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Signs of the Times

Matthew 16:1-4, “And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³ 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. ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed.”

As we look back upon the cross of Calvary, we see a picture of victory with Christ delivering us from our sin. But it wasn't always that way.

Cleopas was a Jew who lived during the time of Christ. Though his identity and background are obscure to us, nevertheless he is mentioned in the Bible as one whose world view was radically altered in a moment. All of his life he would have viewed the Roman cross as a symbol of shame and torture (1 Corinthians 1:23). And as a Jew this would have been for good cause; God Himself prescribed that those who were accursed should be hung on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:23). And thus, when who he thought was the Messiah was hung on a Roman cross to die a criminal's death, his life understandably was shattered.

Luke 24:20-21a, "...the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him [the Messiah] up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel..."

But then, Christ opened this disciple's eyes and Cleopas realized that far from being a place of misery, defeat, and shame, the cross was the tool that God had ordained to "save His people from their sin" (Matthew 1:21)! Thus Scripture records this conversation between Cleopas and his friend:

Luke 24:31-32, "And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him [Jesus]; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?'"

Perspective is an interesting thing! When one looks at the "brute facts" of the crucifixion it leads us to the conclusion that Christ was a failure. But then, to behold God's plan; to view the cross from God's perspective is to change our assessment completely and so profess with the loudest voice, "Praise God for the Cross of Calvary!"

Perspective also affects how we view the "signs of the times." Scripture indicates that God has given us specific and certain signs which are constantly occurring in our world today which all relate to the Second Coming of Christ. As we enter into the time of the New Heavens and the New Earth we behold these "signs." The recent mass murder of school children in Connecticut is one of them. And far from beholding these "signs" with a Kingdom mindset and so allowing them impact us to the glory of God, we oft-times respond to them with fear, worry, anger, sadness or indifference. God has ordained events and occurrences in this age for a specific purpose and it therefore behooves us to allow these "signs" to work their purpose in our lives.

In Matthew 16:1-4 the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Christ for a sign. Now this expression, "signs of the times" is used in Scripture to describe certain happenings or situations which are said to precede or point to the Second Coming of Christ (Matthew 24:14, 29, 30; 2 Thessalonians 2:3). These signs are like the labor pains of a woman prior to the giving birth. Beginning as early as six weeks into a pregnancy, these contractions remind us that a baby is coming! In the same way, the "signs of the times" are present throughout time between Christ's first and second coming. And yet before the Second Coming of Christ they will intensify (just like labor pains).

Matthew 24:32-33, “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things [not just the signs of the times, but their increasing growth and frequency], recognize that He is near, *right* at the door.”

Now while Christ in Matthew 16 is speaking to a select group of individuals in response to a particular request, nevertheless there are universal principles given in this passage about “signs of the times.”

The Signs of the Times Verify/Authenticate the Word of God

Matthew 16:1, “And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him [the idea behind this word is that the request here was not genuine; it was an attempt to trip up the Lord] asked Him to show them a sign from heaven.”

The “Pharisees and Sadducees” approach Christ together out of a sense of desperation in the beginning of Christ’s third year of ministry. Nothing that either sect has done independently heretofore has successfully impeded the growth of Christ’s popularity, so now they join forces. This is amazing because the Sadducees and Pharisees were competing, religious parties when it came to the oversight and care of the people of God. They did not like each other!

The Sadducees were liberal (rejecting most of the Old Testament) and from the upper class. It was from their party that the high priest and chief priests were chosen. They were the ones who placed the money changers on the temple mount by which they made a killing from the tax they imposed on the offerings of the people of God. Dr. John MacArthur describes them this way:

The Sadducees... cared nothing for rabbinic tradition and had no compunction about making religious, cultural, or political compromises. Their cardinal principle was expediency. Although they claimed to believe Scripture, their interpretations were so spiritualized that all significant meaning was lost. They were thoroughly liberal and materialistic, not believing in angels, immortality, resurrection of the dead, or anything else supernatural. (Dr. John F. MacArthur 1988, 3)

The Pharisees were opposite of the Sadducees because they were conservative (holding to the 39 books of the Old Testament along with the teaching which comprised the “tradition of the elders.”) Typically they were from the working class and many of them, like Paul (Acts 18:3), made their living from a trade. They were separatists and were viewed as the “friend” of the working man.

Understandably therefore, the religious groups were enemies who genuinely did not like each other. Yet here we read that they had banded together in the attempt to stem the rising tide of Christ’s popularity! As they most likely were from Jerusalem AND Christ is in Galilee (on the

northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee¹), they had a long walk to formulate the perfect question which once and for all would trip Him up! The test was this: “Show us a sign!”

