

### The Pharisees and Sadducees Ask the Lord for a “Sign”

#### Matthew 16:1-12

Matthew 16:1-12 - *“Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. <sup>2</sup> He answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red, <sup>3</sup> and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. <sup>4</sup> A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” And He left them and departed.*

*<sup>5</sup> Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. <sup>6</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” <sup>7</sup> And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have taken no bread.” <sup>8</sup> But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, “O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? <sup>9</sup> Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? <sup>10</sup> Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? <sup>11</sup> How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? —but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” <sup>12</sup> Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

#### Background Notes

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were politico-religious parties in Israel. Normally they didn't get along well together. The Pharisees were the legalistic conservatives of the day, and the Sadducees were the theological liberals of the day. (When do legalists and liberals ever get along well together?!) Well, the Pharisees and Sadducees found common ground in opposing the Lord Jesus. Here in Matthew 16 they ganged up on the Lord, trying to trip Him up by asking Him to show them a sign from heaven. The scribes and Pharisees asked the Lord for a sign in Matthew 12, and now here in Matthew 16, the Pharisees and Sadducees again asked Him for a sign.

When they asked the Lord to show them a sign from heaven, they may have been hoping for some kind of supernatural sign in the sky. More likely, however, they were implying that they didn't believe that His earthly miracles were of God. They wanted a “true” sign - proof from **heaven**! Back in Matthew 12 they attributed His miraculous powers to Satan, so the implication may be the same in both Matthew 12 and 16.

The Lord's answer to these skeptics was the same as His answer in Matthew 12. *“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and*

*adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For 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” (Matthew 12:38-40).* No sign would be given to these unbelieving skeptics except “the sign of the prophet Jonah.” The Lord, of course, was referring to His coming death, burial and resurrection.

In Matthew 16 the Lord again condemned the religious leaders for their lack of logic and common sense. *“When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times.”*

In essence the Lord was saying, “You know how to read your basic weather signs, so why can’t you discern the signs of the times?” To what “signs of the times” was our Lord referring? He certainly included the wonderful miracles that were taking place right before their very eyes. Those miracles were right in line with prophecies of the Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures. Certainly those miracles were signs of the times! And then there was the ministry of John the Baptist, announcing Jesus as the Messiah. The Pharisees and Sadducees certainly knew the prophecies predicting the forerunner of the Messiah, and they could not deny that John the Baptist was a prophet from God.

Maybe the Lord was even indicating that they should have been aware that the timing of the Messiah’s coming, given in Daniel’s prophecy, had arrived. The timing was certainly easy enough for them to calculate! All of these were signs of the times that the Pharisees and Sadducees should have been able to discern.

Do you realize that there are “signs of the times” today? Even unbelievers should be able to see and discern that the biblical signs for the Lord’s return are taking place right before our very eyes. What signs? Here are just three of the many signs of the times:

1. The return of Israel to its ancient homeland – as predicted in many Old Testament passages of Scripture.
2. The threat of nuclear, biologic and chemical warfare - as predicted in the Book of Revelation.
3. The Middle East crisis, and a search for a treaty between many nations – as predicted in the prophecy of Daniel.

Signs of the times are here, but people “convinced against their will are of the same opinion still” – both then and today. The blind and obstinate religious leaders of Jesus’ day refused to discern the signs of the times. They would not believe, just as blind and obstinate people refuse to believe today. So the Lord left them to their unbelief and went away (v4). The Lord’s action was yet another prophetic picture and indication that God would temporarily set Israel aside and turn to the Gentiles.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. People of great faith do not need sign.

*“A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” And He left them and departed” (v4).*

This was spoken to the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees, but it certainly applies to unbelievers today. How often have you heard unbelievers say, “If God would just give me a sign, I would believe!”? It’s just an excuse -- they wouldn’t believe, even if they saw a “sign.”

If there is a willingness to believe, signs are not needed. **Scripture is all that is needed!** Look at Romans 10:17: *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* And do you remember the rich man in Luke 16? He said that his brothers would believe if someone were to rise from the dead as a miraculous sign. God’s answer was that if they wouldn’t believe the Scriptures, they wouldn’t believe - even if someone were to rise from the dead.

This is still true today. If you’re not yet a Christian, you might be telling yourself that you’d believe if you saw a sign - like the miracle of someone rising from the dead. For you, this would be the sign from heaven that Christianity is true. Well, someone **has** risen from the dead - the Lord Jesus Christ! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a very well attested miracle, and no one has been able to refute the evidence for His resurrection. The “sign of the prophet Jonah” has been given - but unbelievers still will not believe. The evidence is there if anyone is willing to believe.

There’s a lesson here for believers as well: **great faith doesn’t need signs!** Human nature loves signs, because human nature is sinful. Even as Christians, we need to be careful. We still have the sinful nature, and believers can fall into the trap of wanting signs.

Have you ever longed for “a sign”? God can guide you in your walk of faith in many ways, but wanting supernatural signs is evidence of little faith! People of great faith do not need signs.

### 2. People of little faith do not have spiritual discernment.

Why did the Lord say to the disciples, *“O you of little faith...” (v8)*? It was because the disciples had no discernment – no idea what the Lord was talking about. The Lord said that they were to take notice and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees - and the disciples thought He was talking about bread (v6)! They thought that He was telling them not to buy literal bread from the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees.

The disciples were way off the mark here. The Lord was talking about the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, which permeated and propagated like leaven, or yeast. The Lord had to rebuke the disciples for their lack of spiritual understanding and discernment: *“Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? — but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

There’s a lesson here for believers today. The disciples had saving faith, but they were rebuked for having little faith as believers. All believers have saving faith, but many Christians have very little discernment in their understanding of the Word, or in their Christian walk and lifestyle. Christians who have been believers for many years have asked me the simplest questions about the Bible or about the Christian life, and I wonder where these people have been? They have not grown or matured in their faith. They have not spent much time in the Word. As a result, they are believers of “little faith,” and they have very little spiritual discernment.

Does the Lord have to rebuke you for your “little faith”? People of little faith don’t have spiritual discernment.

## **Practical Application**

### **How many more chances will you get?**

The Lord gave the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees chance after chance to turn from their unbelief, but they wouldn’t. Ultimately they lost their last chance, and they are eternally lost.

Are you an unbeliever? How many chances will you get? A young man I know has had many chances to trust the Lord, but he is still an unbeliever. He has attended many Bible studies, but he’s still a skeptic. He’s been to a Christian camp, but he’s never made a profession of faith. Last week he was rescued from a tragic nightclub fire that killed 100 people. At the last minute, someone pulled him out from a pile of bodies near the door. One more chance - but as of right now he’s still an unbeliever.

Again, I ask you the question: are you still an unbeliever? The Lord loves you and died for your sins so that you could be saved. You know that you’ve had many chances to be saved – but the chances will not go on forever! How many more chances will you get?