both our stories today, one the man was brought by some people there and the other, a

woman was interceding on behalf of someone. There were other people involved who were the critical link between those people's brokenness and you, and if we can be that critical link God, either individually or as a church, may it be so. Just open our eyes to what that is so that we can honor you.

Lastly, God, we come before you with words. These are old familiar words many of us just memorize them through rote by saying them again and again, but we don't ever want to come to you in prayer, disingenuously or halfheartedly. So with great intent, we pray the words that your son, Jesus taught the disciples. Pray saying...