

The Pharisees and Sadducees Demand a Sign
Matthew 16:1-4
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Opposition to Christ has been building throughout the Gospel of Matthew. The second chapter saw Herod the Great seeking to kill Jesus. There have been attempts to oppose Him through questions (Matthew 12:2,10), plots to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14), and claims that His miracles were from the evil one (Matthew 12:24). The Pharisees have been the leading antagonists against Jesus, but the scribes also opposed Him (Matthew 9:3). Later, these two groups joined together to confront Jesus (Matthew 12:38; 15:1-2).

The growing opposition to Jesus has been a theme throughout this Gospel. Jesus' response to His enemies has been intensifying as well. In this section of Matthew, both the increasing opposition to Jesus and the increasing rebuke by Jesus is portrayed.

The demand by the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1)

A new alliance forms in Matthew 16:1 between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. This is the first time in the Scripture that we find these two groups cooperating together. The grammar of the Greek text links these two groups together by using one definite article. The phrase, "*The Pharisees and Sadducees came,*" instead of "the Pharisees and the Sadducees came," groups these two groups into one unit, acting together with the same approach and purpose.

The reason this is significant is that they were far from allies in their leadership of the nation. These were the largest and most influential groups among the Jews, and together they comprised the Sanhedrin, the ruling council that would be involved in the trial of Jesus.

However, they were at odds in both their doctrine and their authority. The Sadducees held the power over the ruling council and were aligned with the chief priests who served the temple. The Pharisees were more influential among the Jewish people. The Pharisees exerted authority through their teaching and traditions, while the Sadducees exerted authority through the institutions, such as the temple and the Sanhedrin.

The Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed doctrinally as well. Acts 23:1-10 shows the animosity between these groups, when Paul uses their doctrinal positions to disrupt his trial.

"But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, 'Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!' As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there occurred a great uproar" (Acts 23:6-9).

So for the two strongly opposing parties of Jewish leaders to join together against Jesus is certainly an intensification of the opposition. It manifests the saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." We see this with Herod and Pilate, who joined later together against Jesus, *"Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other" (Luke 23:12).*

Since both groups made up the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, it is apparent that not only had two enemies joined to oppose Jesus, but they represented the ruling council in doing so. This was likely a form of official delegation that brought Sadducees to travel from Jerusalem to Galilee (hence the phrase "came up" in verse one). This then was a more formal increase in the Jewish opposition to Jesus.

Matthew signals this opposition by describing their purpose as testing Jesus, like Satan did in Matthew 4:7. Mark adds that *"The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven" (Mark 8:11).* This was not a simple request but was filled with antagonism.

Their demand was *"to show them a sign from heaven."* This is remarkable because the Pharisees had already asked for a sign earlier but were rebuked. *"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet'" (Matthew 12:38-39).* Possibly Matthew 12 involves Pharisees from Galilee, while Matthew 16:1 are the Pharisees who came up from Jerusalem (Matthew 15:1).

Nevertheless, the Jews had a great propensity for signs. *"For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).* The Jews continued to ask for signs even after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Indeed, the Lord provided ample signs that testified to His authority and validated His words (cf. Hebrews 2:3-4), but these leaders considered His works inadequate.

The response by Jesus to the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:2-4)

Before we examine the response to Jesus, we must recognize the textual issue that surrounds Matthew 16:2-3, *“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?”* The NASB includes a footnote that states, “early mss do not contain the rest of v. 2 and v. 3.” The ESV’s footnotes has, “some manuscripts omit the following words to the end of verse 3.” The NIV says, “Some early manuscripts do not have *When evening comes ... of the times.*” Nevertheless, each translation chose to include these words in their text as part of the New Testament.

The two oldest complete Greek manuscripts, dating from the early 300s AD, omit these verses, along with a small number of manuscripts from several centuries later. However, there are two manuscripts which date from the 400s AD that include these verses, along with a very large number of later manuscripts. Some older translations into Latin and Syriac include this section and a few do not. Therefore, the textual evidence does not weigh heavily either way. Jerome (d. 420 AD) noted that most manuscripts known to him did not have these words in them. Nevertheless, he included Matthew 16: 2-3 in the Vulgate, his renowned Latin translation of the Bible.

