

Matthew 12:38-42

Introduction

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees has been escalating very quickly in chapter twelve. It began with the controversy over the Sabbath. When Jesus validates His own actions (healing on the Sabbath) and the actions of His disciples (plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath) by claiming that He Himself is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, the Pharisees respond by conspiring against him, and seeking to destroy Him. Then, when the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, Jesus responds by indicting the Pharisees with the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and calling them an evil brood of vipers. It's in the context of this environment, then, that we begin to read in verse thirty-eight...

I. Verse 38 – Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

Everything *sounds* courteous and polite (“*Teacher, we wish...*”), but we know that the *intent* is full of hate and spite. Haven't the scribes and Pharisees already seen enough signs? We know that they have seen Jesus heal the sick (12:9-14) and cast out demons (9:32-34; 12:22-24). And they certainly must have heard the reports of Jesus raising a girl from the dead (9:23-26). But somehow these miracles were not enough for them. After all, they can always be explained in other ways. Who is to say that Jesus was not practicing witchcraft and sorcery, or even just common trickery? *You* might say that such an idea is completely unreasonable, but how could you *prove* it wasn't so? How could the Pharisees really *know beyond any shadow of a doubt* that Jesus' power was from God, and not from Satan? They want not just compelling evidence, but unquestionable, irrefutable, and undeniable *proof* – the kind of proof that will *convince* them and take away all of their doubts. Isn't this a reasonable request? Can we blame the scribes and Pharisees? Should we really expect anyone to *believe* something as important as this without *proof*? Have you ever wished for evidence like this? Have you ever wished for proof? So perhaps Jesus could call fire down out of heaven. Maybe then, the Pharisees would believe. Or what if Jesus were to ascend up into the clouds and then return? Maybe this would be sufficiently convincing. Or why not show the Pharisees how He can walk on water and multiply loaves of bread and fish? Or what about a message written in the sky by angels? Or maybe Jesus could do something similar to Gideon's fleece or the shadow that reversed itself on Hezekiah's stairway. Whatever the sign is, Jesus should be able to do it “on command” (to reduce the possibility of trickery), and it should confront their physical senses with such shock and awe as to be utterly and totally convincing. “We wish to *see* a sign from you.”

The Pharisees wanted evidence that would *demand* from them a verdict. They wanted proof. But all the while, they never believed that Jesus was actually capable of giving them what they were asking for. If they had, they certainly wouldn't have asked Jesus to give them a sign (that would have been shooting themselves in the foot)! The Pharisees asked Jesus for proof because they didn't think He could give it. The Pharisees asked Jesus for evidence that would *demand* a verdict because they didn't believe He could provide any such evidence. So what an opportunity for Jesus! Maybe a sign like this is just what *some* of the Scribes and Pharisees need. At the very

least, it might convince some of the less hostile bystanders that Jesus is speaking the truth. And think of the damage if Jesus were to refuse – for then people might think He was incapable.

II. Verse 39a – But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it...”

In Mark’s Gospel, this is the end of the story (there is no “except the sign of the prophet Jonah):

- ✓ Mark 8:11-13 – The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

But how can Jesus say that “no sign will be given to this generation”, when He has already provided many signs, and will continue to provide even more signs (John 20:30-31)? Jesus is simply saying that He will not give them the *kind* of sign that they want to see. Oh yes, He *knows exactly* the kind of sign they want (an amazing sign on demand that will provide conclusive evidence and proof), and that is precisely the kind of sign they will never see. And why does Jesus say this? *Because* they are an evil and adulterous generation. And suddenly we’re not just talking about scribes and Pharisees, now we’re talking about the Jewish people as a whole. They are evil and *adulterous* because they have broken their covenant relationship with God. They are evil and adulterous, because in spite of all the revelation that they have been given in the Old Testament Law and Prophets, they have remained unbelieving and unrepentant. And so *because* they are *unbelieving* and unrepentant, they will not be allowed to see the kind of evidence and proof that they have asked for. But wait a minute! Who is it that *needs* evidence and proof? Isn’t it the *unbelieving* and the unrepentant? Why should Jesus withhold proof from people *because they don’t believe*? Doesn’t that seem backwards?

