

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of signs. One of my favorite songs from the 1970s was "Signs" by The Five Man Electrical Band. They were one-hit wonders. The song started: "And the sign said, 'long-haired, freaky people need not apply.'" So I tucked my hair up under my hat and I went in to ask him why. He said, 'You look like a fine, upstanding young man. I think you'll do.' And I took my hat off and said, "Huh, imagine that, me workin' for you!" The chorus said, "Sign, sign, everywhere a sign. Blocking up the scenery, breaking my mind. Do this; don't do that can't you read the sign." It was a pretty good song and even had a Christian twist at the end. It said, "And the sign said, 'Everybody welcome, come in, kneel down and pray.' And when they passed around the plate at the end of it all I didn't have a penny to pay. So I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign. It said, 'Thank you, Lord for thinking about me. I'm alive and doing fine.'"

If you're a little younger you'll remember the 1993 hit from the Swedish group, Ace of Base, that said, "I saw the sign and it opened up my mind I saw the sign. No one's going to drag you up to get into the light where you belong." I never figured out what that really meant.

Have you seen those highway billboards that have a message from God? One says, "We need to talk. God" Another says, "Loved the wedding now invite me to the marriage. God." For those who are waiting on a sign from God there's one that says, "Well, you did ask for a sign."

Many years ago I was trying to help a guy whose marriage was in trouble. In the course of our conversation he told me he was certain God had wanted him to marry his wife. I asked how he knew and he told me when they were dating, one night he asked God to give him a sign if she was the one. He said at that moment he saw a falling star. He had received his sign. But when you live your life by the stars, that's not faith, that's astrology!

I wonder how many people, like my friend, have struggled over some decision and ended their prayer by asking God, "Please just give me some kind of a sign." In our text today Jesus offers some straight talk to sign-seekers.

Matthew 12:38-42. "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.' He answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.'"

Jesus said a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign. That's a perfect description of the some of the sign-seekers in our generation. Do you remember the woman in Florida who cooked a grilled cheese sandwich and saw the face of the Virgin Mary in the bread? It made the national news and she auctioned it off on eBay for \$28,000. There is a water stain

inside a toilet in the main train station in Mexico City that people claim looks like a blurry image of Jesus. So many sign-seekers have shown up, they had to close the toilet booth because it has become a shrine. People bow before the booth and lay flowers and gifts on the floor.

But my favorite sign-seeker story is what happened in Tennessee a few years ago. A woman turned on the light over her sink in the kitchen of her mobile home, and the light through the window projected the image of a face on the mobile home next to hers. It looked like Jesus. As you can imagine, hundreds of people flocked to see the sign. It was in the local paper. The woman was pretty smart because she started charging people \$5 to come into her trailer and turn on the light and see the face of Jesus. Because so many people came to see it, there was a traffic jam in the trailer park. The local television station even interviewed some people who had seen this miraculous sign. They asked a good old redneck what he thought after he came out from the seeing the image. He said, "I want my money back. It looks more like Willie Nelson!"

You may be a sign-seeker or know someone who is. Let's look at three important truths about seeking signs from Jesus.

1. FAITH DOESN'T REQUIRE A SIGN FROM GOD

Have you ever heard someone say, "I'll believe it when I see it?" That's not faith—that's sight. Faith says, "I'll believe whether I see any evidence or not." The Bible says, "We live by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7) Seeking a sign from God could be a sign itself, a sign of weak faith!

This desire for signs isn't new. You'll sometimes hear someone say they "laid a fleece before the Lord." That phrase comes from the story of Gideon in Judges 6. God called Gideon to lead an army to defeat the Midianites. But Gideon doubted God so He asked God for a sign. He laid out a lamb's fleece on the ground one night and said, "God, if you want me to do this, then make the ground dry, but the fleece wet." When Gideon got up the next morning the fleece was soaked and the ground was dry. But Gideon still wasn't convinced. He said, "Please don't be angry with me (I think he knew he was treading on dangerous ground). If you *really* want me to do this then tomorrow morning make the fleece dry and the ground wet." I can almost see God in heaven shaking His heavenly head and saying, "When is this guy going to get it?" But the next morning the ground was covered with dew and the fleece was dry. God gave Gideon two signs, but laying out a fleece is a poor way to find God's will.

