

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 10 November 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Here's Your Sign!

Matthew 15:32 – 16:12

There is a story that my parents have told me many times, of something that happened in February of 1978, when I was a toddler. They called it the “Big Blow of ’78.” The “Big Blow of ’78” was the worst blizzard in the history of my home state of Ohio, as well as in many other states in that region of the country. (In fact, they say it was the worst blizzard in U.S. history.) My dad happened to be driving from Chicago back to Ohio when this storm began. He was in the middle of the plains of Indiana when the snow began to come down; and very soon, it was whiteout conditions, and he was forced to stop at a motel in the Fort Wayne area, so that he wouldn’t be stranded on the road. By the next morning, the snow had completely buried his motel; and he was forced to stay there for more than a week before the national guard had cleared the roads sufficiently for him to drive back to Ohio. The snowdrifts were as high as 30 feet (more than 9 metres) deep in places; and at least 90 people in half a dozen states either froze to death, or died of asphyxiation in their vehicles. Whole trains and lorries were buried beneath the snow. (One lorry driver survived by sticking a pipe out his window, and up through the snow, so that he could have air.) The wind chill during that blizzard reached as low as -51 Celsius; and there were wind gusts of up to 179 km per hour. My mom was at home with my brothers and my sister and me during the storm; and she said that the sound of the wind was the most eery thing she had ever heard. She said that it was like the sound of a freight train roaring by!

The Blizzard of ’78 hit very suddenly and unexpectedly. However, there *was* one notable sign that a big storm was coming. My parents say that before the storm, the sky was the most eery green colour that they had ever seen. I remember seeing greenish skies at times, when huge thunderstorms, hailstorms, or even possible tornadoes were in the forecast; but my parents say that the green sky that they saw before the Blizzard of ’78 was the scariest-looking sky they had ever seen. I can’t help but wonder if any of the people who lost their lives might have been spared if they had heeded this sign, and gotten to a safe place.

You don’t need to be a meteorologist to know that a storm is coming, because the sky often gives us signs in advance. (For example, we’ve all heard the saying, “Red sky at night, sailors’ delight; red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.”) People in Jesus’ day were familiar with the “red sky” weather sign; and Jesus used it to illustrate the *prophetic* signs of the times, which pointed to Him as the Messiah. The people of Israel *should* have known that their Messiah had arrived, and was among them, because the signs had been given beforehand; yet, most of them missed it. This morning, we will be talking about the most important messianic sign of all—the sign of the prophet Jonah. We will also see how we, as believers, should beware of the false traditions of men. The title of this message is ***Here’s Your Sign!***

Read Matthew 15:32-39.

I. Christ's acceptance of the Gentiles (15:32-39)

In last week's message, we read about the period in Jesus' ministry when He and the disciples went on a preaching tour in the region of Tyre and Sidon, in Lebanon. Because the people of Israel at large had rejected their own Messiah, Jesus was now offering Himself to the *Gentiles!* We also saw how Jesus cast a demon out of a Syrophenician woman's daughter (although He did remind her that He had been sent *first* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel). By now, the word was spreading far and wide that Jesus was preaching to the *goyim*—the heathen!

Well, this morning's passage, we find that Jesus and the disciples are still in the region north of Israel, in Gentile territory. In **Mark 7:31**, the Bible says, "***And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis.***" Decapolis was a region on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee; so apparently, Jesus and the disciples walked southward through the Gentile provinces of Syria, Ituraea, Gaulantis, and Decapolis, before wrapping around the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, and finally coming to the shore. All this time they were surrounded by Gentiles; and Jesus was healing and ministering to them. One of these Gentiles was a man with a speech impediment.

Read Mark 7:31-37.

Can you imagine how astonished the disciples must have been as they made this trek through Gentile lands? All their lives, they had been taught that the Messiah was only for the Jews; but now, here was the Messiah Himself, showing them that He had come to save the *Gentiles*, too! While the Jews *will* have special privileges in regard to the land of Israel during the Kingdom Age, the Gentiles will partake in the Kingdom, as well (*if* they repent of their sin, and believe on Jesus as their Lord and Saviour)!