The scribes and Pharisees, and the generation of their day, had completely misunderstood the *purpose* of miraculous signs. They thought that the *reason* for signs was to provide the *evidence* that would *demand* a verdict. They thought that the point of signs was to give them the kind of *proof* that would create faith. But Jesus knew that this was not at all the purpose of signs, because no such sign could ever exist. Apart from *faith*, the evidence can always be interpreted and explained away. We might conclude trickery and slight of hand or some kind of elaborate ruse. We might conclude sorcery. We might conclude that our physical senses are deceiving us. Or we might plead temporary ignorance and conclude that someday the true explanation will come to light. There is no sign—no amount of outside evidence or proof—that can ever provide the basis for an absolute certainty of the truth of God’s Word. And this is as it should be. For if our certainty about the truth of God’s Word was dependant upon outside evidence, then the evidence would be ultimately more reliable and more authoritative than *God’s Word*. So then what is the value of signs and evidence? And how are we ever to come to a true, *100% certainty* about the truth of God’s Word, if *not* by signs, evidence, and proof?

III. Verse 39b-40 – No sign will be given to [this generation] 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.¹

Jonah was only three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish *because* on the third day he was vomited up onto dry land! In the same way, Jesus will be only three days and three nights in the heart of the earth *because* on the third day He will rise from the dead. This is the greatest sign that will ever be given to the evil and adulterous generation of Jesus' day, and yet it is not at all the kind of sign that they were asking for! In the first place, the sign would not be produced on demand. In the second place, they will not actually *see* the resurrection *happen*. Thirdly, they will not have the resurrection announced to them by *angels*. And fourth, they will never actually *see* the resurrected *Jesus*! So what kind of a *sign* is this? What kind of evidence is this? What kind of proof is this? An unbelieving and unrepentant generation will never be convinced by such a sign. Instead, they will deny that the resurrection ever happened. They will suggest that the empty tomb is to be explained by the fact that Jesus' disciples came by night and stole His body away while the guards were sleeping (Mat. 28:11-15). And yet over and over again, the apostles will preach the resurrection of Jesus to the Jewish people as the final "sign" and "*proof*" that He is the promised Messiah (Acts 2:22-36; 3:11-26; 4:5-12; 5:27-32; 13:26-39; 17:1-3)! Why will they do this, if they know that this kind of evidence will never be able to convince the unbelieving? Well, because that's not the point of the sign. The point of the sign is to convince those who *have faith* – those who have already come to *believe* God's Word as it has been revealed in the Old Testament. The Apostle John writes:

- ✓ John 20:30-31 – Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah promised in God's Word], the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Notice that John did not record the signs in order that people might believe in the God of the Old Testament. The Bible everywhere *assumes* that there is a God and that this God is the one who

¹ If Jesus was crucified on Friday (cf. Good Friday) and resurrected on Sunday, then He was only in the grave for two nights (not three). There are some who believe that Jesus was actually crucified on Thursday (or even Wednesday), but that leaves us with (at least) three nights and *four* days, and Jesus specifically said that He would be raised *on the third day*, not on the fourth day (Mat. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Acts 10:40; 1 Cor. 15:4). The Jewish Rabbi's said that, "The part of a day is as the whole day" (quoted in Morris). This explains why the chief priests and the Pharisees could remember Jesus saying that He would rise from the dead "*after three days*" (Mat. 27:63; cf. Mk. 8:31), and yet ask to secure the tomb only "*until the third day*" (Mat. 27:64). So if Jesus was raised on Sunday, and if Sunday was the third day, then Friday must have been the first day that He was laid in the tomb (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday equal three days in Jewish reckoning – one whole day and parts of two others). So what about three nights? If Jesus was raised "on the third day", then He can only have been in the tomb for two nights. First of all, it seems pretty clear that this is not meant to be an exact expression. It sounds more like a colloquialism rather than a formal and precise definition (as though Jesus were in the grave *not more* than, and *not less* than three *full* days and three *full* nights). The Jewish Rabbi's also said: "A day and a night make an Onah [time period; in this case a twenty-four hour time period] and a part of an Onah is as the whole" (quoted in Morris). So "a day and a night" could easily be a colloquial reference to *one* day (Onah), consisting of the light part of the day and the dark part of the day, and once again, "a part of an Onah is as the whole". So I understand that when Jesus said that He would be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights, His audience would have readily understood Him to be saying very simply that He would be in the heart of the earth for all, or part of three days (part of Friday, all of Saturday, and part of Sunday).