I'm not proud to admit that I was once a sign-seeker. When I was in college I had a lot more zeal than knowledge. I was passionate about my faith, but I didn't have much spiritual maturity. I had already accepted God's call to preach, but I still had a few doubts. One of my favorite Bible professors was a wonderful man named Dr. Sigurd Bryan. He was a dignified teacher who always wore a coat and tie to class. He probably had at least a dozen different suits or sports coats, but there was a particular gold colored blazer that I liked. I'm pretty colorblind, but even I could tell his blazer was gold colored. During this time I was struggling with whether or not God really wanted me to be a preacher. So one morning I asked God for a sign. I said, "God if you really want me to be a preacher, please let Dr. Bryan be wearing his gold blazer in class today." I showed up early and waited with great anticipation for Dr. Bryan to arrive. And would you

believe that we had a substitute teacher that day? That would have served me right for asking for a sign, but actually Dr. Bryan showed up wearing his gold blazer.

You may say, "Wow!" But as I reflect back on that request, I realize how spiritually immature I was. I would never pray a prayer like that today, because I don't need signs to hear from God. I have something much more reliable—the Word of God.

The problem with looking for signs is that they can be misleading. During World War II after the Normandy Invasion the Allied troops were pushing eastward toward Germany. As the Germans retreated they changed the road signs so they pointed in the wrong direction. The soldiers soon learned to stop looking at the signs.

When you're looking for a sign from God you might misread the sign as well. This reminds me of the funny story about the young man who asked God for a sign for what He wanted Him to do with his life. He looked up at the sky and saw three clouds that looked like three letters, "GPC." So, the young man thought for a minute and said, "Go Preach Christ! Thank you, God!" So he devoted his life to preaching. But he was a terrible preacher. He couldn't keep a church. Finally after a miserable life of trying to be a preacher he died and arrived in heaven. He asked the Lord why He put those three letters in the sky. The Lord said, "What did you think they stood for?" He said, "GPC. Go Preach Christ." The Lord shook His head and said, "No, my son. They stood for Go Plant Corn!" Signs can be misleading.

2. THE GREATEST SIGN (The Sign of Jonah) IS JESUS' RESURRECTION

I enjoy some of the comedy of Bill Engvall. His famous routine is when he talks about how people ask stupid questions. He suggests these kinds of people should wear a sign so we'll recognize them. For instance; he says when he and his wife were moving from Texas to California, there was a U-Haul truck in their driveway and their house was full of boxes. His neighbor wandered over and asked, "Hey, are you moving?" Bill replied, "Nope. We just pack our stuff up every couple of weeks just to see how many boxes it takes. Here's your sign." Or he talks about the time he had a flat tire and drove into a filling station. The attendant came out and looked at it and said, "Got a flat tire, there?" Bill looked at the guy and said, "Nope. While I was driving around these other three tires just swelled up on me. Here's your sign."

When Jesus heard their request for a sign He must have been thinking, "How blind can you be? Haven't you seen my miracles and heard my words?" He said, "You want a sign? Here's your sign, the sign of Jonah." What is the sign of Jonah? I asked a group that question once and someone said, "Is it the sign of the fish?" I said, "No. Here's your sign." No, I really didn't say that, but they really said that because they were thinking about Jonah and the whale. I actually call it a fish, because once I was preaching on Jonah and got all tang-toungled. I kept talking about Jonah being in the welly of the bale.

We don't have to wonder about what the sign of Jonah is because Jesus explains it. He said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Jesus was predicting His resurrection. Jonah spent three days in the dark, cold belly of a huge fish. He was as good as dead, but God

miraculously delivered him after three days. The same thing happened to Jesus. He spent three days and three nights in a dark, cold tomb. But unlike Jonah, Jesus really died. But God raised Jesus from the dead.

Believing in the resurrection of Jesus is a requirement for salvation. Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Why doesn't the Bible say, "Confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus walked on water; or believe in your heart that He fed the 5,000?" It's because the resurrection of Jesus proves He is more than just a great teacher or a magic man. He was and is God and He rose from the dead and is alive forevermore.