With this in mind, we now come to **Matthew 15:32-38**. In this passage, we find Jesus doing the same kind of miracle that He had done for the Jews only a few weeks earlier: namely, He fed 4,000 people with only seven loaves of bread, and a few fishes! Let's read those verses again. (**Read Matthew 15:32-38.**)

In these verses, we find that the disciples are, once again, *doubting* the Lord! Now, if this had been the first time that Jesus had done this kind of miracle, their doubts would have been understandable. However, this *wasn't* the first time: it was the *second* time. The disciples had already seen Jesus feeding 5,000 men (not counting women and children) with five loaves of bread and two fish, only a few weeks earlier. Now they were in a situation in which there were 4,000 men, and 7 loaves of bread; and, once again, Jesus challenged the disciples to feed the people. You'd think that they would have remembered what had happened before, and would have immediately begun to prepare for Jesus to feed the crowd. However, this was *not* how they reacted. Just as they had done before, they said, "***Whence should we have so much bread in the wilderness, as to fill so great a multitude?***"

Now, in all fairness to the disciples, this kind of miracle happened only twice in the 3 ½ years of Christ's ministry. (That would have been only 2 days out of about 1,260 days.) Every other day in those 3 ½ years they had to rely upon God to provide bread for them in the ordinary way. (This is why

Jesus taught them to pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread.*") Yet, when it *did* come time for Christ to provide food from out of nothing, He expected them to believe that He could do it. Sadly, they failed the test—even though they had *passed* the test of faith on previous occasions. We mustn't forget that Christ had given *the disciples* the power to do miracles while they were preaching throughout the cities of Israel; and at the time, they had had enough faith to perform those miracles. Why did they not remember these things now?

With perfect hindsight, it is easy for us to look at the disciples' lack of faith and say, "Tsk, tsk. How could their faith have been so weak?" Of course, it's easy for us to say this, because we have the complete Word of God in front of us, and we know how this story ended. But would we have done any better if we had been in their sandals? Probably not! How often have *we* forgotten God's provision for us in the past? Now, the gift of performing *miracles* (acts that defy the physical laws of nature) has not been given to Christians since the time of the Apostles; but God does work *providentially* for us all the time, when we pray. The Lord even still heals people miraculously, when He so chooses. While I was on deputation in the U.S., I met a brother in Christ who had experienced an undeniable and amazing miracle. (And his pastor and other church members testified to it.) He had been in a serious car accident, in which his head literally was severed from his torso, with the exception of his trachea, the main arteries, and his spinal cord. (The fact that he survived was, in itself, a miracle, because his head was literally hanging from his body; and the spinal cord is not elastic enough to bend that much without snapping!) However, the most astounding thing of all was that several vertebrae in his neck were crushed to powder; but after the people in his church prayed for him, they became whole again! (The doctor trembled and turned as white as a sheet when he saw clear, whole, healthy vertebrae on the x-ray screen! He knew he had seen evidence of a miracle!)

We serve a mighty God; and He protects and provides for us in whatever way He wishes. Yet, we often forget, don't we? Sometimes we *do* trust the Lord as we ought; and God honours our faith, and comes through for us in a powerful way. Yet, when faced with another formidable problem farther down the road, we forget all about God's provision for us in the past; and we fall back on our own human reasoning. We need to *remember*; brethren! Don't forget what God has done for you in the past! Ask the Lord to *help* you to remember His past provisions for you, so that you will be ready to act in faith when the next test comes along!

Read Psalm 103:1-5.

Now, let's get back to those 4,000 people that Jesus fed with the seven loaves and few fish. We know, for a fact, that these people were Gentiles, and not Jews. For one thing, this event happened somewhere between Tyre and Decapolis; and all these lands were Gentile territory. Another reason we know that these were Gentiles is that Matthew uses the word *spuris* for "basket." A *spuris* was a large, hamper-like basket; and this was the kind of basket that Gentiles used. *Kophinos* was a smaller basket; and it was the kind of basket that the Jews used. *Kophinos* is the word that is used in all four accounts of the feeding of the 5,000 (who, of course, were Jews); but *spuris* is the word that is used in the account of the feeding of the 4,000, both in **Matthew** and in **Mark**. So clearly, Jesus performed this miracle for *Gentiles*.

Why, then, did Jesus do this miracle for the Gentiles? First of all, He did it out of love and compassion for their physical needs. He didn't want them to faint in their journey home. Secondly, He wanted to show these Gentiles that He was the Bread of Life to them, too! Remember the day after Jesus had fed

the 5,000, when He told the Jews, ***“I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst?”*** Well, Jesus was now offering Himself to the Gentiles in the same way! My friends, it doesn't matter who you are, or where you're from, or what ethnicity you are: Jesus came to be the Bread of Life to *you*! If you will believe on *Him*, and Him alone, He will give you eternal life (which means a relationship with God, that lasts forever). Just as bread gives life and nourishment to the body, so Christ will give you the spiritual nourishment that you need to live your life for Him! Believing on Jesus is as simple as picking up a piece of bread and eating it! Stop trusting in yourself, and trust in *Christ* instead!