This was a rather interesting request on the part of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The word for “sign” is better translated as a “testifying miracle.” In other words, the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted proof of Christ’s authority and identity and that what He said was true and valid.

Now, Christ does not rebuke these leaders because they asked for a sign (to verify the identity of a prophet is not only wise, but Biblical [cf. Deuteronomy 13, 18]). Rather, Christ rebukes these leaders because their request was a rejection of the signs that God *already* had given! The Pharisees and Sadducees had already seen Christ perform many “testifying miracles” as to His identity. To this point Christ had:

- Turned the water into wine, John 2:1-11.
- Healed the demoniac, Mark 1:23-28.
- Cleansed the Leper, Matthew 8:1-4.
- Healed the paralytic, Matthew 9:1-8.
- Healed the man with the withered hand, Matthew 12:9-14.
- Healed the multitudes by the Sea, Mark 3:7-12.
- Stilled the storm, Matthew 8:23-27.
- Healed the Blind, Matthew 9:27-31.
- Cast out demons, Matthew 12:22.
- Fed the 5,000 (Matthew 14) and the 4,000 (Matthew 15).

The problem is that these leaders attributed these acts to the power of Satan! Speaking of Christ casting out a demon from a person ravaged by this fallen angel they said:

Matthew 12:24: “But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.’” (Compare this with the people’s response, Matthew 15:31).

And so Christ rebukes the Pharisees and Sadducees not for seeking a sign, but for their refusal to believe the signs God had already given! From this we see that

- 1) Signs are not bad (in fact in v. 4, Christ would give yet another sign), and that
- 2) Signs are testifying miracles given to verify the word of God!
- 3) Which is why we translate the word as, “testifying miracles!”

Now on this side of the cross we no longer need “testifying miracles” in order to prove the validity of God’s word regarding the identity of Christ. We have all the proof we need in our hands, the Scriptures. What relationship then do the “signs of the times” have to the veracity of God’s word today? They point to a very important truth:

Matthew 24:8-14, "But all these things are *merely* the beginning of birth pangs [speaking of wars, famines, and earthquakes]. Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come."

In other words, the "signs of the Times" continue to verify the word of God but NOT when it comes to the identity of Christ, BUT RATHER to the reality of the coming of Christ and the Final Judgment! They point us forward and so remind us that

- (1) God's wrath is real,
- (2) The end of the world is approaching, and that
- (3) Christ is coming again!

The Signs of the Times Call for a Response

Matthew 16:2-3, "But He answered and said to them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening." Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?"'

It is easy to miss that this is a rebuke. And thinking of the players involved, it is scathing! Who were the men standing before Christ "testing Him"? The religious leaders of the day who had "seated themselves in the chair of Moses" (Matthew 23:2) and fancied themselves as "a guide to the blind" and a "corrector of the foolish" (Romans 2:18-20)! Notice the rebuke: *you are much better at weather prediction than you are at teaching the word of God!*

Matthew 16:2b-3a, "...When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening'"

This is the old maritime proverb: "Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in morning, sailor take warning!" With this little saying, these Jewish leaders were able to predict the weather quite accurately. Too bad they weren't as competent when it came to the word of God! And so Christ said this:

Matthew 16:3b, "Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?"

What does it mean, "to discern the signs of the times"? It means that we do more than just identify them. Rather, it means that we live in light of their message! In essence Christ is saying, "Do you understand what time it is? If so, then why aren't you living differently?!" The truth be

known, they didn't understand; which is why they lived as they did! From this we conclude that the signs of the time that God continues to give of the Second Coming of Christ and His impending judgment are designed to summon men to a biblical response! And that response is what Christ said about His Second Coming and our response to it. After speaking about the "signs" and happenings that point to His Second Coming, Christ said, that it relates to the believer this way:

Matthew 24:42-44, "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will."

The word for "alert" and "being ready" are the same: γρηγορέω (grēgoreō). "Alert" means to be spiritually vigilant and ready at a moment's notice. It is used in the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) where all the bridesmaids were waiting for the arrival of the groom and his groomsmen. The wedding tradition in Christ's day involved the groom and groomsmen arriving at the bride's house after hours of celebrating. Here they would pick up the bride and her bridesmaids and proceed to the formal wedding ceremony. Five of the bridesmaids didn't bring enough oil and were scrambling at the last moment for the oil needed for their lamp. As a result they missed the coming of the groom! They weren't vigilant and so ready!

Matthew 24 tells us that the purpose of the "signs of the times" are to sober and prepare us for the coming of Christ. Each time that we behold one of these "signs" from God, we must allow it to

- (1) Wean us more and more from this world,
- (2) Push us closer to the Savior, and so
- (3) Prepare us for the day of Christ's return!

