

1 The Lord hadn't been back long before the Jewish leaders were in His face again. Normally enemies, the Pharisees & Sadducees united in their opposition against their Messiah King. The *Sadducees* considered themselves the *upper-class*, the elites. Most of the chief priests & high priests came from their sect. Many of them made a good living selling animals for sacrifice or exchanging money at the Temple gates. The *Pharisees* on the other hand were mostly working class. You might recall one named Paul who made tents for a living. Pharisees were usually more conservative; remember how they like to keep to the old Rabbinic traditions. But the Sadducees could care less about the old school. They were much more modern, more liberal, ready to compromise for any personal profit. They claimed to believe in God's Word, but having so over-spiritualized it, most of its meaning was pretty much lost. They didn't believe in angels, the supernatural, life after death; no hell, and even no heaven... and that's "sad-you-see."

Differences between the Pharisees & Sadducees kept them in turmoil. But, when it came to opposing the grace & truth that threatened their control over the people, putting Jesus away was a cause that brought them together. Instead of humbling themselves before their Master—coming to Him for light—they confirmed their own spiritual darkness by joining forces with other like-blinded men. Misery loves company.

Note their reason for coming to Jesus in our passage today: to *test* Him. They weren't looking for Truth, they were hoping to trip Him, to corner Him, to show the crowds that He was a fraud. So they asked for a sign, but not just *any* sign. They knew of His many miracles, the many signs that bore witness of His power on earth. They weren't asking for an earthly miracle, but a *heavenly* one: a sign *from heaven*. Jewish superstition held that even demons could perform signs upon the earth, but only God could produce a sign from heaven. That's probably why they claimed that Jesus was casting out demons by the power of demons. [pause]

Do you remember the story Jesus told about the poor man & rich man who died? The poor man was carried by angels to Abraham's side, but the rich man went to hell. Luke 16.19-31:

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of

his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

The Pharisees & Sadducees wanted a sign from heaven, but what better sign could God give than the one standing right in front of them. They simply wouldn’t see it: they willed NOT see Him, trust Him, believe Him; their pride refused the sight to see. No matter how much evidence Jesus provided, they would never accept it, because, ultimately, they rejected the One who was providing it, the One who was the very best evidence God could give them. Three reasons:

- 1) John 3.19-21 Darkness hates the Light: rejects/runs from it; lest its own evil be exposed.
- 2) 2Co4.3-4 They willed-not to see their Savior because they were blinded by Satan.
- 3) Luke 19.42 Finally & ultimately, God grants them: “Have it your way.”

2-3 They asked for a sign in the sky. But Jesus responded, “What good would that do you?” When they looked up, they were far better at predicting the weather than understanding the Word. Here were the supposed “experts” in God’s law who boasted of their superior knowledge. And yet standing right in front of them was their Messiah... and they didn’t have a clue. Clearly they had no idea what God was up to. Their long-awaited King had come, but they shoved Him out of the way to better see themselves in the mirror. [pause]

How well do we know what God is up to today? Are we making ready for His return? Let’s take a check-list approach to a just few verses from Matthew 24:

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ... “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against

nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.” –Mt24.3,6-7

You may remember from a couple of weeks ago, a ‘rumor of war’ that sent the island of Hawaii into panic. Turned out to be a false alarm, but in light of our current relations with North Korea, there was good reason for alarm.

And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. –Mt24.11-12

Sounds like a page out of today’s paper. The occult is on the rise. False Christianity is through the roof. Pulpits are proclaiming an assurance of salvation without even the slightest desire for holiness. “Evangelicals” are now a political party. Western church-ianity has stripped everything amazing about “grace”, and turned it into a permission slip for just about any sin under the sun. In other words, the spirit of lawlessness is on the loose. Listen to the apostle Paul:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons –1Ti4.1

4 The only definitive “sign” the Messiah would grant them would be one they’d never recognize, and certainly one the Jews weren’t hoping for: the sign of Jonah. Jesus offered them the same sign back in chapter 12:

He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a 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 something 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 something greater than Solomon is here.” –Mt12.39-42

Jonah was sent to the unrighteous Gentiles of Nineveh, and they repented at the preaching of this prophet who’d been *raised from the dead*, after three days & nights in the belly of a huge fish. The Ninevites had heard of Jonah’s plight, but rather than dig their heels in unbelief, the ignorant Gentiles turned from their sin, and pleaded for God’s mercy & grace instead.