has revealed Himself in the pages of the Old Testament. John assumes this as well, and he knows that wherever there is true *faith* in the Word of God, then the signs that he has recorded (and especially the resurrection of Jesus) will be all the “*proof*” of His identity that anyone could possibly need. So after *assuming* the one true God of the Old Testament in Acts 17:22-29, Paul concludes his address to a *Gentile* audience with these words:

- ✓ Acts 17:30-32 – The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; ***and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.***” Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”

Paul doesn’t bother to give any evidence *for* the resurrection. For Paul, the resurrection *is* the evidence. It is the evidence that Jesus is the only Savior and Judge of the world. Paul knows that where there is no *faith* in the one true God of the Bible, the sign of Jesus’ death burial and resurrection will never convince anyone. So he didn’t come undone when some people mocked his “so-called evidence”. But wherever there is the seed of a true faith in God, then the good news of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection will be all the evidence of Jesus’ identity that anyone could ever possibly need. You see, the resurrection by itself is proof of nothing – just the fact that one day a long time ago, something really amazing happened. But in the context of a true faith in God’s word, the resurrection gives us a true assurance that God has appointed Jesus as the only Savior and Judge of the world. The Pharisees want proof because they don’t believe. But ultimately, proof is only given to those who believe. The evidence can only be rightly understood by those who believe.

IV. Verses 41-42 – 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.

The Gentile Ninevites repented, and all they had for “evidence” was the preaching of a strange foreign prophet, and perhaps the “sign” of his deliverance after spending three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. They had far less *evidence* than the Jews of Jesus’ day. They had far fewer *signs* and far less “*proof*”, and yet they still repented! So what was the difference? The difference was their *faith*. The Ninevites believed God’s word, while the Jews did not. They believed God’s word, and so the little evidence they had powerfully *confirmed, and strengthened, and validated* their faith. The Jews, on the other hand, disbelieved God’s Word, and so all the evidence in the world could do absolutely *nothing* to convince them. Therefore, on the Day of Judgment, the example of the Ninevites’ *faith* will condemn the Jews of Jesus’ day for their *unbelief*. The Gentile queen of Sheba came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and before she departed again for her own land, she said to Solomon:

- ✓ 2 Chronicles 9:8 – Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king for the LORD your God! Because your God loved Israel and would

establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness.

The only evidence this queen had was the wisdom of Solomon, Solomon's worship at the temple, and the majesty and glory of Solomon's reign as God's anointed (2 Chron. 9:1-4). She had far less evidence than the Jews of Jesus' day. She had seen no such signs as they had seen. So what was the difference? The difference was her *faith*. The queen of the South believed God's word, and so the little evidence she had powerfully *confirmed, and strengthened, and validated* her faith. The Jews, on the other hand, disbelieved God's Word, and so all the evidence in the world could do absolutely *nothing* to convince them. Therefore, on the Day of Judgment, the example of the queen of Sheba's *faith* will condemn the Jews of Jesus' day for their *unbelief*.

Conclusion

Ever since the Garden, man has been trying to play God. We have set ourselves up as the standard of truth. We have decided that the only things we can know for sure (epistemology) are the things that have been "*proven*" to us through logic (rationalism), or through our five physical senses (empiricism). In our arrogance, we have tried to submit God and His Word to our empirical and rationalistic testing. But the only way we can legitimately trust our mental logic or rely on our physical senses is if we *first* of all have *faith* in the God who created us, and who gave us our abilities to experience His world and to think rationally. If we start out without faith in God and His Word, then no amount of experience or reasoning, or evidence of any kind will ever lead us *to* God. On the other hand, when someone with faith sees the evidence, he is able to rightly understand and interpret the evidence, so that even a little tiny bit of evidence is a powerful and wonderful confirmation of his faith. Let us not seek to accumulate enough evidence *before* we will believe! Let us first of all believe in order that we might properly *understand and interpret* the evidence (cf. Augustine)! Let us humbly submit ourselves by faith to the Word of God, because it is only *faith* in the Word of *God* that can ever give us absolute, 100% certainty. Indeed, the value of signs and evidence is that they wonderfully confirm and strengthen the already existing certainty of faith.²

- ✓ Hebrews 11:1-2, 6 – Now *faith* is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* [certainty] of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation... And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

It is not the evidence that *demand*s the verdict of faith. It is *God's word*, and God's word alone that demands the verdict of faith.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 – For indeed Jews ask for signs [empiricism] and Greeks search for wisdom [rationalism]; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called [to those who have faith], both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

² Also, while evidence cannot create the certainty of faith in the unbeliever, it may at least "shut the mouth" of the unbeliever.

