

Chapter 46: Seeking for a Sign

Matthew 12:38–42

In the previous few sections, we have seen how the opposition to Jesus has been rising. The Pharisees have begun to conspire against him, how to destroy him (Matt. 12:14), and they have begun to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of the people by accusing Jesus of depending upon the power of Satan (Matt. 12:24). In this passage, the tension continues to rise. The Pharisees will gain the support of the scribes in opposing Jesus, and, together, the two will demand that Jesus offer to them a sign for their inspection. Jesus will not do for them what they ask, but he instead promises to do something better by proving his authority through the “sign of the prophet Jonah” (v. 39). Here, Matthew begins to reveal to us the gospel truth that *Jesus was vindicated by his resurrection*.

A Sign to See (Matt. 12:38–39)

The conjunction “then” (v. 38a) that transitions into the present story does not specify the precise length of time has passed since Jesus confronted the Pharisees when they accused him of relying on the power of Satan to cast out demons (Matt. 12:22–37); however, as Morris writes, “it is not unlikely that on this occasion it points to something that followed pretty closely.”¹ In this interaction, Jesus does not face the Pharisees alone, but the “scribes and Pharisees” together (v. 38b). France suggests that the “inclusion of ‘scribes’ this time may reflect the more overtly theological character of the challenge, but...the interests of the two groups were closely related....As, in their own view at least, guardians of true religion, they cannot allow Jesus’ outrageous claims to go unchallenged.”²

Here, the scribes and the Pharisees join forces to make a simple request: “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you” (v. 38c). Indeed, Nolland notes that this request might sound on the surface “like a major concession,” as though the scribes and Pharisees had recognized that they had too quickly dismissed Jesus, and now they were genuinely interested in investigating Jesus’ claims.³ Specifically, they were asking “not for an ‘ordinary’ miracle but for a legitimating sign that would provide compelling proof to them.”⁴ At some level, this makes sense, given the scope of authority that Jesus was claiming for himself: “Such a bold claim needs to be verified: if God has sent him, surely God will be prepared to authenticate him.”⁵

Yet, Jesus sees through this request: “they ask a sign, in order to plead, as a plausible pretense for

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 323.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 488.

³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 509.

⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 353.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 487.

their unbelief, that Christ's calling has not been duly attested."⁶ Jesus had performed many miracles so far; did those miracles not attest to the fact that he had been sent from God? Furthermore, Jesus recognizes that these scribes and Pharisees will not judge him fairly, since they had been willing to attribute even the great display of his authority over the demons to the power of Satan himself. Lenski correctly identifies Jesus' objection to this request:

“A sign to see” is an objection to the signs Jesus had thus far wrought. What these scribes and Pharisees could “see” in them was to them not nearly enough. For all these signs, shining with grace, mercy, and help to poor sinners and sufferers, were aimed at a seeing with the spiritual eyes of faith, at recognizing Jesus as the divine Deliverer from sin and Satan's power, John 10:38. In the spiritually blind eyes of these men such signs amounted to nothing. They demanded something that required no faith but just ἰδεῖν [*idein*], sight.⁷

Lenski is drawing attention to the specific grammar of this verse, which puts “to see” at the very end, bringing it as the surprise conclusion to the whole sentence: “We wish from you a sign to see” (lit.). They were not asking for *a sign*, since Jesus had already provided those. Rather, they are specifically asking for a sign *to see*—that is, one that would appeal to their external senses apart from faith.

Jesus refuses their request, answering, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (v. 39). As Carson notes, it is notable that Jesus is applying the term “adulterous,” which arose from the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, to his own contemporaries: “Israel had largely abandoned her idolatry and syncretism after the exile. But now Jesus insists that she is still adulterous in heart.”⁸ This observation is remarkable when we consider the nature of the question that the scribes and Pharisees are really asking. Namely, they are inquiring about whether Jesus truly acts by God's authority. Jesus, however, insists that their unbelief in him is proof that *they* are rebellious against God's authority.

Again, what they do is not totally wrong, since prophets claiming to speak for God were to be tested as to whether God had actually sent them (e.g., Deut. 18:15–22). Jesus, however, insists that the fact that they are *still* asking for a sign is proof that they have wandered from God—not a sign that they are indeed zealous for keeping God's covenant. They have already received the proof they need to believe, so their ongoing skepticism is not covenant faithfulness, but covenant rebellion. Calvin writes, “It is not solely, therefore, because they ask a sign, that Christ makes this attack upon the scribes, but because they are ungrateful to God, wickedly despise so many of his wonderful works, and try to find a subterfuge for not obeying his word.”⁹ Moreover, this unbelief reveals the nature of their spiritual adultery: “By their illegitimate demand they revealed their inner divorce from God. Their covenant and marriage tie no longer held them.”¹⁰

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:93.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 490.

⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 340.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:94.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 491.

A Sign to Believe (Matt. 12:40)

At the end of v. 39, Jesus insisted that “no sign will be given to [this evil and adulterous generation] except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” In v. 40, he explains what he means by this sign: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (v. 40). By these words, Jesus clearly enough speaks of his coming resurrection. In other words, he is saying that he will prove his the authority of his works by rising from the dead: “In this manner our Lord cuts off every pretense for their wicked demands, by threatening that he will be their Prophet after his resurrection, since they do not receive him while clothed with mortal flesh.”¹¹

Jesus’ words are tricky because he says that he will be buried “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” We count days and nights as though we were making hotel reservations, detailing with precision when we will check in and when we will check out. Jesus, however, is using “night and day” as an expression to represent “any portion of three calendar days.”¹² Thus, when Jesus says “three days and three nights,” he means a length of time that stretches through (to some degree) three days of the week: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Hendriksen offers an illustration that helps to understand this figure of speech: “When we say ‘the universe,’ the ancients would say ‘heaven and earth.’ So also, should not their expression ‘one day and one night’ be taken to mean one time unit, one diurnal period, as part of one such period being taken as a whole?”¹³ One modern illustration of this way of counting would be in the page count of a reading assignment. If a student is assigned to read pages 1–10 of a book, their assignment counts as ten pages of reading, even though (1) normal math would suggest nine pages ($10 - 1 = 9$), and (2) some of the pages (especially the last page in the chapter) might only have a couple of lines on the page.

The rest of the Scriptures unfold the significance of this sign. In Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, he insists that “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know...God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:22, 24). Then, Paul confesses the “mystery of godliness,” which declares, in part, that Jesus was “manifested in the flesh, *vindicated* by the Spirit” (1 Tim. 3:16). The vindication of the Spirit may refer to a number of works in Jesus’ life; however, the ultimate vindication of Jesus was through Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. As Paul writes elsewhere, Jesus Christ our Lord “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4).

A Sign to Condemn (Matt. 12:41–42)

The nature of the sign of Jesus’ resurrection makes it more powerful than any signs that have come before it. Therefore, Jesus says that previous generations will condemn this generation, since they did not receive anything nearly so clear as what Jesus has done and will do before them: “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:94–95.

¹² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 206.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 534.

at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (v. 40). Additionally, Jesus says that the Queen of Sheba will condemn them: “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (vv. 41–42).

In both cases, Jesus says that Gentiles from faraway lands who believed when they saw lesser signs will rise up to judge these Jews who have not believed after seeing greater signs.¹⁴ Even the remarkable way in which God rescued Jonah from near-certain death in the great fish cannot compare to God’s resurrecting Jesus from the dead. Furthermore, in both cases Jesus says that the condemnation will arise because “something greater” is here. In this phrase, “something greater,” France notes an important connection back to what Jesus said earlier in this chapter in Matthew 12:6: “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” France writes:

In these two declarations Jesus, while not offering any specific sign, goes a long way toward giving his own answer to the question about authority which underlay the demand of v. 38. Jonah and Solomon, the prophet and the wise man (the latter also the king, son of David), represent two of the principal authorities by whom God’s message was communicated to his people in the OT; the third major authority was the priests and the temple cult, which has been the subject of a similar formula in v. 6. If “something more/greater” than all these key authorities is now present, and if, moreover, all their functions have now been brought together in a single person, Jesus’ questioners have a thought-provoking basis on which to consider the question of his authority. Temple and priesthood, prophet, king, and wise man—something greater is now here.¹⁵

If far-off Gentiles believed on the basis of lesser signs in the past, why won’t the scribes and Pharisees believe Jesus after seeing so much more from him?

The issue really does come down to the question of their “evil and adulterous” hearts. Hagner’s comments are important for us to heed:

There is in principle nothing wrong with the desire for a sign from God. The request for a sign only becomes unjustified and intrinsically wrong when one is already surrounded by good and sufficient evidence one chooses not to accept. In that case, unreceptivity and unbelief are the root problem, and it is unlikely that any sign would be sufficient to change such a person’s mind. This is not to argue for gullibility or easy belief. The fact is, however, that Jesus’ contemporaries had plenty of evidence upon which to act responsibly. In a similar way, evidence of the truth of the gospel exists today both for unbelievers and believers. In these circumstances, to ask for more evidence, more signs, is to reflect a deep-seated unbelief in the reality of God and his grace.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 355.

¹⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 493.

¹⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 355.

What will you do with Jesus? How will you respond to the proofs of his divine authority through his various signs?

Discussion Questions

1. How does this passage (vv. 38–42) connect with the confrontations of the Pharisees with Jesus in the earlier parts of this chapter (“then”; v. 38)? Why do the Pharisees bring the scribes along with them (v. 38)? When the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus for a “sign,” what are they really asking him to do? What does the Old Testament tell us about Israel as an “adulterous” people? Why does Jesus apply this term to the scribes and Pharisees (v. 39a)?
2. Who was Jonah? Why does Jesus say that he will give to his generation the “sign of the prophet Jonah” (v. 39b)? What is Jesus talking about when he says that the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth (v. 40)? How should we understand the phrase “three days and three nights”? Why was the resurrection such an important sign to vindicate the ministry of Jesus? What does the rest of the Bible say about the significance of the resurrection?
3. Who were the “men of Nineveh” and how much information did they have when they repented (v. 41)? Who was the “queen of the South” and how much information did she have when she came to hear the wisdom of Solomon (v. 42)? What should we make of the fact that both of these are Gentiles at a great geographical distance from Israel? Why does Jesus say that these groups will rise up to condemn the unbelieving Jews?
4. What signs do we have to test Jesus’ claims today? Why do the Scriptures warn us against walking by sight, rather than by faith (2 Cor. 5:7)? What do the Scriptures teach us about how to test claims of religious teachers (Deut. 18:15–22; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Thess. 5:20–21; 1 John 4:1–3)? What is challenging for you to believe about Jesus? How might you evaluate your own questions in the light of the Scriptures?