

Reading the Signs

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- [0 : 0 0] If you would keep your Bibles open to Matthew chapter 16 on page 16 of your New Testament sections. Looking at this extraordinary little passage where some Sadducees and Pharisees come and test Jesus in asking for a sign from heaven.
- And he reposts with this riddle which leaves them scratching their heads. It is very nice to be back from holiday. We had a wonderful time. We were up in the northeast of Germany where my in-laws have some holiday property.
- And it was in the old communist part of Germany which they couldn't access the property for the whole time of the GDR, the communist East Germany. And it's a great pleasure for us to be able to go there now on our holidays again.
- And we went to the local church there which was lovely, the Lutheran Church. And the minister who was there has been there for many years and was trained under the old communist system. And apparently ministers under the old communist system were trained never to say anything earth-shattering, threatening, or challenging whatsoever.
- But to keep it very straight. And so we had a very straight sermon when we were there. Well, that's quite different from what Jesus is doing in this passage. What he's been doing in the chapters you've been looking at for the last few weeks.
- [1 : 1 6] He's been very challenging. Quite offensive to his hearers. And today, once again, Jesus challenges his tormentors.
- And there are people coming along with a very clear sense of what they thought God should be doing. And they knew their scriptures. And they wanted him to act in a certain way. And he basically says to them, you don't know.
- You just don't know what's going on. Well, let's look at the passage. It's a very interesting section. They demand a sign. And then Jesus responds to them.
- First, I want to look at the sign. I want to think a bit about what these people are doing. And then finally, let's unwrap the mystery of this riddle, Jonah's sign at the end. First, the sign.
- They come and they say, Jesus, give us a sign from heaven. Basically, they're pretending. What they're doing is pretending. It's that if Jesus came and performed a miracle, a special sign for them, that they would then believe that he's the Messiah, they're going to follow him.
- [2 : 1 7] Of course, they had no intention of doing any such thing. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two competing sects within first century Judaism. They are religious scholars, but with different emphases.
- The Pharisees accepted the written scriptures, the Old Testament, but added a mass of oral tradition alongside that. The Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament and interpreted them very literally.
- They did not believe in any kind of spiritual realm or angels or demons. So you see, these two groups, they're utterly opposed to each other, but they're united in their hatred of Jesus.

But they come to him with very clear understandings of how the scriptures operated and a very clear picture of who God is and what he would do. And so here they are.

They come to Jesus. They pursue him. He's gone out in this passage. He's in a Gentile area. They go after him and they say, come on, Jesus, give us a sign. Prove yourself.

[3 : 22] Show us the goods. You see, it's the need for a sign. What they want God to do is to come and prove himself to them. They wanted God to show up and do something.

But the thing is, he'd already been doing so. Jesus had been healing people. He had performed significant miracles, including the feeding of both the 5,000 and the 4,000.

He had been gathering people around him and he had been teaching. And you see, what they are doing is coming into conflict with Jesus and what he was doing.

They had a picture of how God should operate. They knew their scriptures. And they didn't like the way this Messiah was working out. They were so wrapped up in themselves that they could not see what Jesus was doing.

They put themselves at the center. And if Jesus was God's Messiah and they dearly hoped he wasn't, they wanted him to come and prove himself to them their way, on their terms.

[4 : 29] They wanted their kind of Messiah. They put themselves at the center. They knew their scriptures, but their eyes were closed. If their eyes had been open, they would have seen what God was doing and they would have seen that Jesus was God's Messiah.

But you see, it's that human sinful desire to force God to come here and now, to meet my needs here and now, to please me, to prove himself to me.

It's demanding God to come and prove himself. And it's not just a sign they want. They don't want just any sign. They want a sign from heaven, not just any run-of-the-mill sign, not just some healing.

Jesus had been going around healing people. And that upset them greatly. In Matthew chapter 12, they got very upset when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. It's not what they want.

What they want is a voice from heaven. They want a lightning strike. They want thunder and cloud. Because that's what God does. That's how they understood God would operate.

[5 : 37] In Exodus chapter 19, God revealed himself to the people of Israel on the Mount Sinai. And it says, There was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain, a trumpet blast.