Now, if you were here last week, you'll remember that when Jesus was speaking to the Syrophenician woman, He implied that she, as a Gentile, was like a “household puppy,” eating scraps from the Master's table, after the “children” (the Jewish believers) had been fed. As we saw, the word *kunárion* was a word which referred to a *household dog*—a family pet. Now, maybe some of you are still a little perplexed as to why Jesus would refer to us Gentiles as a “puppies” in the spiritual household of Abraham. Does this mean that Gentiles are less important to God? No it doesn't; and here is the proof!

Read John 10:14-18.

What does Jesus mean when He says that He has ***“other sheep...which are not of this fold”***? He's talking about *Gentiles*! Jesus had told the Syrophenician woman that He was not sent ***“but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel”***; and He then compared believing Gentiles to household puppies. But now, He is comparing believing Gentiles to “sheep” from ***“another fold.”*** Jesus is saying that very soon, there would be no difference between Jew and Gentile! Both Jew and Gentile would be brought into one “fold”; and this “fold” is the local church!

Now, it's important to remember that there was no such thing as a church with *full-blooded Gentiles* in it until 10 years after Jesus had gone back to Heaven. It wasn't until about A.D. 41 that God revealed to Peter that full-blooded Gentile believers (Romans, in particular) were now allowed into the local church. In **Acts 10**, we read about how God instructed Peter to preach the Gospel to a Roman centurion named Cornelius, in the city of Joppa; and as he preached, all the Gentiles in the room believed the Gospel. Then, the Holy Spirit came upon each of them, and indwelt their bodies. Not only that, but to show that God had now accepted these Gentiles, He caused them to speak in languages that they had not known before, just as the Jews had done on the Day of Pentecost 10 years earlier. When Peter saw the Gentiles speaking in other tongues, just as the Jews had done on the Day of Pentecost, he got God's message. He now realised that God had accepted the Gentile believers, and that they needed to be baptised, and brought into church membership. And so, he baptised them all that day; and they became members of a brand-new church, right there in the city of Joppa.

But that's not all. You see, God doesn't want there to be “Gentile churches” over here, and “Jewish churches” over there. During this New Testament age, there is no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers. Now, as we saw last week, God *does* still command us to take the Gospel to ***“the Jew first.”*** We do need to remember that we Gentiles are partaking of the spiritual blessings of a covenant that God originally made with *Israel*. God isn't done with Israel; and He *will* use them as a nation again in the future, when they finally repent and believe on Him. Yet, at the same time, God does not put the Jews on one “tier” in the local church, and the Gentiles on a lower “tier.” When Jews and Gentiles are in the same congregation, God sees them as “one.” All who believe on Christ,

whether they be Jew or Gentile, are commanded to be baptised and join themselves to a local church; and in that church, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. God sees them as one unit!

Read Ephesians 2:11-22.

II. Christ's abandonment of the Pharisees (16:1-4)

(Read Matthew 15:39 – 16:4.) Jesus had just spent several weeks teaching His disciples that Gentiles who believe on Him *will* have a place in His Kingdom. Jesus was preparing His Apostles to take the Gospel to Gentiles one day; and the Gentiles were obviously *hungry* for the Gospel message!

Sadly, though, most of Jesus' own people were *not* hungry to hear the Gospel. In fact, when the Lord arrived back on Jewish soil, a "*not* welcome" committee was waiting for Him! In the last verse of **chapter 15**, Matthew reports that after Jesus and the disciples had sailed across the lake from Decapolis, they arrived in the shore of Magdala; and who were there to greet Him but His old friends, the Pharisees and Sadducees? (And they were in a particularly scornful mood.) Jesus had just spent several weeks among the Gentiles; and I'm sure they had a thing or two to say about *that*. They probably threw all kinds of taunts and jibes at Him—such as asking Him whether He intended to be the Messiah of the heathen.