In the consideration of whether this text was original to the Gospel of Matthew, we must consider how it might have become added later, or conversely, left out of later copies. There is a very similar passage found in Luke 12:54-56, *“And He was also saying to the crowds, ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming,’ and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, ‘It will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?”* Many consider Matthew 16:2-3 as an assimilation of Luke 12:54-56 into Matthew’s Gospel in the copying process.

However, these two texts are similar, but far from identical. Luke’s Gospel involves the interpretation of clouds and wind, while Matthew’s Gospel involves the interpretation of the color of the sky. Also, Matthew 16:2-3 speaks of the time of the day, which is absent from Luke 12:54-56. If Matthew 16:2-3 was borrowed from Luke 12:54-56, it was done only generally, with little specificity. The question would then be why the wording was not much closer in Matthew.

While there are difficulties in understanding Matthew 16:2-3 as being added from Luke 12:54-56, there are also difficulties in understanding why copyists would have left out this text in copying Matthew 16:2-3. While it often makes sense why a copyist would insert a parallel passage into another Gospel story (although Luke 12 is not parallel to Matthew 16), it is often more difficult to understand why something might have been intentionally left out. The errors of omission are usually more due to an accidental overlooking of a word or a phrase.

It is very unlikely that such a lengthy piece of text would be accidentally overlooked by a copyist. However, it is possible that one or more copyists might have omitted this text intentionally. This is because of the analogy of the appearance of the sky. In the area of Judea this type of red sky in the morning is normally a precursor to a coming rain. This is not true of other areas, such as Egypt, where the climate allowed for the preservation of buried manuscripts to survive many centuries. There are some highly regarded textual analysts who have hypothesized that this text was omitted because it would have been confusing for the local readers of their copy.

Since the text could be understood with or without this questionable text, it is difficult to arrive at a clear conclusion to this matter. However, because it has survived in the vast majority of manuscripts with an understandable rationale of what may have happened to cause it to be omitted by some Greek texts, it is better to consider it to be authentic to Matthew's original text and study it as such.

The point that Jesus made is clear and straightforward. If the Pharisees and Sadducees could interpret the signs in the sky in order to predict the weather accurately, then surely they should be expected to understand the spiritual nature of what had so obviously come upon them. The *"signs of the times"* were the miracles of Jesus that pointed people to listen to the truth of His teaching. The signs that Jesus had been performing were overwhelmingly demonstrating that He was from God and had authority over all, yet they were oblivious to the obvious. They could observe the nature of the sky and connect it to weather patterns but could not observe the nature of the miracles and connect it to the Messiah.

This rhetorical question *"Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?"* could also be interpreted as a statement of fact. The ESV and NIV take this approach, while the NASB, KJV represent it as a rhetorical question. Either translation is possible and both serve to communicate the point at hand.

The proof that they could not *"discern the signs of the times"* was that *"they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven."* If they could see the significance of the miracles that Jesus did, they would not have come to Him to ask for a sign. Rather, they would have embraced the signs that He already had provided.

Jesus was testified to by John the Baptist, fulfilled the prophecy of the Old Testament regarding the Messiah, and had done a wide variety of miracles, in a wide variety of places, among a wide variety of people. His miracles alone were all the evidence that any spiritually minded person should need to believe in Him. When John the Baptist *"sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"*" (Matthew 11:2-3), *Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM."* These works of Jesus were prophesied in the Old Testament and were sufficient to convince anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear.

Today, there are many very capable and intelligent people who are able to study details of physical science and draw meaningful conclusions, and yet who are ignorant of the knowledge of God. In spite of whatever facts have been seen or heard about God, they *"suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them....For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools."* (Romans 1:18-19, 21-22). The issue is not intellectual, but spiritual.