Paul put it this way in Romans 13:

Romans 13:11-14, "And this *do*, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts."

As it relates to the non-believer the signs of the times are a call to turn from sin.

Luke 13:1-5, "Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners

than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

For the man or woman who does not believe in Christ, what ought they to do in response to a “sign of the times”? They must turn from their disbelief knowing that if they delay, a worse fate awaits them if they are without Christ! The signs of the times call for a response!

The Signs of the Times Evidence the Reign and Rule of God

Matthew 16:4, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.’ And He left them, and went away.”

As the Pharisees and Sadducees obviously had missed the point of Christ’s earlier signs, no doubt Christ’s words probably went above their heads. Yet it needn’t go above ours. What is the “sign of Jonah”? Christ has already used the reference in Matthew 12. There He gave more detail.

Matthew 12:39b-40, “...and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth [the idea here is, ‘...and no more!’].”

It is clear from this that the “Sign of Jonah” was the sign/power/the significance of the resurrection! Now when we think of the resurrection as a “sign,” what are we to think? Paul tells us how we should think:

Romans 1:4a, “Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead...”

The “sign of Jonah”/the sign of the resurrection is nothing less than the testimony of the regency and power of Christ as King over this world, over Satan, and over life and death! Truly, it is the sign that God reigns and that history is moving toward the end for which He has planned it. And thus each one of the “signs of the times” reflect the sovereignty of God over life. To behold them as one informed by the word of God is to be left in awe! Listen to the words of assurance that were given to the nation when it was sent into exile:

Isaiah 40:12-17, 21-26, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance, and the hills in a pair of scales? Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and *who* gave Him understanding? And *who* taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, and informed Him of the way of understanding? Behold, the

nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless... Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He who sits above the vault of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He *it is* who reduces rulers to nothing, who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have they been sown, scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, but He merely blows on them, and they wither, and the storm carries them away like stubble. To whom then will you liken Me that I should be *his* equal?' says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these *stars*, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of *His* power not one *of them* is missing."

Isaiah brings it to a climax when he writes this:

Isaiah 45:6b-7, "I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these."

This passage is talking about the bad things of life! Yes, God even controls these; let the earth wake up and worship Him while there is still time!

Amos 3:6, 8, "If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it? [The point?]?... A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?"

The signs of the time witness to the sovereignty and dominion of God over creation! What ought we to do? Let us "fear!"

2 Peter 3:11-12, "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!"

Do you understand that God is not a passive god who sits back wringing his hands when things don't go his way? God is the great I am who reigns supreme over all creation. To behold therefore a sign of the time is to behold an act of God as He rules over creation! Anthony Hoekema put it this way:

The signs of the times reveal... that God is at work in the world, busy fulfilling His promises and bringing to realization the final consummation of redemption. They reveal the central meaning of history: the Lord rules, and is working out His purposes." (Hoekema 1994,

This always amazes me. The non-believer beholds an act of a sovereign, omnipotent God; and they recognize it as such and then they blame God for natural disasters! But rather than respond with humility and repentance; for again in the words of Christ, "...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:5) they are moved to anger not realizing that the power of God that can shake a continent soon will be directed against them on account of their sin!

If you really believed that God was behind a natural disaster, wouldn't you repent and so turn from all rebellion against Him! Clearly, in accord with Romans 1, the non-believer hates God and is running from Him! That is their excuse... but what about ours?

John Bunyan in wrote the character in *Pilgrim's Progress* named, "Slothful." In response to the message of a passage like the one before us today, he did not refute it; he only said, "Yet a little more sleep!" I think this typifies so many today. We are as the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane on the verge of the most profound event this world has ever seen, and all we can think about is sleep! Our slumber is in the form of forgetfulness. Christ's response was, "Wake up! Be on the alert! Fast and pray!" (Matthew 26:41) Yet how do we sleep? What does this look like? We have long forgotten that we were saved for a higher purpose than making a living, earning money, and enjoying pleasure. We were created and saved for a different existence. We are part of a Kingdom against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail. Worship is our calling! Loving/serving God and our neighbor is our creed!

Oh Christian may the signs of the time wake us up! May they shake us out of our spiritual lethargy unto a zealous, passionate longing for the Day of the Lord and so the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

End Notes

¹ The events of Matthew 16 began just after the Lord crossed the Sea of Galilee from the Gentile area of Decapolis, where He had miraculously fed “four thousand men, besides women and children,” and came to the Jewish “region of Magadan,” on the western shore (Matthew 15:32–39). The exact location of Magadan, which Mark refers to as Dalmanutha (8:10), is unknown.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 16, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.