

They Seek a Sign

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[0 : 00] So we turn to Matthew chapter 12 and verse 38. The heading of this passage is the sign of Jonah.

The Magi are wise men traveling from the east were given a celestial sign, a sign directing them to the one born in Bethlehem.

And arriving in Jerusalem, they were heard saying, where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

I've come to worship him, they said. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

It doesn't say three wise men. And it doesn't say stable. They saw the child with Mary in a house. But this sign was taken very seriously.

[1 : 51] This celestial sign, this star in the sky, was taken very seriously by the Magi. Leading them to travel a very great distance in search of the one promised, the Messiah.

It was taken seriously even by the enemies of Jesus. And in particular, it was taken very seriously by Herod.

Who sought out Jesus for a very different purpose. He wasn't interested in worshipping this babe in a manger as he grew up.

In a dream, Joseph was told by the angel, She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel.

God with us. For he will save his people from their sins. God with us. God with us. We have, with Joe, we've been studying the book of Jonah.

[2 : 56] And elsewhere, I've also been looking at the book of Matthew, where Jesus refers to the sign of the prophet Jonah. So the passage I'm looking at this evening is Matthew 12, 38 to 42.

Where this need for a sign takes prominence. Show us a sign. During the Second World War, before my time, I hasten to add, during the Second World War and after the invasion of Norway and after the rescue of Dunkirk, there was a real threat of invasion on these islands.

And one of the things that was instigated by the powers that be was the removal of all signposts to confuse an invading army.

In this passage, the removal of signs is not advocated. We need signs. Indeed, signs are important and used extensively in Scripture, pointing not so much to a place, but to a person, to Jesus, the Messiah.

Here in this passage, we have scribes and Pharisees asking Jesus for a sign. They were more than just sceptical about Jesus' claims as Messiah.

[4 : 34] They were stubbornly disbelieving him. So what does it take to make someone believe and trust in Christ Jesus?

Is it miraculous works? Is that what is going to do it for us? Like healings, if someone is healed, is that going to change someone to suddenly believe in Jesus?

Is it driving out demons, something we don't see particularly much here in the West? Is it raising someone from the dead? Well, that's certainly not something that we would be seeing very often, I'm sure, if at all.

Certainly not in these days. Or is it speaking in tongues? Is that what would draw people into faith? Miraculous works.

Or if it's not miraculous works that draw people into trusting in Jesus, could it be persuasive argument? A well-presented and logical case.

[5 : 39] Is that what would make someone change their mind and turn around 180 degrees and walk towards Jesus when they were going completely in the opposite direction? Is it the convincing delivery that would make someone change their mind and take a stance for Jesus?

If it's not miraculous works, if it's not persuasive argument, is it scientific proof? Is that enough? Is that what we would require? Is it archaeological evidence, for example, for the existence of the various people and places referred to in the Old and New Testament?

Or is it even copies of the original text in papyrus or whatever form it took?

Is that what would persuade someone to become a Christian? Or do we want, for scientific evidence, a verifiable modern example of a person having been swallowed by a large fish and spat out alive?

Would that scientific proof? If we could prove that, would that convert someone? Would that cause someone to suddenly believe in Jesus? Or would a laboratory reproduction of Jesus' miracles before your very eyes, would that make you change your mind if you are not in Christ Jesus?

[7 : 03] These Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus. Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. So what would have persuaded them to believe in Jesus?

Is it miraculous works? Jesus had already performed miraculous works in the region, in the area, and they would have no doubt seen these remarkable events and wonderful, miraculous works. A demon-possessed man, a demon-possessed blind, mute man had come to Jesus in chapter 12, and he was enabled to talk and to see.

Did they believe as a consequence of that? These miraculous works before their very eyes? Did they believe then? No. They blamed Beelzebub. They blamed Satan for this.

No, it wasn't you, Jesus. It was Satan. It wasn't God. In chapter 9, Jesus heals a paralyzed man, raises a girl from the dead, cures a woman with a chronic condition.

[8 : 20] Is this enough to convince someone? He made the blind see. He made the mute able to speak. Very convincing, you would think.

Would this transform a person's thinking? Yet the Pharisees and the teachers of the law still demand a sign. In terms of evidential proof, they wouldn't have required proof of the Old Testament miracles.

They were only looking for the proof that the miracles Jesus was performing were in fact of God. But they believed in miracles, the Old Testament miracles.

These, they would have believed as being true. Enoch was taken to be with God and he never saw death. Miracle. The parting of the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus.

Which of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees would not have believed in that? Of course they believed in that. They would have actually taught that to their students. The burning bush.

[9 : 30] Of course. Yes, they would have believed that. The Moses staff. That became a snake. The plagues. The gnats. The flies. The rivers of blood. All of these things.

Yes, they would have been promoting these to their people. They believed in miracles. Water from the rock. The Jordan divided in Joshua's time. The sun and moon staying fixed in the sky.

The miracles of Elijah and Elisha. Yes, they would have believed all of these. Of course they did. So they did believe in miracles. Just not what Jesus was doing.

That it was coming from God. So miraculous works. Did that convert? Did that change the minds of these Pharisees and teachers of the law?

Well, what about historical proof? Did they want historical proof? People nowadays, they say, we want historical proof that this actually took place. It's not relevant, is it, really?

[10 : 28] I mean, they believed in the historicity of the Old Testament. And as far as they were concerned, they believed the Old Testament. It all happened in time and in space.

In history. And they would have also believed in the historicity of Jesus. Because he was standing there right in front of them. Speaking to them. So, of course, they believed in the historicity of Christ. They didn't need archaeological artifacts to say or to believe that Jesus actually existed.

Of course they didn't. They had God's word in the Old Testament writings, which they accepted as authentic.

And yet they can hear God's word through Jesus. But no, no, they wouldn't accept that. That's not God's word. We have God's word in this Old Testament here.

[11 : 29] This is not God's word. So, historical proof. Was it that enough to convert them? Of course it wasn't. What about persuasive argument?

Would that be enough to convert these Pharisees and teachers of the law? If it was persuasive argument they were really looking for, why didn't they go to John the Baptist?

Pointing the way to Jesus. He was very persuasive. He pointed out their sins to them. They could have gone to listen to him. And of course, right before them, standing before them, speaking to them, they had the words, the very words of Jesus.

He spoke to them. Who could be more persuasive in turning to Jesus than Jesus himself? We would all here love to hear Jesus speak to us person to person.

They had that privilege and yet they did not believe that the person standing before them was the Messiah. And it says of Jesus, he is the one who spoke with authority, yet they seek a sign.

[12:39] Teacher, we want a sign from you. How weak their argument sounds now. So if you're not believing now, what is holding you back from believing and trusting in Jesus?

Are you waiting for a sign from heaven? Not everyone, not everyone has a spectacular conversion experience. Very often it can be a slow and gentle realization that the claims of Jesus are true and that they apply to you personally.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household. They were looking for a sign, but a sign had already been given, Jesus said.

It is not clear what kind of sign the Pharisees and teachers and all were after. I mean, what would it have been they were looking for? They already had seen miracles. Jesus was standing in front of them.

What else can they expect? What would overcome their resistance to Jesus' claims? Would bringing down rain or the darkness of the sun do the trick?

[13:52] It's not likely. They would have said it's some kind of trickery. It's Beelzebub. Of course it is. But Jesus knew their hearts. No new miraculous signs would be given to them except that which they already had.

something they already believed to be true, something that had already taken place. This is the sign that they would be given and it is that miracle that is recorded for us in the book of Jonah.

No sign would be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of this huge fish.

this they would have known. This they would have believed in. This they probably taught to their children from a young age like we teach our children.

That wonderful story of Jonah in the belly of the huge fish. In fact, it's one of the favourite Bible stories for children.

[15:00] The Pharisees and the teachers of the law would not have understood the significance of the sign of the prophet Jonah and even if they did they would have disagreed with it with the very idea that by the command of God Jonah was sent to preach to the Gentiles of Nineveh.

Why would a Jew be sent to Gentiles to preach to them? A people that would have been despised by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

Yes, the people repented in Nineveh and were saved by God. But would the Pharisees and the teachers of the law would they have gone out to Nineveh to preach to the Gentiles?

Far from it. They would have felt like they were going to be contaminated by them. We are not like these other folk they might say.

Do we sometimes think like that? Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save nor is ear too dull to hear.

[16:17] There is no one beyond redemption. So Jesus explains this sign that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law undoubtedly did not understand or would not have understood.

The Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. I mean the explanation would have seemed rather cryptic to the hearer.

Even to the disciples it probably wasn't quite understood are very clear to them at this time.

Remember that this was before the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The irony is of this situation is that the so-called experts wouldn't understand.

You think experts would understand everything but these experts wouldn't understand and didn't understand quite an irony. At that time Jesus said I praise you Father Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.

Yes Father for this is what you are pleased to do. In verse 40 of our passage the Son of Man is the most common we read there Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man and the Son of Man is the most common title Jesus uses to describe himself.