Jesus concluded, *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign"* (Matthew 16:4). According to Mark 8:12, Jesus said these words while *"sighing deeply in His spirit."* Although the Pharisees and Sadducees opposed Him and came up to test Him, Jesus still felt a deep emotional disappointment with their unwillingness to recognize the power of His merciful deeds

Therefore, this rebuke was not in condemnation, *"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him"* (John 3:17). Rather, this statement was a direct attempt to awaken them to the essence of their evil of dismissing His miracles. It was offered with the desire to turn them from their evil ways.

Jesus also did not only isolate these Pharisees and Sadducees as being uniquely evil, for they were representatives of an evil generation. It was the whole generation of Jews who rejected Him. The Pharisees (and scribes) were called an *"adulterous generation"* earlier in Matthew 12:39 because the Old Testament frequently speaks of Israel's failures with the analogy of a marriage. When the people of Israel practiced idolatry and apostasy, it was represented as adultery, as a woman (Israel) leaving her husband (God).

"Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, 'Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. I thought, "After she has done all these things she will return to Me"; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also.'" (Jeremiah 3:6-8).

"As for your adulteries and your lustful neighings, the lewdness of your prostitution on the hills in the field, I have seen your abominations. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will you remain unclean?" (Jeremiah 13:27).

"Do not rejoice, O Israel, with exultation like the nations! For you have played the harlot, forsaking your God. You have loved harlots' earnings on every threshing floor" (Hosea 9:1).

The Jewish people of Jesus' day were rejecting their Messiah, and this was the unfaithfulness of an adulterer. Like an adulterer, they were unsatisfied with what Jesus had provided for them and sought more. Their desire for a sign from heaven would not be given, with one exception, the sign of Jonah. Jesus referenced what the sign of Jonah was earlier in His similar rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes, who were seeking for a sign, *"An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will 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 will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth"* (Matthew 12:39-40).

Just as Jonah was delivered by God from certain death in the stomach of the great fish, so Christ was delivered by God from actual death through the resurrection. The resurrection is the one, and greatest, sign they would receive. Jesus based His resurrection on the factual account of Jonah, in contrast to those who view it as a mere fictional story.

In the parallel passage of Mark 8:12, Jesus' recorded words are, *"Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."* This is not inconsistent with Matthew 16:4, since these Jews would not recognize the resurrection of Christ. In brevity, Mark simply omits this exception, which is insignificant as there was no response. As Jesus put it in Luke 16:31, *"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead."*

The withdrawal from these leaders is significant. *"He left them and went away"* used a stronger word for this withdrawal than any time previously. He left them (KATALEIPO) in a sense that included forsaking or abandoning them. The reason *"He left them and went away"* was because they were evil. This is the beginning of His turning to eventually head to Jerusalem to suffer, be killed and be raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). Jesus had just returned to the Jewish area of Galilee when He was confronted by the Pharisees and Sadducees seeking for another sign. His destination was across the Sea of Galilee, to the north into the district of Caesarea Philippi. He would only return to Galilee to pay a tax (Matthew 17:24) before departing for Jerusalem (Matthew 19:1). His ministry to His disciples would take the focus of ministry until His arrival in Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1).

Conclusion

Just as the Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a sign from Jesus, even though there were a great abundance of signs Jesus did in many settings, so people today demand God perform to their expectations. Many are, in essence, making the same demands of the Lord in order to get their own desires fulfilled. The Lord is calling men to follow Him, not asking men how they would like Him to serve them on their terms. This is why He is the Lord Jesus Christ, with all authority in heaven and on earth.

Many Bible teachers will use Matthew 16:1-4 to argue that we should discern the signs of the times, and observe the world events in such a way that leads to the conclusion that Christ's coming is soon because we are at the end of this present age. This appetite to discern present events has proven fruitless for the two millennia since Christ spoke these words to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Christ's return is imminent, but unknown, and in order for His coming to be imminent, there can be no intervening event that is necessary in order to bring the rapture of the church. Our focus should be on obedience to the word of God, not upon the examination of world events to project what God will do when He has told us *"It is not for you to know"* (Acts 1:6-8).