

The Greatest Sign

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 26, 2019.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 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 (Matt. 12:38–42).

After confronting the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, calling them a “brood of vipers” (meaning a family of snakes), and after telling them that on Judgment Day they will be condemned by their words, Jesus is asked not for words but a sign. In fact, joining the Pharisees, the conservative party of the Jewish leadership, is the scribes, the teachers of the law. Together they form the most influential ensemble in Israel. What they say gets heard. What they want they get. And now, having been labeled and condemned by Jesus, they have heard the Teacher’s words defiantly requesting: “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you” (vs. 38). Their response to Jesus’ harsh words is as if to say, “What sign will you give us to justify the authority of your words?” The Word of Christ was not enough.

It is important for us to understand what they are asking. First, what do they mean by “a sign”? From their perspective by “sign,” they mean a miracle that justifies the authority of the prophet and validates his message. They are in essence saying, “Give us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe your words.” The wish of the scribes and Pharisees is not trapped in antiquity.

Today, there are people who feel there must be modern signs and wonders to justify the reality of Christianity. Some are even taught that miraculous signs validate their Christian experience. Today, false prophets will manufacture so-called miracles, assigning it to the Spirit of Christ, playing on fleshly desires. God’s holy Word is not enough.

Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees of His day and signs-seekers of ours, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign...” (vs. 39). What then are we to make of the signs that Jesus did, and what does the wish of a sign tell us about the scribes and Pharisees? What do signs do?

What Signs Do

Let us first understand that what the scribes and Pharisees want as the ultimate validation is not the stand-alone validation of truth. God warned the children of Israel, “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of

The Greatest Sign

dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:1–3). False teachers arose in the Old Covenant Church as they do in the New Covenant Church, and they are very convincing. Pharaoh demanded proof of Moses’ message, but the signs were matched initially by the Egyptian magicians (Ex. 7:8-13). Therefore, we see that signs verify truth but do not justify falsehood.

Consider the sign of fire from heaven upon Elijah’s soaking-wet sacrifice. God rained down fire from heaven incinerating the burnt offering, wood, and stones. Nothing was left. But listen closely to Elijah’s prayer: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (1 Kings 18:36b–37). Note the connection between the sign that Elijah prays for and the Word of God: “I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me...” The fire from heaven, as miraculous as it is, simply (and powerfully) verifies the truth of God’s Word.

Or consider cowardly Gideon and his wool fleeces. A wet fleece and dry ground one day and a dry fleece and wet ground the next, but the sign was given graciously by God to verify His Word (and to strengthen Gideon in his calling). Some have erroneously interpreted Gideon’s actions as a guide for direction, but that is to miss the point (description does not imply prescription). God gives signs to verify the giving of His true Word.

Is then the wish of the scribes and Pharisees reasonable? The irony of their wish is that unrequested signs had already been given by Jesus. In the ninth chapter of Matthew, Jesus heals the paralytic in front of the skeptical Pharisees. Jesus gives the purpose of the sign explaining, “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” (Matt. 9:6). In the eleventh chapter of Matthew, Jesus provides a summary to John’s disciples of the signs given: “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up...” (These were all signs that Jesus gave). And then, Jesus adds these all-important words: “and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Matt. 11:4-6). Believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to His Word is the purpose of the signs given.

In other words, what do signs do? They point us to Christ and His Word. The scribes and Pharisees however deny Christ, ignore His Word, and demand a sign. They ask something of a sign that it was never intended to do.

What Signs Do not Do

Captivated by what J.C. Ryle calls a “spirit of unbelief,” the scribes and Pharisees demand a sign or they will not believe. They want an experience to manifest in them something only the Holy Spirit can do. They want to be apologized rather than evangelized, argued convincingly but never born again. No one is ever convinced into heaven; no one is ever argued into the kingdom of God. In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man disregarded the Scriptures as superfluous begging Father Abraham, “but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will

The Greatest Sign

repent.” To which Abraham replied, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:29-31). An unbelieving heart will not believe apart from an act of God’s grace.