Everyone trembled. When the Lord descended on Mount Sinai, there was smoke because the Lord descended in fire. See, that's what they want. That's going to be enough for them.

And Jesus criticizes them for not being able to read the signs of the times. You see, they knew their scriptures, and they probably thought they were very close to God.

But they weren't able to see Jesus. They were not able to see the very plain evidence right before their eyes that Jesus is the Messiah.

It just goes to show you that knowledge of the scriptures alone is not faith in Jesus Christ. And that is what happens when you put yourself at the center of your faith.

[6 : 37] I think a lot of people struggle with their faith because what they want God to do is to come on down and prove himself. They want God to show up. But in fact, he's already done so.

And the spirit of our age, spiritually, is a very self-centered one. We want God to show up and bless us. We want God to accept us the way we are. We want God to come and meet our needs here and now.

We want God to prove himself to us now. We put ourselves at the center of our faith. And then we expect God to fulfill our needs our way.

Look within yourself and ask yourself, what's the center of your faith? I know in my own life, I realized that for much of my Christian journey, I chased after experiences of God.

I chased after personal fulfillment, good feelings, affirmation. I wanted God to do things for me. I wanted God to meet my needs. And I went to church seeking feelings of closeness to God, seeking experiences of worship, seeking signs.

[7 : 51] I wanted God to give me a sign. And you can do that. You can do that in all sorts of ways. You can go from worship experience to worship experience.

You can have wonderful experiences of worship during which you feel close to God. And I would do that, you know. But what I noticed over the years was that there were still huge areas of sin in my life that remained untouched.

I would wonder why I could go and have a wonderful worship experience twice on Sunday and find myself struggling with sin on Monday. Because what I really should have done was added to that the discipline of sitting myself down with my scripture, with my eyes open to see who God is, to see what the scriptures say about Jesus.

The focus being not on myself, but on Jesus Christ. Or you can go down the spirituality route. You can go in retreats and read books, get a spiritual director.

They're available at Christchurch Cathedral for \$75 an hour. You can think about that one. And you can turn within yourself and analyze yourself spiritually and analyze your walk.

[9 : 14] But when you do those kind of things, what you can end up doing, if you are the center, you can end up skating around the perimeter of the Christian faith. But if you remain the center, if you remain the center of your faith and your experience, then what you're asking God to do is come and meet your needs.

Now, there's nothing wrong with going on retreats and reading wonderful books and even getting a spiritual director. That helps you. But what's the direction? Is this about you? Or is it about Christ?

Because if you're looking within yourself, you're not going to be able to see what God has done and is doing. When I became a Christian back in the 80s, people talked a lot about Bible dipping.

Does anyone remember Bible dipping? I remember we were taught about Bible dipping. That was when, if you had a problem, you would pray and then open your Bible somewhere and just read. And maybe God would give you a word.

So let's say you had a problem with a relationship. You pray. You open up the Bible. And he went out and hanged himself. What are you going to do with that?

[10 : 27] What do you see what a ridiculous thing that is to do? What a ridiculous kind of activity that is. It puts me at the center of the Bible. It's saying, God, give me a sign. And it treats the Bible as a personal handbook intended to address my needs here and now.

When in fact, the Bible is all about pointing to Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers to the human race. You see, what those Pharisees and Sadducees didn't do with all their knowledge of the scriptures is push through that knowledge to get to Jesus Christ.

That's why they're an adulterous and sinful generation, because any sign from heaven wasn't going to lead them to true faith in Jesus Christ. They should have opened their eyes, opened their scriptures and their eyes and see what Jesus was doing.

It's the same with us today. You see, we have the Bible. The Holy Spirit refreshes us and speaks to us through the word of God. The Old Testament points to Jesus. The Gospels proclaim him.

The Epistles expand our understanding of him. God has given us his word so that we might learn about Jesus, know who he is, what his expectations are, how he saves.

[11 : 48] And you see, when you have that kind of foundation for your faith, then you can develop the most wonderful, intimate, fulfilling relationship with God.

But it will be a relationship that will see you through the tough times as well as the good times. Let's say we just had a wonderful holiday. I don't know about you, but I'm one of those people who worries when I go on holiday.

