

Sign of the times

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[0 : 00] So, Matthew chapter 16, beginning at verse 1. Now hear God's word. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to test him.

They asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, When it is evening, you say, it will be fair weather, for the sky is red.

And in the morning, it will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to accept the sign of Jonah. So he left them and departed.

When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

[1 : 13] And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, We brought no bread. But Jesus, aware of this, said, Are you of little faith?

Why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the 5,000 and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the 4,000 and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The signs of the times.

[2 : 27] I want you to think about that for a moment. To make it easy for us this evening, Jesus is not speaking about the future. In fact, the signs of the times is even a reference to the future.

It's a reference to here and now. Well, not here and now, but here and now in the days of Jesus.

You know, one of the conditions for reading Scripture is knowing how to read future passages.

And what I mean by that is that is it future from the point of view of the person speaking and still in our future? Or is it future from the point of view of the person speaking, but now in our past?

Yeah, and that, when you read the New Testament, you have to make that distinction every time you read a passage that speaks about the future. Is it future future? Or is it future past?

The signs of the times is the very present that Jesus is in. To put this another way, if you were to read the Bible from beginning to end the very first time of reading it, and you could remember everything that it said, just imagine for a moment that you could remember everything, you would still need to read it all over again.

[3 : 52] And you'd need it to read it all over again because it takes the New Testament to understand the Old Testament. But if you read it from beginning to end, you would not get to appreciate everything that is in the Old Testament because, as I said, it takes the New Testament to understand it.

So you read it through again, and then you begin to see that certain things in the Old Testament come to light because it is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ. That's very important to understand how God throughout history is moving everything forward.

So here we have Pharisees and Sadducees who want a sign, who want Jesus to do something additional to everything else that God has done. And what's the answer that Jesus gives to them?

He gives them this word, that no other sign will be given than a sign that has already been given. Jonah. In other words, I'll give you a new sign, but the new sign will be an old sign.

Go back and look at the sign of Jonah. Now here's the issue. And here's the issue, even for Christians today in their perhaps struggle to live the Christian life, their definite struggle in how to apply the Bible to daily living.

[5 : 12] You know, so many of us live the Christian life almost paying no reference to Scripture as the guide to Christian living. You know, it's easy to spot when a Christian is making it up as they go along.

You know, the Bible should regulate our life and our conduct. So the Sadducees here want something different.

The trouble is, is that if Jesus does give them another sign, what's the problem? Well, the problem is, if Jesus gives them another sign, how are they going to be able to interpret it if they cannot interpret the signs of the times?

You see, Jesus is very aware that it's not a new sign that they need, but what they need is a perception, an understanding, the ability to interpret all the signs that are present, all the signs that have already been given.

You know, Christians also get themselves into a whole lot of trouble. In that same way, we want signs, we want God to make it clear to us. You know, I'll do this today, God, if I walk out my front door and a yellow car passes by.

[6 : 18] You know, that's not even Christian. That kind of determination. It's brought into Christian thinking, it's brought into the Christian mind, but the trouble is, it's your asking for signs in addition to the very word of God that God has given you.

And what Jesus is saying here is that it's not another sign that you need. It's not the writing in the sky that you need. What you really need is to be able to understand what God has already given you.

And the Pharisees and the Sadducees here don't. That's the problem. They want something new. They want something different. They want something more because they don't understand what God has already given them.

You know, and that's the issue, I think, for almost modern day Christianity that we have, dare I say, even move beyond the Bible. Where we live our Christian life as though the Bible is a thing of the past and now we're trying to look for something.

Yeah, give us a sign, God. Give us a feeling in my stomach, whatever it may be. And the issue's not the sign. The issue is your ability to be able to understand all what God has given you in the first place.

[7 : 36] And here's the thing. It becomes a whole lot easier when you understand what God has given you and how to use it. You remember how I told you how to interpret the will of God perfectly?

Very easy. It's not complicated. Three things come into play as they do with temptation. Desire, ability, and opportunity. That's how you determine what the will of God is.

Do you have the desire to serve God in whatever capacity? Do you have the ability to serve God in whatever capacity? And do you have the opportunity? When those three things line up, that's God's way of directing life in such a way to show you what you're going to do next or what you ought to be doing.

Yeah, the desire's the issue there because if there's no desire, well, you have to go and look at something else in your spiritual life. Now, it is true that some people can finally get something if it's told to them in a different way.

We've all met people like that. You get one person that explains it and they explain it over and over again and then somebody else comes along and explains it in a different way and suddenly they get it. Sometimes that's true.

[8 : 51] It's also true, however, that some people can have the same thing explained to them in a hundred different ways. And still not get it. The Pharisees and the Sadducees seem to be in that kind of bracket.

That they've had sign after sign after sign after sign and they cannot interpret any single one of them. You know, and I've, you know, we see this today, you know, we have the Gideon blanket issue.

That even when we, when Christians ask for a sign, not that they should, when they ask for a sign and, you know, let's just say, for instance, the sign works out in their favor, then they ask for another one just to make sure that the first one's correct or they've interpreted it correctly.

It's a spiral of confusion. Rather, take your time and get to know what God has already given you and it will become very clear.

Now, why is this important? Well, it's important for this reason. It's one reason. God is moving towards a future and God is moving you towards a particular kind of future.

[9 : 59] It's often the case that when people want a personal vision of their own, I made this very clear in the original mission study so I don't want to go over old ground, but when somebody comes up with a personal vision, sometimes it could be nothing more than them wanting to write the future.

I want it this way and I want it that way. Rather than asking the question, well, how do I fit into the future that God's got planned? I mean, that's the issue.

Yeah, we've all got hopes and dreams that we'd like to see fulfilled, but the issue is really what's God's future and how do I fit into the future that God is writing or has already written and that I'm now living out?

Yeah, that's a much more important question for you to ask as a believer. You know, important so that you don't get left behind and I don't mean that in the book series way.

I mean that in a spiritual way. So here's a few examples of how God unfolds throughout history. I'll make them simple for you. Number one, 10 commandments.

[11 : 06] You know, one of the commandments is don't steal. I can remember reading that the other day thinking, why did God have to write that one? And not just that one, all of them. You know, it's telling you something about the world.

It's telling you something about people. If God has to write a command, do not steal, it must mean that that is a problem in the world and that God is addressing that problem by giving us a command, do not steal.

He's trying to shape human behavior. He's trying to shape the human consciousness and morality. He's trying to direct people who perhaps have the tendency and the temptation to steal to not steal. The law's there as a guide. It can't change the heart. But if you have to write a law that says do not steal and do not murder, it is because those things are happening.

You know, God writes this out. Another example would be an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Now this one's not more interesting, but the law develops.

[12 : 12] You know, God's law doesn't actually stay the same. You see, if you read it carefully in the Old Testament, you see that God makes one law on one occasion and then he has to develop that law because of certain things cropping up.

You see that in the life of Moses who basically has to organize the people around a set of laws. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth is the easiest one to understand. What does it mean?

Well, it means that God understands that the world has violent people in it. God understands that in this world someone could take your eye and your natural response sinfully is to take more than an eye.

That it is possible for someone living in this world to take a tooth in a fight through violence and through your sinfulness it is possible for you to take more than a tooth.

It's possible to take their life out of sheer anger. And so God writes this law to say don't go any further than what was done to you. An eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth.

[13 : 15] In other words don't retaliate beyond what was done to you. But then we get into the New Testament and the laws develop and we hear the Lord Jesus Christ saying you have heard it said an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth but I say to you do not resist the one who is evil but if anyone slaps you on the right cheek turn to him the other also.

In other words the Lord Jesus Christ is developing the law from what we could say is limited retaliation to now turning the other cheek. In other words it doesn't stay the same.

You're kingdom people and as kingdom people who follow me by faith and are saved you turn the other cheek. You see how the law develops and Jesus is saying you have heard it said but I say unto you.

He's not contradicting God he's not contradicting himself he's not contradicting a previous law rather it's developing it's moving forward into a future the future being a place where there is no violence and there is no retaliation.

This is an important principle to understand how the Bible unfolds. You know when God gave instructions regarding the tabernacle you'll remember that it was built it was beautiful and then it fell into well it just fell apart.

[14 : 42] Does God say go build another one? No. Rather he wants a temple to be built this time. In other words again you see this development of God in other words God doesn't change but he

doesn't keep things the same throughout history.

David wants to build the temple but he doesn't get to do it because he is a man with blood on his hands and Solomon gets to do it instead. But the point is this that you start with a tabernacle you then have a temple made with stone and now you have no temple at all made with stone other than the temple which is where God dwells now you Christians the church.

So all the way through the Bible if you read it carefully God is moving towards the future and the future leaves certain things about the past in the past the tabernacle the temple and now the temple is the church in which God dwells God dwells in you.

