

How Many Signs Do You Need? 4-10-05

Matthew 16:1-4 (NIV)

¹ The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' ³ and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away.

Our last study in Matthew was the feeding of the 4000 on the Southeast coast of the Galilee. Jesus and His disciples sailed from there to Magadan. It has never been determined where that city was, but we know from the passage that followed that it was in the Jewish territories. They had been in Gentile territories since the time Jesus told the religious leaders that they were spiritually blind. (Matthew 15:14)

It did not take long for those religious leaders to find and attack Jesus again. The interesting thing about this passage is that it sounds like the two groups have teamed up.

¹ The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

The Pharisees were the ultra conservative religious leaders. Their strict way of life always limited their number. At no time were there ever more than around 6000 of them. They began as a way of life about 200 years earlier when Antiochus Epiphanes tried to assimilate the Jews by encouraging them to accept Greek ways. The religious leaders responded by trying to strictly keep every detail of the Law. Eventually they had 50 volumes of writings on keeping the Law, which they valued as highly as the Law itself. (Matthew 15:9) We might think of them as the ultra religious right today. I will not incriminate any particular denomination.

Juxtaposed to the Pharisees were the Sadducees. They were the secularists of their day. They only accepted part of Scripture as being divinely inspired. They encouraged the acceptance of Greek culture. They refused to believe in any afterlife, in the miraculous, in angels or spirits. (Matthew 22:23 | Acts 23:8) That is why they were sad, you see (Sadducee).

The Pharisees hated Jesus because He challenged the value of their writings. His teachings undermined their pride in performance and elitism. (Matthew 23:23-25) From their perspective, Jesus was undermining the Law. What they were unable to see is that He was fulfilling the Law. (Matthew 5:17) Why could they not see that? Being such students of the Law, if anyone was to discern that Jesus was the Messiah, you would think it would have been these men. If they had seen it, they would have changed their group name to Gladisees. However, their study of the Law was intellectual and performance driven, not a desire to see their own faults and need for change. (Matthew 23:28)

Commented [notes1]: ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Matthew 15:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." Matthew 15:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ²³ That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. Matthew 22:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ⁸ (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) Acts 23:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: ²³ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. ²⁵ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Matthew 23:23-25 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Matthew 5:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Matthew 23:28 (NIV)

The Sadducees were upset with Jesus because He was turning the people's hearts to God, which undermined their efforts to secularize the nation. They maintained power by being the party Rome could count on to keep the people from being worked into a militaristic fervor over a Messianic claim. That is why they were appointed by Rome to control the Temple. Jesus threatened everything that they stood for.

In this passage for today, these two opposing forces joined to fight a mutual threat. It is amazing how enemies can abandon their opposing ideologies to fight a mutual enemy. The Pharisees did not believe Jesus could deliver a sign from heaven. One of the superstitions of the day was that demons could perform earthly miracles, but that only God could give a sign from heaven. The Sadducees did not even think a sign from heaven was possible. Because both groups' wealth, pride, power and position were threatened by Jesus, they set aside their differences to test Him.

It is not a good idea to try to test God. The Children of Israel tested God during their wilderness wanderings. (Psalms 78:18) They asked God to give them meat. He did. They ate until they died from it. (Numbers 11:20) You see, testing God implies that we have some kind of right to make a demand on God, as if God has to prove Himself to His creation on our terms. It is one thing to make a request of God out of a humble heart, and another thing altogether to demand that God do as you desire. "If you are God, then do so and so." Just think how that must sound to our Creator.

It is not that Jesus did not want them to know and believe. That was His desire. In fact, He had given dozens or even hundreds of signs. Isaiah prophesied that the virgin birth was a sign. (Isaiah 7:14) John the Baptist did not miss the sign he needed, the Spirit of God descending like a dove on Jesus. (John 1:33) Simeon and Anna did not miss their sign, whatever it was. They were waiting in the Temple for the baby Messiah and were rewarded with seeing Him before they died. (See Luke 2:25-38) It was Simeon who said that Jesus, Himself, was a sign, a sign that would be opposed. (Luke 2:34) His virgin birth, the timing of the birth, His wisdom even in childhood, His anointing by the Spirit, His power to heal, the wisdom by which He spoke, even His breaking of the boundaries established by the Scribes, (See *Jesus Concealed in the Old Testament pg 25*) everything about His perfect life was a sign to anyone who wanted to see, in that day and today.

Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees said to Jesus, "We know that you are from God." (John 3:2) Many of them knew and yet rejected. Just as Jesus said in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, "They have Moses and the prophets. If they will not hear them, neither would they believe though one rose from the dead." (Luke 16:29) Jesus' words were always rich with meaning. Even when He did rise, these hardhearted leaders paid the Roman guards to lie and say the body was stolen. (Matthew 28:13)

How can we get that hardhearted? How can we get to the place where the truth does not matter even when it stares you in the face? Why do some see the daily signs all

Commented [notes8]: ¹⁸ They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved. Psalms 78:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ²⁰ but for a whole month--until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it--because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have waited before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" Numbers 11:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' John 1:33 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, Luke 2:34 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." John 3:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: ²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' Luke 16:29 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" Matthew 28:13 (NIV)

around us and believe, while others see the most amazing signs and yet refuse to believe? Surely, the Spirit of God draws everyone. How many signs do we need?

We all face those times when the reality of the spiritual realm crashes through our walls, those barriers we create to maintain our love for the world and our pursuit of pleasure. The Holy Spirit will sometimes get through the noise we create to keep ourselves from hearing. When we cannot avoid Him, we must make a choice. We either turn up the volume and go on our way, or we turn it down and listen. If, by the grace of God we listen and consider, we begin to see the signs. However, if we refuse to hear, the signs are non-existent, though they surround us. "Their eyes reject the evidence because their hearts reject the One who gives it." MacArthur Don't let that be true of you! We ignore the Spirit to our own detriment.

There is some doubt as to whether or not Jesus gave this illustration of the sky. The text is not in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts.

² He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,'¹³ and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

It became a mariners' poem, "Red sky at night, sailors' delight; Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning." Jesus was repeating His previous accusation in an illustrative way. These leaders were blind to spiritual truth. They could tell the weather related signs, but they could not see the spiritual signs. (Luke 12:54-56)

How is it that they could read Daniel and not see that He predicted the Messiah would come in their day? (Daniel 9:25-26a) How could they read Isaiah and not see the Messiah would perform the very miracles Jesus performed? (Isaiah 35:4-6) Even the Gentile world was talking about a new Jewish king rising up in their day! Why could everyone see but the ones who should have seen? What was the matter with them? How could their pride so blind them?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves how could our pride so blind us today? Do we have any less signs than these men did? I think we have many more. We can read of their mistake in rejecting their Messiah. Is that not a sign to us? We can read the details of fulfilled prophecy, and you do not have to be a rich man to have the printed details in your hand. We have the archeological evidence. We have the story of the early church and its spread around the world. We have the sign of a million transformed lives. We have prophecies fulfilled in our day. Yet many refuse to believe, and stubbornly cling like these religious leaders to their own ways.

Do we know the signs of our time? When has a nation ever been reborn after 2000 years? (Isaiah 66:8) David predicted the day would come, and we have seen it. (Psalms 102:16) Jesus predicted these last days would see violent earthquakes. (Matthew 24:7) Have you noticed they are becoming more frequent? He predicted there would be wars and rumors of wars. (Matthew 24:6) There have been more wars with more people killed in the last hundred years than ever in history. Jesus predicted famines. Though we have abundance in some countries, people are starving. He predicted believers would suffer and be killed. (John 16:2) There are

Commented [notes16]: ⁵⁴ He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Luke 12:54-56 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: ²⁵ "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. ²⁶ After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. Daniel 9:25-26 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: ⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. Isaiah 35:4-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: ⁸ Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children. Isaiah 66:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: ¹⁶ For the LORD will rebuild Zion and appear in his glory. Psalms 102:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. Matthew 24:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Matthew 24:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: ² They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. John 16:2 (NIV)

more martyrs in our time than ever before. The Apostle Peter predicted in the last days people would scoff at the second coming of Christ and many would fall away. (2 Peter 3:4) They predicted an upsurge in lawlessness before the coming of the Lawless One. (2 Peter 3:17, 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8) We are seeing all these things come to pass but do we really see the signs of the times? Or do we, like these religious leaders prefer darkness to light?

There are rare cases when a person's upbringing or circumstances so limit them that they are in need of a special sign to break through all the indoctrination they have received. Saul was one such man. Jesus appeared to him in His glorified condition, blinding him, and giving him a new direction in life. (Acts 9:3-6) He became Paul the Apostle. Paul said that God had mercy on him because he had acted in ignorance. (1 Timothy 1:13)

Jonah seemed to be such a man. He was a reluctant prophet. Interesting that God should choose what happened to him as a sign of resurrection. He personally needed a sign. God prepared a great fish to swallow him and head him back in the right direction, to give God's message to a barbaric group of Gentiles. What a sign!