Do you ever do that? You go on holiday and really start worrying then? Do you know I worry that we left the oven on? And I worry that we might lose our passports on the way or that my daughter might eat hers?

You know, I worry that we're going to lose the tickets or maybe we booked the train on the wrong day and we're a day late and missed the flight. I worry that someone's going to break into my house and most of all, I worry that St. John's might not keep running while I'm away.

And you know, what I started doing on my holiday, these worries were very powerful and I started praying like mad, Lord, please just protect my house and protect our passports and bless St. John's and Lord, just help, please.

[12 : 51] And I kept praying like that. And that's not bad. But what I realized was that in doing that, I wasn't actually growing in the Lord. See, I was making myself and my worries the center of my prayer life.

And I was just going around in a circle, praying. It didn't really help my worries. So what I did was I turned back to the scriptures and started reading through the Psalms, discovered afresh, more about the nature of who God is and how he blesses his people.

And so by centering myself on the reality of who God is, it put my situation in a different perspective. See, I'm not the center of attention.

You don't grow by making yourself the center of your faith, the center of your spirituality. You grow by making Christ the center of your faith.

And by reading his word, you get the principles that come from the reality of God. And you just grow your relationship with him. Christ has to be the center.

[13 : 59] It's not give me a sign. It's Christ at the center. Well, now, I want to think a bit about what they're doing here. Why are they tempting Jesus in this way, demanding a sign from heaven?

You see, what they're doing is trying to trap Jesus. They're tempting him. They were tempting him in the same way that Satan did when Jesus was in the wilderness.

It's a temptation to become a wonder worker, a circus show. You know, Satan tempts Jesus by saying, turn those stones into bread or throw yourself down and God will lift you up.

It's to put on a big show. And so here are these Sadducees asking for a sign from heaven. They want thunder and lightning. They want a cloud.

But Jesus sets himself against that kind of thing. His message in the Gospels is very simple. It's repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

[14 : 59] Simple. His miracles and his teaching are evidence for the coming of that kingdom. His miracles were not intended to just draw attention.

They were intended to come and point the way to what God was doing. They point to the sovereign power of God, active in the human race through Jesus. And it's no different today.

When God acts amongst his people, you know, if someone is miraculously healed, it's the most wonderful thing. I've prayed for people and they've been healed. And when that happens, you just say, God, you're amazing.

Praise you. There's no question God continues to do miraculous things amongst his people. But if you choose to believe in Jesus because he has performed some big miracle or because you have had some wonderful experience, then the basis of your believing is not faith in Jesus Christ.

And there is no need for repentance. You don't need to change anything and you do not need to submit your life to Jesus. And you see, a spiritual diet that consists mainly of big spiritual experiences will not change your life.

[16 : 15] It will not effectively deal with the sin in your life. It will not make you clean inside. And that is why Jesus set his face against being this kind of wonder worker, against being a circus show.

He could have gone for the thunderbolt from heaven. He could have gathered a huge crowd of people that way. But that's not how the kingdom of God operates. That is not what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

The way to be a Christian is through repentance and submission to Jesus Christ. And the way that Christ walked led to death and resurrection. There's a language in the Christian world that talks about zapping people.

I always think it sounds like the electric chair. You get zapped when someone prays for you. You can get zapped when someone prays for you and it feels really great for a while. And people talk about the Holy Spirit just falling on some place and everybody getting changed overnight.

When I was working in Wales, we heard about that all the time. And there was always at some village down the road. I thought, what are we doing wrong? And you know, over the years as a Christian, I've gone to loads of wonderful Christian events.

[17 : 32] Big services, conferences, rallies, everything. And it is wonderful when huge crowds of people gather together to worship the Lord.

It's marvelous. I was in a cow field in rural Wales one time and there were 500 Welsh people in their tent all praising the Lord. And when 500 Welsh people praise, it's an awesome experience. But, you know, I think that in the Christian world that we make a mistake sometimes in that we don't go beyond the experience and we emphasize the experience.

By that I mean we have big music, enthusiastic singing, people getting very involved, big emphasis upon God showing up and doing things amongst his people. I want loads of these things and of course, there's nothing wrong with wanting to go and worship the Lord.