Now what reason do I have for pointing all this out? Well quite simply this they're all signs multiple sign upon sign upon sign upon sign teaching us one thing that God who doesn't change is moving history to a future and in that movement lots of things change God doesn't keep things the same ultimately and if God has done it in the past you can certainly expect him to do it in the future even in the church the things that are true just are real will always remain the same like the temple like the fact that God does dwell with his people that doesn't change but what changes is the tabernacle to the temple stone to the church that changes so God is moving us in a direction the Pharisees and the Sadducees maybe even like us today just don't see it they've seen that they're aware of their history they're aware of all the changes that's going on but that they are unable to perceive or understand or interpret that God is actually moving his people towards the future and the things around them changes the essential things remain the same but the things around them change so what do they do well the

Pharisees ask for a sign Jesus says no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah why because the issue is not the sign it's whether or not they have the ability to interpret what God has done in the past and what God is doing in the presence with Jesus Jesus says to them look you're able to tell whether or not it's going to be a good day or a bad day you're able to tell whether or not it's going to be a good evening or a bad evening but you're unable to tell what it means for me to be amongst you you know that's that's a damning I mean that's that's hard to take isn't it to hear from the to hear from Jesus Christ that you know you're able to understand what red sky at night means you're able to understand what red sky in the morning means but you're unable to understand what it means for a person to be able to heal the blind the lame the sick the deaf hear the mute speak the lame walk and you can understand what that means you know

[18:12] I think that's a shocking judgment I think on people who knew that God's Messiah would do those very things and yet through their lack of not signs but interpretation they just don't get it why well Jesus makes it very clear verse 4 because they are an evil and adulterous generation do you know for a number of years I always wondered why Jesus wrote in the sand and what did he write I think Jeremiah tells us what he writes in Jeremiah God's people are known for committing adultery spiritual adultery against God in other words they've turned their back on God they've hewed out cisterns for themselves and turned their back on a God of living water they've they've just left God behind they just don't want anything to do with God they put all their trust in the temple and so God decides to destroy the temple to remove the very thing that they're focusing on and it says this in Jeremiah and I've preached on it here so you know that those who have committed spiritual adultery and who live this way will have their names written in the sand in other words what happens when you write something in the sand a little gust of wind and it's gone the tide comes in and it's washed away

Jesus is saying something quite clear about what will happen to the leaders of Israel and when does Jesus write in the sand well is it not at that moment where the woman is allegedly caught in adultery and he is pointing out to them no you are the real adulterers for you have committed a spiritual adultery against God here's the thing don't think that you're immune from that none of us are immune from committing a spiritual adultery against God how do we do it well we do it like the Pharisees will we just do our things our own way we commit to our own beliefs we commit to our own versions our own interpretations our own understandings rather than submitting ourselves to what the Bible actually says and be careful with it no we just we just hold on to what we believe as though we're definitely right and you know what if we hold on to beliefs that are right we shouldn't move we shouldn't budge even for a moment but sometimes we could be wrong sometimes we could be committing the very things that actually don't cause us to be that faithful to God so Jesus says no sign will be given except the sign of

Jonah do you know I think in the context here he's not referring to the fact that Jonah was in the belly of the fish and then sort of kind of resurrected as though the sign that Jesus is referring to here is going to be his death and resurrection it could be it could Jesus could be exactly saying that I think it's more likely that when he says no sign will be given but the sign of Jonah that it actually has more to do with Jonah as a preacher going to a people that he didn't want to go to but he ended up going because God wanted him there and the very people he preached to was not God's people but the people of Nineveh and they repented and here we have Jesus Christ who came unto his own people hearing the very words of God and they pay no attention that's why Jesus finishes in verse 12 you know beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees I think it has much more to do with this statement of Jonah with the preaching element the teaching element of Jesus than it does his death and resurrection but he could be referencing to both so here's the warning for you as it is for me as it is for any disciple be careful be careful that you don't have a heart that commits a spiritual adultery be careful that you have forgotten truths about Jesus and that's the issue here with the disciples they go over to the other side they have no bread by this time they should realize that's not a problem if you've got Jesus right if you've been with Jesus and you've seen him feed 5000 people and you've seen him filled give food to 4000 people and they've been filled it shouldn't be a problem but they've come across with no bread hence why Jesus says are you a little faith and he goes straight into the explanation of the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000 how are often we do the same where we know something to be certain and true and we hold on to it with absolute faith in a moment only for a half a year down the line or perhaps another year we've forgotten it what we were strong in faith in one moment we become weak in faith in another what's crept in what why why is that unbelief risen in your life is it because you have forgotten well Jesus says yeah you've forgotten you've forgotten about who it is that you belong to and you have forgotten exactly what this person can do rather the unbelief of the Pharisees your own version of what might be has crept in the leaven of the Pharisees you're holding on to your own teaching or the teaching of others rather than truly understanding what Jesus Christ has done in other words you no longer perceive your own understanding has been diminished so what's the lesson beware of unbelief creeping in beware of the truths of Jesus eroding through unbelief do you know I got a brilliant book by a guy called Lovelace it's it's on spiritual dynamics of living you know he makes he makes the point very very clear and I'm so glad that he did because I've often thought it but with a man as clever as he I'm glad that he said it because it gives me a kind of assurance that you know I was on the right lines and he makes the point very very clear that you know too often

[25 : 01] Christians don't get to see the blessings that come from faith because they're just not living by faith that's what the disciples are here they we have no bread the panic starts or you know oh what are we going to do I think Lovelace is right too often even today in the church we don't get to enjoy the blessings of living by faith in God because we're not actually living by faith in God that is a challenge that is a super challenge but faith in what God has said not faith in our own personal vision or our own personal sign faith in what God has said so be careful be careful of that unbelief creeping in be careful of developing a life of little faith faith in where your faith is instead of it growing it is diminishing and it has become smaller and smaller over time you know be careful of your own interpretation and here's here's here's a suggestion a biblical suggestion the word of God produces faith and it's kind of circular that as you read the word of God you're to read it in faith and as you read the word of God it produces faith and the faith that you get from the word of God then gives you faith to read more of the word of God and understand it you know one of the problems that the disciples have here just like the pharisees have is that when little faith creeps in you know don't think you're going to be able to understand scripture an unbelieving heart and mind doesn't get to see the riches or enjoy the blessings that God gives why because the only way to please God is through faith the blessing comes through faith in him and so what is absolutely necessary for a correct interpretation of the signs of the times is faith in God and faith in what God has said so here's the conclusion what does all this mean in other words well there's a couple of things for us to consider number one

God is moving you into a future God is moving you along in his own storyline now you might want to play a different part you may not want to play the part that you do but here's here's the real joy that you should hang on to one day your actor's clothes are going to come off and the makeup's going to be stripped and the person who you really are is going to shine in all of glory if you feel as a

Christian as you live this Christian life that you're not who you believe you really are that you are so much more but it's just not coming through in this daily life you're absolutely right but for the time being you have to be satisfied with the clothes that you're in and you have to be satisfied with the life that God has given you to live because you're here to serve him but one day you're going to go to the dressing room called glory and the costume's going to come off and then the real you resurrected to a new body and to glory will be finally seen and then you'll know that's the future that God is moving you towards don't look for a sign in the sky then don't do it a yellow car outside my front door don't do it don't go flipping a coin to make a spiritual decision don't do it it's not that God couldn't interpret couldn't get something to you through those ways that's not the issue the issue is always our interpretation we're always going to question it and here's the thing here's what I've often found in my own life that if I flipped a coin I've done it in the past you know I've flipped the coin asking God does he want me to go left or right the moment I go two out of three I have that moment you then discover where your heart really is because you're not really satisfied with the answer you've got here's the other thing identify the real limitation identify the real limitation you know when I hear

Christians say you know the Bible's a difficult book and you know there's big chunks that are boring and some of it's repetitive understand the real limitation if you feel that way about God's word that's really an indication of your limitation not the Bible's it's really an indication of where you are not where God is so identify the limitations and deal with them just like the Pharisees have to and just like the disciples have to you know the limitations are not with the signs they're not with God they're not with faith they're actually with us so identify the limitations yes some parts of the Bible are difficult they're not boring you know it's a reflection of our own limitation not God's so here's a final thought be care of departing be careful of a spiritual adultery be careful of wanting something other than what

[30 : 53] God has actually given you be careful of that now the warning is there because the warning is real and the warning is this don't bypass what God has given you and look for something else and miss what you've already got in other words take the time to look back over all that God has given you and you will see the future that is ahead of you that's the point God is moving us to a future and the only way we truly get to see it is by going back to the word that God has given us in other words you could put it this way no other future sign will be given other than that of God's word Amen