

Satisfaction
Matthew 12:38-50

“If I could only see a sign from God, then I’d believe!” When we read the story of Pentecost, it’s easy to understand such a reaction. The sound of a mighty, rushing wind. Tongues of fire resting on each of the believers gathered in the upper room. And then of course the miracle that they were suddenly able to speak all sorts of different languages. Wow. Who wouldn’t believe if he could see such signs?

Well, several of the people standing in the streets of Jerusalem, that’s who. After all, Acts chapter 2 documents the many different reactions of those who were standing by and watching all this. Yes, some were amazed and marveled at the spectacle. But others were in doubt, perplexed by what they could not understand. Still others mocked and scoffed, saying that the apostles were just drunk – as if drunk people instantly became accomplished linguists.

But people had a similar range of reactions to the signs, the miracles that Jesus did as well. After all, earlier in this chapter when Jesus cast a demon out of a man who could neither see nor speak, some of the people came to the correct conclusion that Jesus actually was the Son of David, the Messiah, the Christ God had promised to send to His people. But others, including the Pharisees, insisted that He only cast out demons by the power of Satan. They were the ones who, at the beginning of this passage, insisted that they needed to see yet another sign, yet more proof that Jesus actually was the Christ.

And maybe that’s where you find yourself today. Maybe you’re just not sure about a God Who can’t be seen or heard or touched. Maybe you aren’t comfortable with the possibility of anyone or anything that human reason can’t explain. Maybe you’re just not satisfied with the testimony of your Christian friends and the evidence you’ve seen of real change in their lives. Maybe you need more proof that Jesus is the real deal.

Well, how did Jesus respond to the skeptics in today’s passage? We might have expected Him to point to the mighty works He had already done – after all, that’s what He did when the disciples of John the Baptist came to Him with their own doubts at the beginning of chapter 11. “Go and tell John what you hear and see,” he had said on that occasion, and it is still the case that Jesus’ many miracles of healing continue to bear witness to His unique power and authority as the Son of God. But instead, Jesus offered the Pharisees yet another sign – the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Now, what was this sign? Well, after having been thrown overboard from a ship in the midst of a terrible storm, the Lord saved Jonah’s life by having what the King James Version calls a whale swallow him up and then vomit him out onto the land after three days at the bottom of the sea.

Now, that’s a pretty impressive sign, but it also happens to be one of the Bible stories that modern skeptics love to dismiss as mere legend or folklore. It’s just not possible for anyone or anything to remain alive inside a whale’s stomach, they say – there’s too much gastric acid. And so you can’t possibly believe a book that claims such nonsensical things to be true, they say.

Now we could respond to such skeptics with the fact that the Greek New Testament doesn’t use the word “whale,” but “sea monster,” reflecting the fact that the Hebrew text of Jonah speaks simply of a “large fish.” And we could point to the fact that some fish have an organ called a “swim bladder” which

is full of air, and that this organ in some species is connected to the fish's guts, which allows them to gulp air into the bladder, which in turn helps them regulate their buoyancy. We could therefore posit that an overgrown fish of the right type could, in fact, have done exactly what the Bible says – gulping Jonah into a sac of air and keeping him alive in it for 3 days.

On the other hand, it would be very easy for us to respond to our modern skeptics by turning the tables on them, shining a light on the real reason for their doubts. Remember, in verse 39 Jesus called the Pharisees “an evil and adulterous generation,” because they weren't really open to being convinced of the truth about Him. No, they were just looking for excuses to dismiss His claims so they could continue living in the comfort of their pride and self-righteousness.

Just so, all too many modern people dismiss the claims of Christ, not because they can't prove the miraculous things Jesus did, but because they don't like some of the things He says – things about the need for repentance and holiness, about the need to submit to His absolute authority as the King of Kings.

But instead of chiding or lashing out at our critics in this way, let's take another look at the sign of Jonah. For the whole point of the story is that God saved Jonah from drowning in a way that even Jonah didn't expect. And after three days in the belly of a fish, God gave Jonah new life, a new chance, a fresh start.

And that's the same sort of sign Jesus gives to both His critics and His followers, a sign that should tell us everything we need to know about Him. For if it was a miracle for God to send a huge fish to keep Jonah alive at the bottom of the sea for three days, it was an even bigger miracle for God to bring Jesus back to life after He had been dead in His tomb for three days.

Yes, when you get right down to it, the Resurrection of Christ puts all the miracle stories of the Bible to shame. For if you can believe that the Father raised Jesus from the dead, then for God to make a big fish, or even to make the world in six days becomes pretty easy to swallow, if you'll pardon the pun. The fact is that the Resurrection of Christ is the only sign any of us should need in order for us to put our trust in Him.