Where is your confidence? Is your confidence in signs and evidence and proof, or is your confidence in the veracity and trustworthiness of God's Word? Thomas said:

- ✓ John 20:25 – Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

Thomas still had faith in God and His Word, but he did not yet understand God's Word, and so he doubted the resurrection. But it was because of the faith that Thomas' still had that Jesus mercifully appeared to Thomas and said to him:

- ✓ John 20:27 – Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

To which Thomas could *only* reply: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28) There are some who might read this and say: "If only I could be given the same evidence, *then* I would believe the Bible." What they don't understand is that Thomas' doubt was overcome by the evidence *because he already* believed God's word. If Thomas' conviction had really been dependent upon what he saw, then one day he would have wavered. He would have wondered if he had not been imagining things. He would have questioned the accuracy of his memory. But that's not what happened. Why? Because Thomas knew the 100% certainty that comes not from signs and evidence, but from faith in God's word. As Jesus said to Thomas:

- ✓ John 20:29 – Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

The Apostle Paul writes:

- ✓ Romans 4:18-21 – In hope [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

May it also be said of us when we have come to the end of our lives that no distrust made us waver concerning the promise of God, but that we grew strong in our faith as we gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. May we not fear the wise men and debaters of this age who demand signs and seek wisdom (1 Cor. 1:20, 22). Instead, may we fearlessly proclaim the great "sign" of Christ's death and resurrection and the good news of salvation through His name.

Teaching our Children

- Q.** What did the Scribes and Pharisees want to see from Jesus?
A. They wanted to see a sign. They wanted more evidence to prove who Jesus was.
- Q.** The Pharisees had already seen many signs from Jesus. What could they still want to see?
A. The Pharisees wanted an amazing sign that would absolutely convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. The other signs were not convincing enough. After all, what if Jesus was actually casting out demons by the power of Satan?
- Q.** Why did Jesus refuse to give the Pharisees the sign that they were asking for?
A. Jesus refused to give them a sign because they were an evil and adulterous generation. They were unbelieving and unrepentant.
- Q.** But more than anyone else, isn't it the *unbelieving* who need to see signs, evidence, and proof?
A. No! We can only understand the true meaning of the signs if we have already learned to have faith in God and His Word. Apart from faith in God's Word, all the signs and evidence in the world will never convince anyone.
- Q.** What did Jesus say would be the greatest evidence (of who He was) that the Pharisees would ever be given?
A. The sign of Jonah... the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (But remember that the Pharisees would never get to *see* Jesus after His resurrection.)
- Q.** What is the only way for us to truly be convinced by this "sign" of the resurrection of Jesus?
A. We must first of all have faith in God and in His Word. Only then can we understand the true power and meaning of the resurrection.
- Q.** What is the only way to be absolutely certain of anything?
A. ~ All the signs and evidence and "proof" in the world can never give us absolute certainty. This can only come from faith in the truth and trustworthiness of *God's Word*.
~ For older children: Those who have faith in God's Word are able to *rightly understand* the evidence, and then the certainty of their faith is wonderfully supported and confirmed *by* the evidence!
- Q.** Whom did Jesus say would rise up at the judgment and condemn the people of His day for their unbelief?
A. The Ninevites (who repented at the preaching of Jonah), and the queen of the South (who came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon).
- Q.** Who had more signs and evidence, the people of Jesus' day or the Ninevites and the queen of Sheba?
A. The people of Jesus' day had been given far more signs and evidence.
- Q.** So what was the difference? How could the Ninevites and the queen of Sheba respond rightly when they had so "little" evidence?
A. Because they had come to know the certainty of faith in God's Word – and nothing can ever be more certain than the word of God.
- ✓ See Scriptures on page 5 and last Scripture on page 6. Help your children to see that *faith in God's Word* is the only sure foundation for life.