Your salvation rises and falls on whether or not you truly believe Jesus died and was raised to life again. Some people are looking for proof, but they're making the same mistake Thomas made. They want a sign. On that first Easter night Jesus appeared to the disciples but Thomas was gone. Jesus vanished and when Thomas showed up they told Him about Jesus. He refused to believe. He said, "I have to see a sign. Unless I see the nail prints in Hands and place my hand in the hole in His side I won't believe." That's why he's called doubting Thomas. A week later Jesus appeared and He knew exactly what Thomas had said because He said, "Here, Thomas put your finger in the nail scars in my hands." Thomas fell to His knees and said, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus said something to Thomas and He said something about me. He said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." (John 20:29) Jesus was talking about me. He said blessed are those who have not seen, but they believe. Is that you? Do you recognize the sign of Jonah? Do you believe in your mind and in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead? Jesus said you are blessed if you believe it.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You want a sign? My Resurrection, dummy: Here's your sign."

3. GOD MAY PROVIDE SIGNS, BUT THE BEST EVIDENCE IS JESUS

You may be thinking, "Does God EVER use signs, or dreams, or miracles to communicate?" Of course He does. He can do anything He wants. He's God after all. But God has a better way to communicate to us today. The Bible says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things." (Hebrews 1:1-2)

We have something more valuable than Gideon had, the written Word of God. We have something even Peter, Paul, and Mary and the other early believers didn't have. We have Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts and the Epistles. And when the Bible speaks, it IS God speaking.

So seeking a sign from God isn't the best way to hear from Him. In fact, seeking a sign can even be sin. One of the temptations Satan presented to Jesus was to give proof He was God. He said, "Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. If you're really God, the angels will catch you and that will be a sign that you're God." Jesus said, "It is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to a test.'" (Matthew 4:7) There is only one place in the Bible where God invites us to test Him and

the tithing promise in Malachi 3. Otherwise, demanding a sign is putting Him to a test, and God's Word says, "Do not put the Lord your God to a test."

But some people even use the Bible to test God. They play what I call Bible Ouija Board. They take a Bible and say, "Speak to me, God." Then they close their eyes, open the Bible randomly and put their finger on a verse. Can God speak that way? Of course He CAN, but that can be dangerous too. I heard about one guy who did that. He took his Bible and said, "God please tell me what to do." He flipped his Bible open and plopped his finger down on Matthew 27:5. It says, "So Judas threw the money into the Temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself."

The very best way for you to hear from God is to let His Word abide in you. To do that you have to maintain a steady, daily diet of God's Word. Once you have it in your head and in your heart, you will be thinking about His Word all the time. When you're confronted with a challenge, or a challenge, you won't need a sign. You'll be able to say; "God's Word says this about that issue." You'll be like that person in Psalm 1 who is blessed because they mediate on God's Word day and night.

There are a couple of important personal applications we can gather from what Jesus said here.

(1) JESUS' PREACHING IS GREATER THAN JONAH'S—WILL YOU REPENT?

The story of Jonah was about more than getting swallowed by a fish. He preached to the people of Nineveh and told them to repent or God would destroy their city. He expected them to refuse his message and he wasn't upset with the idea of God destroying them. But to his disappointment and surprise, the entire city repented. Here's what the King of Nineveh said, "'Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.' When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." (Jonah 3:8-10) Always remember that God would rather pardon you than punish you.

Jesus' comment about the Jews could be applied to our nation today. He said the people of Nineveh would rise at judgment and condemn this generation, because they repented at the preaching of a reluctant prophet, and this generation has a better preacher: Jesus. And even today we have the Words of Jesus. He is saying, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Billy Graham once said if God doesn't judge America for its wickedness He would have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. But before national repentance can happen there must be personal repentance. In Jonah the Bible says they all repented "from the least of them to the greatest." Will you hear the Word of God today and turn from your sins and ask God to forgive you? If you refuse to repent, on Judgment Day someone from Nineveh will say, "Wow! I only heard Jonah. You heard Jesus and you still didn't repent? I can't believe it!"

(2) JESUS' WISDOM IS GREATER THAN SOLOMON'S—WILL YOU WORSHIP HIM?

