

Chapter 63: Seeking for a Sign

Matthew 16:1–4

After the beginnings of a fruitful ministry among the Gentiles, Jesus returns briefly in Matthew 16:1–4 into Israelite territory. While Jesus had immediately met a Canaanite woman of faith in Gentile territory (Matt. 15:22), upon his return it is the faithless Pharisees and Sadducees who confront him immediately, in order to request from him a sign from heaven to validate his ministry (v. 1). What is behind this request? How does Jesus respond to them? Ultimately, Jesus urges them (and us) to *seek Christ in the signs that he has provided*.

A Sign from Heaven (Matt. 16:1)

In Matthew 15:21, Jesus moved into Gentile territory. After healing the daughter of a Canaanite there, he remained in Gentile (Matt. 15:29; see also Mark 7:24), where he fed the four thousand people. At the end of that passage, Matthew tells us that Jesus “got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan” (Matt. 15:39). While there is debate about the precise location of Magadan (or Dalmanutha; see Mark 8:10), it is clear that Jesus crossed from the east side of the Sea of Galilee to the west side, back into Jewish territory—at least for a brief time.¹

Having returned to Jewish territory, the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus. This is similar to how the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus to ask him about the hand-washing practices of his disciples (Matt. 15:1ff), but with a major difference: the Pharisees and Sadducees were enemies against each other.² For these two sides to come together against Jesus would be as rare as when the Republicans and Democrats in Congress join together for a thoroughly bipartisan effort. In this case, these enemies were united by a common enmity against Jesus. Significantly, we read both that they “came” and that they “tested” Jesus (προσελθόντες...πειράζοντες; *proselthontes...peirazontes*; v. 1a), using the same words that had previously describe the approach of Satan to tempt Jesus in the wilderness: προσελθὼν ὁ πειράζων (*proselthōn ho peirazōn*; Matt. 4:3).³ The word for “test” can both mean to “tempt” (i.e., to entice) someone toward sin or to put someone to the test through an examination.⁴ Satan tempted Jesus in the former sense, while the Pharisees and Sadducees are (primarily) testing Jesus in the latter sense.

Specifically, the Pharisees and the Sadducees tested Jesus by asking “him to show them a sign from heaven” (v. 1b). That is, they want Jesus to go beyond providing an earthly sign by doing something heavenly. Hendriksen gives suggestions of the kind of sign that they were seeking:

¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 410.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 636.

³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 247; Osborne, *Matthew*, 612.

⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 647.

Let him cause manna to drop from the sky, as (according to their view) Moses had done (Exod. 16; cf. John 6:32). Or, like Joshua, by means of prayer let him cause the sun and the moon to stand still (Josh. 10:12–14). Or again, as in the days of Deborah and Barak, let him make the stars to fight for Israel (Judg. 5:20). Or, in imitation of Samuel, let him, by means of a fervent petition, draw down a thunderstorm to discomfit the “Philistines” of his own day, that is, the Romans (I Sam. 7:10). Let him at least not lag behind Elijah whose imploration brought an instantaneous response of “fire from heaven” (I Kings 18:30–40).⁵

By such a request, they were putting God to the test, something that Jesus had explicitly refused to do during his earlier encounter with Satan (Matt. 4:7; see Ex. 17:2; Deut. 6:16; Ps. 78:18; 95:9).⁶

Along the same lines, we should recognize what a great degree of continuity their request has with Satan’s temptation of Jesus overall. Not only does Matthew narrate the story with the same “came...to test/tempt” language, but the Pharisees and Sadducees are ultimately “suggesting to Jesus that he perform a deed for which his Father had not commissioned him.”⁷ Although perhaps not as powerful of a temptation as when Jesus had been fasting for forty days in the wilderness to be tempted by Satan himself, the promise of these religious leaders as well as of Satan himself are the same: accomplishing Jesus’ mission apart from the cross. As Osborne notes, there is a continuity between the testings of Satan and the Pharisees and Sadducees: “Jesus was ‘tested’ first by Satan (4:1, 3, 7) and will continue to be ‘tested’ by Satan’s emissaries in the ensuing narratives (19:3; 22:18, 35).”⁸ As with Satan, so also here Jesus sees directly through this promise to recognize that it is a lie: “Unbelief always finds a way to refuse to accept the truth, no matter with what credentials it is presented.”⁹ This was not a test of verification to confirm the validity of faith in Jesus, as John the Baptist had requested when he sent his disciples to ask whether Jesus truly was the one who was to come (Matt. 11:3). On the contrary, this is a test of falsification to prove that Jesus is *not* the one whom God’s people had been expecting.