[17 : 49] It's used about 81 times in the Gospels. It was never used of Jesus by anyone else. It is a Messianic reference used in Daniel 7 chapter 7 verses 13 to 14.

In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

It is unlikely that even after the death and resurrection of Jesus when the sign of the prophet Jonah would have become clearer that these Pharisees and teachers of the law would have believed.

Would the secular humanist of today come to faith if given scientific proof that a person could be swallowed by a great fish and then spat out and survive?

[19 : 06] No, they too look for a sign. In their case, they look for a non-miraculous sign. So again, I ask, what is holding you back from believing and trusting in Jesus?

The star pointing to Bethlehem was sufficient for the Magi. Surely the sign of Jonah is sufficient for us. Jesus was the first fruits of the resurrection.

So what's the problem? What then is the problem? Jesus cut straight to the chase. No nonsense. It was a wicked and adulterous generation that was asking for a sign.

These were not genuine inquirers seeking the truth. These teachers of the law and Pharisees, they saw themselves as the custodians of the truth.

They were the ones who held the truth. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

[20 : 18] For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. They didn't. These folks standing and opposing Jesus, they didn't recognize the Messiah.

What a shame really when you think about it. They didn't recognize Jesus for who he was. So sad in many ways. They were speaking to him face to face.

What a privilege they had and yet how sad. They had made the law and all its add-ons and they would earn many laws and multiplicity of laws that they had included in their transformation of the law that was given by God.

They made it their God. They were spiritually adulterous, turning away from the true God, making gods in their own image.

They had in effect set themselves above the law. They would define it, they would administer it, and they would control it. So when Jesus comes into the picture, they realise they can't control it, they can't administer it, they can't even define it.

[21 : 40] But even if they did define, administer, or control it, they couldn't adhere to it. There were too many laws and they're bound to break them. But perhaps their greatest fault, their greatest sin, was their pride.

The sad thing was, they were ignorant of the fact. They saw themselves as more righteous than anyone else. A more detailed explanation of the sign of the prophet Jonah, that wouldn't have made any difference.

Even if one was raised from the dead before their very eyes, they would have not believed. In the same way, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked him.

He saved others, they said, but he can't save himself. He's the king of Israel. Let them come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. Do you think?

The fact is, they didn't. And the upshot is that they would be judged, not by their own standards, not by their fellow Jews.

[22 : 51] As it says in the passage, verse 41, they will be judged by the people of Nineveh.

Nineveh, the people of Nineveh will stand up at judgment and condemn them. That would have been very difficult for them to swallow, wouldn't it?

That they would be judged by the Gentiles, by those who had listened to Jonah's message and repented from their sin and turned to God in true faith.

That was a difficult one for them to swallow. the second one was by the Queen of the South, it says in verse 42. The Queen of Sheba had heard of Solomon's wisdom, of his wealth, and of his God.

Praise be to the Lord, your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule over the Lord, your God. Because of the love of your God for Israel, and his desire to uphold them forever, he has made you king over them to maintain justice and righteousness.

This was the Queen of Sheba speaking to David. Jesus said that he had traveled a great distance to listen to Solomon's wisdom, that she had traveled a great distance to listen to Solomon's wisdom.

[24 : 17] The Pharisees and the teachers of the law would be judged by those they would have despised. Such irony. So if you're holding back from believing and trusting in Jesus, is it because you have joined the camp of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law?

If so, beware, lest you be judged by those you despise. In closing, I would say that the signs we should be looking for point to Jesus.

The religious leaders looked for a sign, but a sign had already been given that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve.

No other sign would be provided, and the same applies to us. It is not a sign they should have been looking for, but the one that the sign represented or pointed to, something greater than Solomon is here, or in another words, someone greater than Solomon is here, and they couldn't see it.

At this time of year, coming up to Christmas, there are many things or signs that would appear to be pointing to Jesus.

[25 : 57] Birthday celebrations of the one born in Bethlehem. We have Christmas lights, candles, Christmas trees, Christmas decorations, Christmas carols, Christmas cards, the giving and receiving of gifts.

But we have, amidst it all, we have mixed messages with Santa Claus and reindeer, season greeting cards, pictures of a helpless babe in a manger, when in reality he is Emmanuel, God with us, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Saviour who died on the cross for our sins, the one on whose shoulders the government lies.

And to finish in a few words, apart from God's word, there is another sign that should point us to Jesus, and that is lives, lives lived in obedience to him.

We should be shining as a beacon to God's grace. So I say to each one of you unto myself, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Amen. May God add his blessing to these thoughts on his word. We'll now continue in song. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 30] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.