That is why the Gentiles of Nineveh will stand and condemn the Jews. They repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now here is Jesus—the actual Messiah—standing right in front of them, proclaiming the Way, Truth & Life... and rather than bow in humble adoration, they’re

trying to trap Him in their nets. Indeed, “neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” And how do we know? From Thursday’s reading in our two-year plan:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. –Mt 28.11-15

“He came to His own,” John tells us, “but His own would not receive Him.” How sad. The people so persisted in their love for darkness that they were completely blind to their Messiah’s appearing when He came for them. Rather than open arms, their leaders met Him with opposition; such opposition that Jesus shortened His stay in their territory once again. From Mark’s account, we learn that, Jesus didn’t just walk away...

He sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.” –Mk8.12

How weary He must have been? Have you ever been wearied by another’s rejection of Jesus? It is such a weird mix of emotions: sadness, sorrow, frustration, impatience. And yet let’s not forget how much patience the Lord showed us before we finally turned to Him, and how much patience He continues to show us even now as we are prone to wander.

Just this week I sat across the table from an unbeliever. The conversation was going great. We listened intently to one another’s small talk, back & forth for some time. But the moment I made an effort to turn it to the Gospel, I could see their eyes glaze over. They continued to look at me, even nodding acceptingly on occasion. But I could tell they weren’t listening any longer. So much so that—mid sentence—I even slipped the words “but at this point you’ve lost interest in everything I am saying,” and continued my sentence to its end before pausing for a response. The only response I got was another nice nod, as if affirming everything I’d just said. It saddened me so much. The conversation was engaging right up until the point where it turned to Jesus. Then the lights went off. No one was home, no more interest in the conversation. [Weary sigh.]

Here was Jesus, sighing in sorrow at their hell-bound opposition. And “so,” the Scripture tells us, “*He left them and departed.*”

His withdrawal wasn't simply a walking away, it was definitive. He physically left the area, He left emotionally in a sigh of sorrow, and He left decisively in judgement: "Ok. Have it your way." Moving forward He no longer focused on reaching lost Jews, or preaching to clueless crowds. He knew Calvary was coming. At this point He shifted His focus to preparing His men for His departure, and for *their* leadership of His Church that He would build upon the faithful confession like the one Peter will make before the end of this chapter. And—interestingly—where would the Rock make his great confession? In Jewish territory? No, those leaders had run their Messiah away already. Instead, as the Lord of all creation would have it, Peter would make his great confession among the Gentiles. From here on, Jesus provided no more signs for unbelievers, but only truth to build up His followers who'd bear the torch moving forward.

What lessons can we take from our passage today? How Now Shall We Live?

1. Take note that there comes a time when the Spirit of Christ moves on. Having rejected the Good News of the Messiah so many times, God sovereignly & decisively says to the unbeliever: "Ok, have it your way." If you are wishy washy in your walk with Christ, if you're one who likes to just kinda flirt with the church, mooch a little on the fringes, who considers her like "a friend with benefits," wake up! I warn you, by the mercies of Christ, do not be one from whom the Lord deeply sighs and then walks away. Consider all He has done for you. Take Him up on His offer to exchange your sin & wrath for His righteousness & eternal joy. He will not tarry forever. [pause]

If you're a lover of Christ who faithfully proclaims the Good News, but, more often than not, finds yourself sighing in sorrow at the unbelief of those you share with... take heart. You're not a failure if they don't believe. God hasn't called you to win souls, but to proclaim the Truth in love. Trust Him with the results. There may even come a time to shake the dust off of your feet and move on. Trust Him to work with the Word you've planted. You never know: your years of patient, fruitless tilling & planting & watering & fertilizing may be followed up by a sibling's single proclamation that brings Home a great harvest.

2. That said, Beloved, do not grow weary of doing good, of praying for your lost loved ones, of proclaiming the Truth in Love. No one would have ever guessed Saul would become Paul, or that the thief on the cross would surrender to his Savior. There is a strong likelihood that at least some of the very ones Jesus sighed over in our passage today would one day place their faith in Him through—not His own preaching, but through—the ministry of His apostles. Keep praying, and continue looking for open doors of opportunity.

3. Lastly, Church, consider the mercies of God through Jesus Christ for the needs of your own soul today. He does not throw in the towel on those that love Him. He does not quit on those called according to His purpose. The sign of Jonah is your assurance! At Calvary God made Him who knew no sin to become sin on your behalf, that you might become the righteousness of God! He was crucified for your short temper, for your anger, for your murder, for your lust, for your greed, for your adultery, for your sin, for your disdain & past carelessness of His work & Word. He suffered the wrath and was buried in the death that you deserved, in order to pay your debt in full, to satisfy justice! And to prove it, He rose from the grave on the third day.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. –Ro8.31-39

PRAYER

SONG: *O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*

COMMUNION

SONG: *Doxology*

BENEDICTION: *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. –Jude 24-25*