The Signs of the Times (Matt. 16:2–3)

When Jesus was tempted by Satan, he pointedly avoided dialoguing or debating with Satan. Here with the Pharisees and Sadducees, however, Jesus teaches them to point out their errors. In vv. 2–3, Jesus contrasts their ability to understand the signs that forecast the weather against their inability to “interpret the signs of the times” regarding spiritual matters. That is, Jesus is saying that the Pharisees and the Sadducees have misinterpreted Jesus in such a way as to misunderstand his significance. As France notes, “‘Times’ translates *kairoi*, a term which often denotes specific or decisive times or events rather than simply the passage of time. They ought to be able to see that important things are taking place, that this is a time of decision, but they are oblivious to what is

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 635.

⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 612.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 610.

⁸ Osborne, *Matthew*, 612.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 610.

taking place through the ministry of Jesus the Messiah.”¹⁰

If so, then what specifically are they missing? Sometimes, “the signs of the times” refer to signs pointing to eschatological judgment that will come at the end of time, but Leon Morris persuasively argues that Jesus is more likely referring to Old Testament passages about the times of the Lord’s visitation of Israel: “In the Old Testament there are references to ‘the day(s) of visitation’ (as in Isa. 10:3; Hos. 9:7) and to ‘the time of their visitation’ (Jer. 10:15) or ‘the year of their visitation’ (Jer. 11:23), and *the times* here may well have such a meaning.”¹¹ Rather than celebrating the arrival of the Messiah who has come to prepare a feast for Jews and Gentiles alike, the Pharisees and Sadducees are rejecting him.

Calvin draws a pastoral warning from the kind of investigation that these leaders conduct because of how it keeps them from embracing Christ:

There are many persons of the same description in the present day, who plead that on intricate subjects they have a good right to suspend their judgment, because they must wait till the matter is fully ascertained. They go farther, and believe that it is a mark of prudence purposely to avoid all inquiry into the truth; as if it were not an instance of shameful sloth that, while they are so eagerly solicitous about the objects of the flesh and of the earth, they neglect the eternal salvation of their souls, and at the same time contrive vain excuses for gross and stupid ignorance.¹²

While should search the Scriptures carefully to understand what they say about Jesus (Acts 17:11), we must beware the kind of investigation that serves only to delay repentance and faith.

The Sign of Jonah (Matt. 16:4)

Jesus concludes his response to the Pharisees and Sadducees by saying, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (v. 4a). Jesus had said almost the same thing earlier to the scribes and Pharisees who had earlier asked Jesus to see a sign from him (Matt. 12:38–39). There, Jesus compared his forthcoming death and burial in the heart of the earth with the figurative death and burial of Jonah in the belly of the great fish. The sign of rising from the dead would indeed be a heavenly sign, but Jesus knows that even his resurrection will not change the hearts of those who are hardened against him by sin. Only the grace of the Holy Spirit, transformation the hearts of evil and adulterous sinners, can lead individual people to faith. No matter how much the rest of the world professes openness to believe if only there were a sufficiently clear sign from heaven, their real impediments to faith are willful, not intellectual.

For such hardened sinners, Jesus can only leave them and depart (v. 4b). As Lenski observes, “This too, was a sign; for when Jesus leaves a man, this means that grace leaves him to judgment.”¹³

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 606.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 414.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:277.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 614.

Importantly, Jesus will head again to “the other side” (Matt. 16:5). Thus, Jesus went into Gentile territory and found great fruit of faith among Gentiles. But, when he returns briefly to Israelite territory, Israel’s leaders oppose him entirely, forcing Jesus back out into Gentile territory. In this, we see a preview of the Book of Acts, where the preaching of the apostles falls on largely deaf ears among Jews while leading many Gentiles to rejoice as they come to faith in Christ for salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. Where had Jesus been in Matthew 15:21–39? Where is the region of Magadan (Matt. 15:39)? What kind of reception did Jesus have while he was among the Gentiles? How does that background contrast with the attitude of the Pharisees and Sadducees who confront him in v. 1? What are they asking for in a “sign from heaven” (v. 1)? Is the sign they request a sign to verify Jesus’ truthfulness, or to falsify his claims? What’s the difference?
2. What kind of weather signs does Jesus describe in vv. 2–3? How accurate are those kinds of signs toward interpreting and forecasting the weather for the coming days? What are the “signs of the times” that Jesus charges the Pharisees and Sadducees concerning their ignorance? What is Jesus saying about the “times” in which he had come? Which signs is he pointing them to that should have driven them to faith?
3. Why does Jesus accuse the Pharisees and Sadducees as representing “an evil and adulterous generation” (v. 4)? Does this suggest that their real problem is a lack of data, or something else? What does Jesus mean when he speaks about the “sign of Jonah” (see Matt. 12:38–39)? Is Jesus’ resurrection from the dead a sign from heaven? If so, why don’t the religious leaders believe? What sign does Jesus give by departing from them (v. 4)?
4. What kinds of signs does the world demand of Christianity in order to prove the truthfulness of the gospel? Have you ever hoped or prayed for a miracle so that God might prove that Jesus is the true God? Why do you think that God doesn’t make a clear, powerful demonstration of himself today? What signs does Jesus point us to instead? Why does God prefer to use the ordinary means of word, prayer, and sacraments instead?