Now, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were *not* friends of each other. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives, and the Sadducees were the religious liberals; and they were usually at each other's throats. However, they had a common enemy: and that enemy was Jesus. Somehow, they were able to unite together to mock Jesus: and as they mocked Him, they demanded that Jesus give them some kind of sign "*from heaven*" to prove that He was the Messiah. You see, somewhere along the line, the rabbis had gotten the notion that demons can do works on earth, but that a sign from heaven can come only from God.¹ However, this was a flawed idea. With God's permission, Satan was able to bring fire down from heaven to destroy Job's cattle, was he not? (Satan will even bring down fire from heaven during the Tribulation period, and will use this heavenly "sign" to convince people to worship the Antichrist.) Once again, the Pharisees' tradition didn't match up with Scripture; yet, that didn't keep them from using their false tradition to accuse Jesus. According to them, Jesus' miracles (such as healing people, raising people from the dead, etc.) had all been performed down here on earth, and not from heaven; and therefore, He wasn't from God.

How, then, would Jesus respond to *this* charge? Surely this time He would give them their wish, and show them a sign from heaven, wouldn't He? After all, this was a showdown. Like a bunch of schoolyard bullies, the Pharisees and Sadducees had taken a stick, drawn a line in the sand, and "double-dog dared" Jesus to cross over the line. If Jesus did nothing, it would appear that He had lost the showdown; and His credibility would be at stake. Yet, once again, Jesus did the opposite of what *we* would expect Him to do: He *refused* to give them any sign! Not only that, but He walked away from them! Time and time again in recent months, Jesus had *withdrawn Himself* from people who rejected Him; and now, He was doing it again. Why? Because the Pharisees and Sadducees weren't asking for a sign to help *increase* their faith: they were asking for a sign in scorn and unbelief, in order to "prove" that Jesus couldn't do it. Asking for a sign because your faith is *weak* is one thing. God sometimes does answer the request of those who sincerely ask for a sign to boost their faith. However, asking for a sign in mockery and unbelief is something that the Lord will *not* respond to. The religious rulers were tempting God; and Jesus would have no part of it. Jesus isn't in the business of doing "tricks" for people who wouldn't believe on Him, even if He *did* do what they demand!

You see, the signs of the Messiah's coming had been given centuries earlier; but most people refused to believe the signs that they were seeing with their own eyes. In **Isaiah 7:14**, God had foretold that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. In **Micah 5:2** and **Isaiah 9:1-2**, God had foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem-Ephrathah, yet would arise from the land of Galilee. In **Isaiah 35**, God had foretold of how the Messiah would heal the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the legs of the crippled, and the tongues of the mute. Prophecy after prophecy was being fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth; but perhaps one of the most important prophecies of all was Daniel's prophecy concerning the *timing* of Messiah's coming.

Read Daniel 9:24-27.

More than 500 years before Christ's birth, the LORD told Daniel that there would be a total of 69 "weeks of years" (483 years) from the time that the decree would go forth from the King of Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem until *just before* the time when the Messiah would be "**cut off**" (killed); *and*, He said that the Temple and city of Jerusalem would be destroyed shortly after the Messiah's death. The Pharisees knew this Scripture well; thus, they *should* have realised that they were now living in the age of the Messiah! The decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem had gone out in the year 454 B.C.; and it had now been 482 years since that decree. They were now only one year short of 483 years! The morning sky was screaming red, warning them that the Messiah *was* here, and that they were about to commit the most heinous crime in history—the crime of murdering their own Messiah! Yet, they refused to believe all the signs from Scripture, which clearly pointed to Jesus as their Messiah.

What is the remedy for those who refuse to believe God's Word? There is none! In Jesus' account of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man cried out to Abraham from across the gulf that separated him from Paradise, and begged him to send Lazarus back from the dead, so that he could warn his five brothers not to come to the horrible place of torment that he was in. Abraham's reply to him was, "**They have Moses and the prophets** (in other words, the Scriptures); **let them hear them.**" The rich man pleaded, "**Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.**" But Abraham said, "**If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.**"

The fact is that not long afterward, there *was* a Man who arose from the grave, never to die again; and that Man was Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had said, again and again, that He would soon die and rise again; yet, these proud, haughty men refused to believe it. Therefore, Jesus refused to give them any other signs—*except* for the sign of the prophet Jonas. By the way, you'll notice that Jesus didn't even explain what He meant by "**the sign of the prophet Jonas.**" Why? Because He had *already* explained this to them some time earlier! Let's read that passage again. (**Read Matthew 12:38-40.**) Jesus had already spoken; and He wasn't going to repeat Himself. The "forecast" of His miraculous birth, of His ministry, of His miracles, and of His death, burial, and resurrection had already been made centuries earlier; and now, it was all coming to pass. If they wanted a "sign," then Jesus would give them just one more—the sign of His own death, burial, and resurrection. Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly before he was vomited out, so *Jesus* would be three days and nights in the earth, before the earth would "vomit" Him out alive! If people refused to believe *this* sign, then there is no hope for them.