You can give yourself in worship. But we don't want to turn Jesus into a wonder worker. We don't want to emphasize the sign, the experience, the thunderbolt, but forget the discipline.

Because once again, we're putting ourselves at the center. And I think that's a tension we always have to be aware of as a church. We're very motivated by wanting to attract people. We want to bring people in. And maybe what we have to do to be more effective is loosen up our services a bit.

[18 : 51] That's what we've got to do here at St. John's. We've got to loosen it up. We've got to ramp up the worship a few notches. Then more people are going to come. Let's get rid of the pews. Let's start dancing in the aisles, folks.

We've got to have a worship band. Sorry about that, Terry. We've got to have a worship band. We've got to have volume. We've got to open up and let God work. We've got to expect God to show up.

And above all else, we must have PowerPoint presentation on the back of the wall. Because that is going to be what gets people to come in here and convince them of the reality of Jesus if they experience him here.

Right? Well, it might. And perhaps we should. You know, maybe we should plant another service in the gymnasium with a different idiom to attract a different kind of crowd.

Maybe so. But, you know, we must always check ourselves that we're not turning Jesus into a wonder worker. Because the idea here of our gathering here is not to direct the attention of Jesus upon ourselves.

[19 : 57] the idea of our gathering here is to direct our attention onto Jesus. And a diet of great experiences alone can certainly sweep people up.

But I do not think it leads them to repentance and true, mature faith in Jesus Christ. I did not see that in my own life. I could go to a wonderful worship experience but still remain deeply impure and sinful.

I would go to church twice on Sunday and see what I could get, what experience I could have. I'm not sure if I always went to worship and learn more about my Lord Jesus Christ.

Because, you see, your faith in Jesus Christ needs to touch and penetrate right to the center of your being. And that doesn't happen with lightning strikes.

What I have found in my own life is that it's the daily discipline of reading my Bible, of praying, of learning to control my mind, my tongue, and my body, and submitting to Jesus Christ.

[21 : 03] That was when I began to attend to sin in my life. And I find that's something I have to walk out every day of my life. Show us a sign from heaven. Jesus rejected that way.

He accepted the discipline of the cross. Well, finally, that takes us to this riddle he puts at the end. He says, I'm not going to give you any sign but the sign of Jonah. And he rather leaves them scratching their heads wondering what's going on.

Now, it's a very interesting riddle which Jesus lays before them. Jonah, of course, is Jonah in the belly of the whale for three days and nights. Now, Jonah, the book of Jonah is a very missionary book and it is the story of Jonah being taken out to the pagan city of Nineveh to preach to it so that the people might be saved.

Now, in the Matthew story here, we have Jesus out in a Gentile area. Now, of course, the sign of Jonah is Jesus' death and resurrection and his proclamation to the world.

You see, it's Jonah going out to the pagan city. It's Jesus going out to the Gentiles. And do you see that the center of Jesus' ministry, his Messiahship and his being doesn't reside in his miracles.

[22 : 22] It is his death and resurrection and his proclamation to the world. It is about him. And Jesus is claiming to be the central person in the history of the human race.

He is claiming to be the central person in the universe. It's all about Jesus. The center of our faith is Jesus. Christ is the center.

And the whole purpose of the salvation, of the resurrection, is to bring salvation to the human race. And so, what is going to bring the gospel forward is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And what is going to carry true religion forward here in Vancouver is the death and resurrection of Jesus. And what will purify sinful hearts?

The death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the resurrection that compels us to do ministry because we know that for every person we meet, the resurrection spells life.

[23 : 28] And that changes the center of everything. The resurrection shows we are not the center of who Jesus is. and my particular grid with which I approach the Bible is not the center.

Jesus is. And when we think about our mission here as a church, we do it not by wanting to give people great experiences, but by wanting to put Jesus at the center of everything we do.

And so, if you are looking for personal fulfillment or completion or certainty or stability in your life, you will not find it by focusing in upon yourself.

You will find it by centering your attention on Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ risen, ascended, and glorified. Christ.

Shepherd, son of a portion of God, salvation of learning and grace will notix the reserve of all glory Hyph traders take us of all glory and die you plan to dolo and what do you will not find it by as the metal or cotton or sam