Therefore, He whose very conception and birth served as a sign, who gave sight to the blind, healed the sick, gave life to the dead, describes the sign-seeking Jews as an “evil and adulterous generation.” Why? Because their hard hearts lusted for signs but denied the One to whom the signs point, Christ Jesus the Lord.

Therefore, let us beware in our own age that we do not wish for a Christless Christianity. Let us not seek the virtues of Christianity apart from our victorious Savior.

Likewise, let us beware of so-called signs in an age of a full and complete canon of Scripture. God’s Word is sufficient. Understand this: Signs from God never stand alone or apart from the Word of Christ; signs from God never glorify the sinner but always our Savior; signs from God never give new life but point to the true and everlasting Life; signs from God did not continue but ceased finding their fulfillment in the Word of Christ, the holy Scriptures. To the unbelieving sign-seekers, Jesus will not give them what they want, but He reveals what we need in the greatest sign ever given.

What the Greatest Sign Does

Jesus reveals that one essential sign will be given, “the sign of the prophet Jonah” (vs. 39). His original audience would have known the historical account of Jonah, as should you. Called by God to go to the pagan city of Ninevah and call the people to repentance, Jonah chose instead to run from God. Discovered aboard a ship in the Mediterranean Sea in the midst of a storm, Jonah was thrown overboard, saving the lives of the ship’s crew and providentially his own. Almost drowning, Jonah was literally swallowed by a huge fish, and there he stayed for three days and nights, a Hebrew expression not to be interpreted literally meaning within a period of three days. With plenty of time to repent and pray, on the third day Jonah was vomited upon the seashore from where He immediately departed for Ninevah. Reluctantly, the prophet delivered the call to repentance to the pagans, and they (much to Jonah’s chagrin) repented.

How then does the historical account of Jonah serve as a sign? Jesus explains, “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” (vs. 40). The “sign of the prophet Jonah” depicts the greatest sign given in the history of the world: the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter stood before scribes, Pharisees, and sign-seeking Jews aplenty and declared these words, “Men of Israel, hear these words: 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—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. 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). Did you catch the reference to signs from God? Peter is addressing the same unbelievers who had heard Jesus’ preaching and teaching and witnessed His miracles, and he says that they

The Greatest Sign

witnessed God-given “mighty works and wonders and signs.” And how did they respond to the signs given? Peter says, “you crucified and killed [Him]” reminding us all that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

For, just as Jonah was returned to life on the third day so our Lord resurrected from the dead. It is in the resurrection of Christ that we are given the greatest sign. It is a sign of the new and everlasting life that we have in Christ, “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). We do not look to the sign of Christ’s resurrection to save us but rather to Christ Himself, who saves us by God’s grace through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11).

Yet, those who do not confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised Him from the dead, will not be saved (Rom. 10:9). Jonah delivered the Word of God to Ninevah and the people repented. They heard not the preaching of Jesus nor witnessed His miracles, but they believed the Word and repented. Similarly, the queen of Sheba heard of the wisdom of Solomon and travelled to Jerusalem, witnessed God’s favored, and believed. She never heard Jesus’ teach nor did she witness His signs and yet she believed in the Lord God of Israel. Jesus came to the children of Israel, but they did not believe.

Seeking signs rather than a Savior, Jesus said that “Ninevah will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it,” and the “queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.” Why? Because “something greater than Jonah is here” and “something greater than Solomon is here,” Christ Jesus the Lord.

We live in a world where the spirit of unbelief is alive and well. The Word of God is disregarded and even attacked. Jesus, if acknowledged at all, is merely a good teacher, not the life-sacrificing, risen, eternal Son of God. The world still demands a sign rejecting the miracle of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, through the gospel the Spirit of Christ continues to save sinners like you and me.

Every Lord’s Day, on the first day of the week, we acknowledge the greatest of signs, worshiping our risen Savior. For everyone looking for a sign, here it is: He is risen; He is risen indeed! Every Lord’s Day we gather to worship Christ through the signs and wonders of His ordinary means of grace: The reading, singing, and preaching of the holy Scriptures; the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper; and, the prayers of the saints assembled. Let us not seek the signs of an evil and adulterous generation but rather rejoice in the greatest sign, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.