My friends, the *only* way to be saved is to place your trust in the redeeming death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead for your sins. The Bible says, "**That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.**"

III. Christ's alert to the disciples (16:5-12)

(Read Matthew 16:4-12.) Jesus literally turned His back on the Pharisees, and walked away. In **verse 4**, the word “*left*” means “abandoned.” God never leaves or forsakes those who believe on Him; but He *does* forsake *lost* people after a certain point, when they have continually rejected Him. Having left them, Jesus now turned His attention to His disciples.

From this point onward, Jesus' signs and miracles began to taper off; and He spent the greater part of His time preparing His disciples for His coming death and resurrection, and for the responsibilities that would fall on them after He returned to Heaven. At this particular moment, there was one thing that Jesus especially wanted to get across to the disciples: and that was to “*beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.*” Once again, though, the disciples misunderstood Jesus' words. They thought that Jesus was talking about *literal* bread; but they should have known better. If Jesus were really concerned about having physical bread on hand, He surely could have *produced* some, just as He had miraculously done on two occasions. The fact is that the disciples' hearts had already become hardened by a certain measure of unbelief; and that is exactly why Jesus was now warning them to beware of the “*leaven,*” or “false doctrine,” of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Now, it may seem strange that Jesus would lump the doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees together. The Pharisees believed in the existence of angels, and in the resurrection, whereas the Sadducees were rationalists, who didn't believe in the supernatural. (This is why the Sadducees were “sad...you see?”) Yet, Jesus lumped their beliefs together. Why? Because *both* the Pharisees and the Sadducees were lost men, who refused to believe on Him! You see, it doesn't matter if you believe in God, or in the existence of angels, or in supernatural things. Satan and his demons believe *all* these things; but *they* surely aren't on their way to Heaven! A mere *head* belief of orthodox doctrines won't get you to Heaven any more than an *atheist's unbelief* will get *him* to Heaven. You must believe on Jesus *with your heart*. You must place your *personal trust* in Him. In faith, you must *ask* Jesus to save you!

Now, we know that eleven of the twelve disciples were saved men. They had *already* placed their faith in Jesus. Why, then, did Jesus have to warn *them* to beware of the “leaven” of the Pharisees and the Sadducees? Because even believers can be corrupted by unbelief, to a degree. Even believers can be corrupted by the empty, worldly traditions of false religious leaders, or by the rationalistic unbelief of others. Even believers can give ear to religious scholars who say that there are errors in Scripture, and that we can't be absolutely sure that we have *all* the Word of God. Even Christians can begin to seek spiritual fulfilment in empty, mystical traditions such as “contemplative prayers,” “labyrinth walks,” or “mantra prayers,” which *empty* people's minds, and turn their focus on the “inner self,” instead of *filling* their minds with God's Word. (In reality, these are *pagan* traditions with a thin Christian veneer, which open people to demonic deception!)

For the believer, true fulfilment comes not from following mystical traditions of men, but from resting in the truth that Christ is *God*—and that since I have been placed in *Him*, I am therefore complete in Him!

Read Colossians 2:8-10.

Conclusion: As we close this morning, I would ask, “Are you waiting for some big, flashing, supernatural sign from the sky to show you that you need to be saved?” If so, such a sign will not be given to you. Christ has already come to this earth, and has died for your sins, and risen from the dead. He has already given you all the

“signs” you need! He’s saying, “Here’s your sign! Will you believe it?” All the signs you need are recorded in Scripture; and the Holy Spirit is silently testifying in your heart that these things are true. If you are not saved, I urge you to repent of your sin and *believe* on Christ today! **If you are saved already**, I would remind you that fulfilment comes not from following carnal, sensual, mystical traditions of men, but from resting in *Christ alone*, and in His complete work on the cross for you! Don’t be corrupted by empty religious traditions, or by rationalistic unbelief, which puff up your ego, but don’t satisfy your soul. *Rest* in the one who is the **“fulfulness of the Godhead bodily.”**

¹ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1980), p. 198.