The magi were not of Israel, yet God spoke to them and gave them the sign of a star in the heavens. (Matthew 2:2) It led them to the baby Jesus. So you see, if you are just that isolated or indoctrinated that you need a special sign, God can give it to you. If you do not get one, it is because you do not need it. You have enough comprehensible signs all around you. Do not be like those stubborn leaders who would not believe the signs because they did not want to believe the One that sent the signs. (Acts 19:8-9)

⁴ *A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.* Jesus then left them and went away. I do not think I understood this before. The wicked are looking for a sign because they refuse to see the ones all around them. When they get the sign of Jonah, buried and raised to life, they will not believe it either. This would make a great Easter passage. The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead was the chief proof and message of the Apostles. All the way through the book of Acts you see them preaching resurrection. (See Acts 1:22; 2:24, 31-32; 3:15, 26; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:30 etc.) When Paul got to Athens, the chief reason they rejected him was the message of the resurrection of Jesus. (Acts 17:32-33) Just as in the Jewish culture and our culture, the Greeks had those who believed that the miraculous never invades our world. Nevertheless, it does! Moreover, it is often in the form of transformed lives.

One of the members of this congregation is a miraculous sign to her neighbor. Her neighbor's health is failing and she goes over each day to check on her and help her. This neighbor does not know the Lord. She cannot figure out why she is doing it. The woman even asked her if she is hoping that she is going to will the house to her. She is trying to figure it out, but just can't. It does not make sense. Why would someone give of himself or herself without receiving something in return? The natural mind cannot understand the things of the Spirit. Loving others does not make sense to the natural mind. We are surrounded by signs, if we are willing to

Commented [notes24]: ⁴ They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."
2 Peter 3:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: ¹⁷ Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.
2 Peter 3:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: ⁷ For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.
2 Thessalonians 2:7-8 (NIV)

Commented [notes27]: ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."
Acts 9:3-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes28]: ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.
1 Timothy 1:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes29]: ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."
Matthew 2:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes30]: ⁸ Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.
Acts 19:8-9 (NIV)

Commented [notes31]: ³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. ³³ So Paul departed from among them.
Acts 17:32-33 (KJV)

see them. Everyone who is attending the service this Sunday has seen the signs of the beauty of creation that is all around us. (Romans 1:20)

There is only one problem that keeps people from seeing the signs. Jesus clearly explained it in John 3:19-20. ¹⁹ *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.* ²⁰ *Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.* John 3:19-20 (NIV) Do you see the signs? Do you love the light? Are you open to seeing the signs? Are you willing to examine them with an open mind? How many signs do you need?

When the Apostle Paul was chased out of Thessalonica, he went to Berea. When he told the people of how Jesus was a fulfillment of the writings of the Old Testament prophets, instead of getting upset and throwing him out of their town too, they searched the writings of the prophets to see if it was true. They were open to examining the signs in God's word, and they became believers. (Acts 17:11)

At the end of our passage today, there is a Greek word that conveys more than is translated in our texts. Our passage just says Jesus left them. The implication is that He left them behind. He was done with them. We will not see any kind of real dialogue until His last week. This short stop into Jewish territory is only on His way to a Roman city. These leaders now had the additional sign of another miraculous feeding of thousands and yet they opposed Him. They would never believe. They had made their choice in spite of the evidence.

Do you see the signs in your life? Sometimes the Holy Spirit knocks again after a long time of letting us alone. He is giving us another chance to turn down the volume and hear Him. He is asking again if we are willing to receive all the signs we have been given. However, God said His Spirit would not always strive with man. (Genesis 6:3) Eventually, if we will not choose, if we love darkness rather than light, He will leave us behind. That is not because it is His choice but ours. (2 Peter 3:9) Open your heart to the signs all around you and believe!

Do not say, "I am so (fair I see) all the rules to be good", or I am (sad you see) because I have no hope in death. Be a (glad I see) all Jesus did to give me eternal life. Do we have any Gladicees in the congregation?

²² *Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,* ²³ *but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,* ²⁴ *but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 (NIV)

Commented [notes32]: ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
Romans 1:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes33]: ¹¹ Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.
Acts 17:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes34]: ³ And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.
Genesis 6:3 (KJV)

Commented [notes35]: ⁹ The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.
2 Peter 3:9 (KJV)