

## SIGN SEEKING

Matthew 12:38-40, Isaiah 7:10

By Raymond White

A lot is said in churches about sign seeking. Don't seek for signs, we're told. If your faith requires signs, then your faith must be weak. And indeed, Jesus did say —

***Matthew 12:38** Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. **:39** But he [Jesus] answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign ...*

But that invites this question: should we reject signs, and hope to never see a true miracle because, after all, we don't really need them? Many people read it that way, "I don't need signs because Jesus said it's wicked to seek them." Is that what he meant?

But if did mean that, than what are we to do with this verse in Isaiah? God spoke to king Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah and demanded that Ahaz ask for a sign so that God can prove himself.

***Isaiah 7:10** Moreover the LORD spake again unto Ahaz, saying, **:11** Ask thee a sign of the LORD thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above. **:12** But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the LORD. **:13** And he [Isaiah] said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?*

Jesus said it's wicked to seek for a sign. But Isaiah said it's a sin not to. What's the difference? Here's the difference:

The Pharisees who were speaking to Jesus were demanding a sign *rhetorically*; that is, they were saying, "show us a sign, bet-cha can't." Their request was not from belief but from disbelief. King Ahaz, on the other hand, believed. In fact, he believed so much that he didn't want to offend God by asking for a sign, so he declined God's offer, and, ironically, *that* made God mad.

That is exactly the opposite of what many Christians believe Jesus meant. But it wasn't their wanting a sign that annoyed Jesus, what annoyed him was that he had shown them many signs and they were never satisfied. That's what their wickedness.

But there's an even better answer to those who are content not to have signs from God, and that is this: Jesus, after chiding the scribes and Pharisees a bit, *did* give them exactly what they asked for — he gave them a sign. And not just a sign, but *the* sign that he was exactly who he said he was.

***Matthew 12:39** ... and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. **:40** For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

Jesus really reached out to them. He was basically saying: "Alright, you're not impressed that I changed water to wine, that I stilled the storm, that I gave sight to the

blind and healed lepers, that I raised the dead — you've seen all that and you still won't believe me. Okay, how about this? I will die. And I will lie dead in the earth for three days. And then I will rise from the dead by my own divine power. How's that for a sign? Will you believe me then?"

Those Christians who claim to be content without signs will say, "Well yes, he did the miracles and rose from the dead, but no one believed him, so our faith should not be based on signs." To which I reply, nonsense! People *did* believe his signs, especially his resurrection. That is what the Christian message is all about and how the Christian religion was born, from those people who saw his miracles and his resurrection and believed. So don't say the miracles don't convert, that's unbiblical and it's ludicrous.

I'll say it another way: If our faith is not based on the miracles that Jesus did, particularly his resurrection, then what exactly *is* our faith based on? His preaching? His radical claims to be the son of God? For heaven's sake, no. Anyone can say anything, and Jesus knew that. That's why Jesus said —

*John 14:11 Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me; or else believe me for the very works' sake.*

This is what he was saying to his disciples: I'm not asking you to believe my claims without proof, so, here's the proof: my miracles. And the biggest one of all will be my resurrection. When that happens, believe *that!*

Still, believers will say, "But it's the holy spirit that makes us believe, not the miracles." Well, okay. But to believe what exactly? Does the spirit convince us that he is the Son of God because he said so? No. The spirit causes us to believe that he did what the bible says he did, that is, the miracles and the resurrection, and therefore what he said is true, and therefore he is the Son of God. If you leave signs and miracles out of that progression — "my faith doesn't need miracles" — then it all falls apart.

Faith, true faith, needs miracles, needs signs, needs proof. If your faith can do without miracles then you don't need Jesus, you can just as well pray to a rock, or some other false god. That's blind faith. True faith requires something rational.

That is exactly the point that Elijah made to the Baal worshipers when his altar was burned by fire from heaven (*1 Kings 18:38*). The priests of Baal couldn't do that, which was the point. The true God does miracles, false gods do not. Still, some Christians will grumble, "But no one believed." Oh? The crowd of witnesses believed, enough to turn on the false priests and kill them (*1 Kings 18:40*). "But they didn't continue believing." Oh? When Elijah thought he was the one true believer remaining, God told him not so, there are 7000 more (*1 Kings 19:18*).

Here's the point of all this: Without the miracles there is nothing to believe *in*. Christianity needed miracles, and it needed people to believe them and tell the world. And that's just what happened. Consider Thomas.

*John 20:25 ... Except I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.*

If ever there was a sign seeker, it was Thomas. How did Jesus react to that demand? Did Jesus say, “Thomas, I’m going to cut you off because you won’t believe without a sign”? No, that is not what Jesus said. What Jesus said was —

*John 20:27 ... Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. :28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My LORD and my God.*

Thomas became a confirmed believer *because he saw and touched*. He would not have believed otherwise. But because he personally witnessed, he was faithful to the end of his life which ended violently. And to what do we owe his unshakable devotion? To the fact that Jesus did miracles, especially the resurrection, and Thomas was a witness.

And the rest of us? We believe their accounts that the miracles actually happened and conclude that Jesus was who he said he was. So it is still the miracles that convert us.

It really annoys me when Christians undercut the importance of the miracles by saying stupid things like, “I don’t need miracles, because if I needed miracles that would make me a sign seeker.” What that is really saying is, “I don’t want my faith to rely on miracles because, truth is, I don’t have enough faith to believe that God might actually do some. If I expect a miracle and don’t get one (and I won’t), that will hurt my faith and I don’t want that.” That’s the real truth behind the “I don’t need miracles” attitude.

Here’s the deal: If God gives you a sign, believe it. If God invites you to seek a sign, seek it. If God demands that you believe with only the signs already given, believe. Get as close to God as you can by whatever he makes available. What could be simpler?

And the sign seekers? They will always make their rhetorical demands.

*Jeremiah 17:15 Behold, they say unto me, Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come now.*

This is just their kind of thinking — a rhetorical demand from unbelief. They expect nothing will come of it and that is why they make their demand, to demonstrate that nothing will happen. That’s what a sign-seeker is, a confirmed non-believer demanding what he is sure can’t happen.

But that is not true seekers who could use a sign from God, and when it comes, they really believe and really commit. Would we accuse Paul of being a sign-seeker because it took a vision to convert him? Would we accuse Thomas or any of the prophets of sign-seeking because they saw and believed? Of course not. Wanting God to act is not sign-seeking. Wanting God to *not* act and demanding that he does, that is sign-seeking.

Yes, lots of folks see miracles and will not believe. But that’s a far cry from “miracles don’t convert.” Miracles *do* convert *some* people, just not others.

So don’t say that miracles don’t convert. That’s nonsense. God is a god of miracles, that is why we believe him. True believers believe *because* of the miracles. Of course miracles convert, they converted you.

What is a true religious conversion? It is this: [1] You look at a miracle, whether a present one or a 2000 year old one does not matter. [2] You realize that the miracle is undeniable. [3] You realize that the miracle is proof of a divine power that caused the miracle. And [4] you commit yourself to the will of that divine power. That’s conversion.