But some people, even those who call themselves Christians, still aren't satisfied. “If I could just hear a word directly from God,” they cry, “then I'd know what to believe, I'd know what to do.” Maybe you've thought or even said such things, especially in times of great confusion or doubt. Wouldn't it be nice, when you have a big decision to make, to be able to have God whisper in your ear, “Marry that person,” or “Go to that college,” or “Take that job?”

Well, in today's passage, the Pharisees did have God speaking directly to them in the Person of Jesus Christ. But they still weren't satisfied because Jesus said and did things that they didn't understand or didn't agree with. And so they denied the truth of His words. In fact, they went so far as to attribute His miracles to the power of Satan.

So, how did Jesus respond to them? First, He turned back to the story of Jonah. For even though Jonah had been reluctant to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, his ministry there had eventually borne tremendous fruit – the people, as Jesus reminds us in verse 41, repented when they heard Jonah's words. In the same way, the Queen of Sheba was so anxious to hear the wisdom of Solomon that she travelled all the way to Israel from her country, which was probably near Ethiopia or Yemen.

But in contrast to the Queen of Sheba, the Pharisees had tried to run away from Jesus' wisdom, rejecting the truth of His teachings. In contrast to the men of Nineveh, the Pharisees had refused to repent, clinging instead to their own interpretations of the Law of Moses in spite of the clear teaching and miraculous deeds of Christ. And so, because they were not satisfied with the clear words and works of God, Jesus said that they would be condemned, not only by God, but by all those who had submitted themselves to the Word of God.

So, what about us? In our desire for yet another message from the Lord, have we forgotten or neglected the Word that God has already given us? When the Bible doesn't answer a specific question we have, do we do the hard work of applying its general principles to our particular situation? When the Bible speaks clearly but says something we don't want to believe, do we continue to go our own way, or do we repent and abide by the words of Christ? For if the sign of His resurrection should be sufficient for our faith, surely the truth of His Word should be sufficient for our guidance.

But if we stand on the truth of the cross and the empty tomb, and if we are honestly trying to follow the Word of God in our lives, we might still remain unsatisfied, this time with the condition of the world around us. For it is easy these days to long for our culture to be cleaned up, to be set right. It's easy to want the people around us to know how to behave, to share the broad consensus on moral and ethical issues that existed not too long ago across America.

And some cultures have gone so far as to use governmental force to compel people to live by a certain code of ethics – that's what Mohammed tried to do when he developed the system known as Islam. Of course our own Federal government tried a similar tactic one hundred years ago when it banned "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" with the passage of the 18th Amendment. We all know how well that worked out.

But in verses 43-45, Jesus shows us that any merely outward religiosity is unstable, that it really isn't possible for a person or a society to go on acting in a consistently godly way without having a saving relationship with God at the same time. The example He gives is that of someone who has been released from demonic possession. After the demons are gone, this man is content merely to rid himself of the messy consequences and outward habits the demons had left behind. But because he left a godless vacancy in his life, the demons simply moved back in – this time in greater numbers, and they proceeded to make an even bigger mess than they made before.

In the same way, just as we should be satisfied with nothing less than the sign of the cross as the foundation of our faith, and just as we should be satisfied with nothing less than the Word of God as the sufficient rule, the final measure of truth for our minds, we must never be satisfied with anything less than the Spirit of God living within us. For only the Spirit Who gave the apostles the ability to speak all those different languages on Pentecost can protect us from the forces of evil both around us and within us, keeping us safe from temptation and danger. And only the Spirit of God, as He brings more and more people to faith in Christ, can ever transform a culture, bringing its beliefs and habits into greater alignment with the Word of God, as more of its people come to live in the power and truth of the risen Lord. In short, there's just no substitute for true Spirit-filled revival if you want to renew and reform any human society.

And because the Spirit of God takes up residence within all those who trust in Christ, we become much more than His servants or even His disciples – we become part of His family, we become His

brother and sister and mother. That's the amazing truth that Jesus tells us in verse 50. And the Holy Spirit can change us from the inside out, accomplishing what no amount of external force or compulsion can do: for those who share in Christ's resurrected life, those who stand on the truth of His Word and those who are filled with His Holy Spirit will inevitably seek to obey God, striving to do God's will in every aspect of our daily lives.

So, I suppose we can go on being envious of the spectacle that happened on that first Pentecost Sunday, or wanting more and more verbal revelations from God, or even looking for some ruler to make everyone behave. But instead, why don't we rejoice in the gifts Christ has already given to all who trust in Him: His resurrection, His Word, His Spirit, and our adoption into His family. Surely, these great, life-changing blessings should be enough to satisfy us.