Jesus also mentioned the Queen of Sheba who came "from the ends of the earth" to visit Solomon. We read this in 1 Kings 10: "She said to the king, 'The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard...Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel.'" (1 Kings 10:6-7, 9)

The Queen of Sheba traveled many months and at great expense to hear the Wisdom of Solomon. She was in awe, and she literally bowed before him and showered him with gifts. Solomon was wise, but he was like a child compared to the wisdom of Jesus. The poor Pharisees couldn't recognize that Wisdom in the flesh was standing right in front of them. They couldn't see the forest for the trees of their hatred for Jesus.

And today, there are millions who have heard about Jesus but they refuse to worship Him. They worship at the altar of their own intelligence. They are "too smart" to believe the Bible. They have decided the Bible is a book of fairy tales and legends. For instance, many people say the story of Jonah being swallowed by a fish is a myth. But Jesus referred to it as an historical event. It's as real as the historical event called the resurrection. But of course, the same people who say the story of Jonah is a fable also refuse to believe in Jesus' resurrection.

A little girl was a passenger on an airline flight. She was sitting next to her mother, and the man on the other side of her noticed she was reading a book. He asked her what she was reading and she said, "It's a book of Bible stories and I'm reading about Jonah and the Whale." The man thought he'd have a little fun with her so he said, "You don't really believe that Jonah swallowed that whale, do you?" She was pretty sharp so she caught his trick question and said, "Of course I don't believe Jonah swallowed the whale, but I do believe the whale swallowed Jonah." The man smiled and said, "Well, how can you prove that Jonah really was swallowed by a whale?" The little girl thought for a moment and said, "I guess when I get to heaven I'll just ask Jonah about it." The man smiled proudly as he considered his final bit of logic. He said, "Well, what if Jonah's not in heaven?" The little girl smiled at him and said, "Well if Jonah's not in heaven then YOU can ask him!"

So will you fall at the feet of the living Lord and worship Him as God today? We don't need signs. We have His Word on it!

CONCLUSION

Let me ask you a question. What if we started seeing supernatural miracles occur here every Sunday morning, do you think more people would believe? Let's imagine, for instance, that every Sunday God gave me the ability to levitate and float around this room while I preached. We'd have bigger crowds but we wouldn't have more believers. How can I say that? Because Jesus said it.

In Luke 16 he told the story of Lazarus and the rich man. They both died and Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man found himself in fiery torment in Hades. He could see Lazarus in heaven with Abraham, so he called out and said, "Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to my

home to warn my five brothers so that they will not come to this place." I've often said his statement proves people in hell are more burdened for lost people than we are. Abraham said, "Sorry, I can't do that." The rich man was persistent. He said, "But Father Abraham, I just KNOW if someone came back from the dead to warn them, they would see that miracle and they would repent!" Listen carefully to the words Jesus spoke next because it applied to the sign-seekers today. He said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, (meaning if they don't believe the Bible) they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:31)

Now if I was ever tempted to disagree with Jesus, this would be it. Surely if someone met a dead person telling them to get saved, they would drop down on their knees and get saved on the spot. I admit I have a rather rich imagination, and as I have thought about that statement in the past I've thought, "Wow, what a great visitation program that would be! What if we could go to the cemetery and resuscitate the bodies of people who had died the week before. Then we give them a few tracts and names and addresses of people who need the Lord, and send them out on visitation. Based on Michael Jackson's famous song, we could even call it 'Thriller Outreach'"

Imagine you're at home one evening and your doorbell rings. You open the door and you're in shock because standing there is old Fred, whose obituary was in the paper the week before. Fred smiles and says, "Good evening. I'm visiting for Green Acres Baptist Church. I want to share with you that I KNOW from personal experience that there really is a heaven and a hell. Now wouldn't you like to repent and be saved?"

Don't you think that would be effective? Not according to Jesus. He said if someone won't believe the Bible, then they wouldn't believe if they saw a supernatural sign like someone rising from the dead.

So, are you waiting on a sign from God? Here's your sign: Up from the grave He arose; With a mighty triumph over His foes; He arose a victor from the dark domain; And He lives forever with His saints to reign. He arose; He arose! Hallelujah Christ Arose."...Here's your sign.

OUTLINE

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PERSONAL APPLICATIONS

(1) Jesus' preaching is greater than Jonah's—will you repent?

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes