

# “The Signs of the Times”

Isaiah 29:13-14; Matthew 16:1-28 (text)

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**B**eloved brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ: One of the most used phrases in the modern discussion of the Second Coming of Christ is “the signs of the times.” Listen to what John Hagee, a popular prognosticator of the end times, has to say about this:

The Bible says in the end of days you will see signs and wonders in the sky, and there are several signs and wonders that are happening in the sky that have never happened before. They are not quite as dramatic as the four blood moons because the four blood moons were predicted by Joel.

Now I do not know where in the prophecy of Joel we find four blood moons. Joel 2:31 says, *“the sun shall be turned to darkened and the moon to blood,”* but where are the “four blood moons”? And since the early church, every war and rumor of war in the Middle East is a sign of the Second Coming of Christ. And every powerful man in world history is the Antichrist: the Roman Emperor, the Pope, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolph Hitler, Henry Kissinger, Mikhael Gorbachev, Islam, and even Ronald Reagan! So, these predictions have made Christianity the laughing stock of the world.

Our text today, Matthew Chapter 16, starts with the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to Jesus asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus did not give them what they wanted, saying instead that the only sign given to evil people like them is the sign of Jonah. Later, Jesus asked his disciples what people say about him, and Peter makes one of his greatest statements or confessions about him, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And at the end of the chapter, Jesus tells his disciples about the sacrifice that he was about to make. He teaches them that as disciples, they also have to bear their cross to follow him.

Today our theme is **“The Signs of the Times,”** expounded in three headings: first, **The Sign of Jonah;** second, **The Sign of the Son of Man;** and third, **The Sign of the Cross.**

## **The Sign of Jonah**

Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus? They wanted to “test” him. They really did not want to see signs, because they have seen and heard many of Jesus’ signs before. These Jews never really wanted to know who Jesus was and what he was teaching. They just hated him for what he was – a man who claimed to be God and Messiah – and that for them was blasphemy.

Jesus at first commended them for their knowledge of weather forecasting. They can tell by the appearance of the sky what the weather would be like. Meteorology was not invented by modern man, but is an ancient science and art. But then he rebuked them for not being able to interpret *“the signs of the times.”* What does he mean by “the signs of the times”? He answers this question in verse 4, *“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.”* Back in Matthew 12:39, Jesus says exactly the same thing to the Jews, but adds two things.

The first is in verse 40, *“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* So, the sign of Jonah is the sign of Jesus’ burial and resurrection. The second is in verse 41, *“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”*

When Jonah was appointed by God to go to the wicked Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh, he ran away. He boarded a ship headed the other way, so God sent a big storm. The people on the ship blamed him for the storm and threw him overboard, where a big sea monster swallowed him live. After three days, the fish vomited him out, and he knew then that God spared him so he could do what God had wanted him to do. So he preached the gospel to the Ninevites, who responded in repentance and faith. God therefore spared the city from destruction.

Did Jonah perform a sign before the Ninevites? No, he did not. He preached the gospel of salvation. Therefore, what was the sign of Jonah? He himself was the sign when he appeared to the Ninevites and preached the gospel. This is what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. He himself is the sign given to the *“evil and adulterous generation.”* He preached the good news of the coming of the kingdom of heaven to the Jews (Matt 4:17). And when he had finished his work on earth, he willingly subjected himself to the cross and to three days in the tomb. Therefore, Jonah’s three days in the belly of the fish and his preaching a gospel of repentance and faith was only a foretaste of Jesus, the greater Jonah to come.

You might be thinking that the Jews were the only ones obsessed with signs. But we also often seek for signs. Many people still read their daily horoscopes; some even go to palm readers and consult tarot cards. But the solution to our troubles are often found in God’s Word, but often the solutions offered in Scriptures are painful, and therefore, are unacceptable. Ordinary instructions from the Bible are sufficient, so we do not need spectacular signs to know what is best for us.

Also, when we hear of “the signs of the times,” we see images of wars, calamities, earthquakes, famines, eclipses and red moons. We often go to Matthew 24, where Jesus says there will be wars and rumors of war, famines, earthquakes, persecution of Christians, false prophets, falling away, and lawlessness. But he also says, *“See that you dare not be alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains”* (verses 4-6). So all of these signs have been taking place from his first coming until “the end.” In his first coming, these signs began, and like birth pains, will increase in intensity and frequency until the end. For example, before World War I, there was no time in world history that there was a war that engulfed the world. So the Jehovah’s Witnesses claimed that their calculations were correct predicting the end of the world in 1914. Afterwards, they recalculated the end of the world to be 1918, and it was uncanny that the Armistice was signed on the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month that same year. Some Christians then concluded that the eleventh hour has come, and soon, Jesus would return. World War I was a sign, but an even more terrible war followed just 21 years later. They were wrong, and still today, many people think that a World War III would be the sign of the end.

## The Sign of the Son of Man

After he rebuked the Jews that they were looking for the wrong sign, he warned his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees. The disciples misunderstood, thinking that Jesus was talking about not having bread. But Jesus was talking about the corrupted teachings of the Pharisees.

Jesus and his disciples then traveled to Caesarea Philippi, 25 miles of Galilee. There, he asked his disciples, *“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”* The disciples tell Jesus that the Jews were thinking that he was the Messiah. They thought that he was the resurrected John the Baptizer. They also thought that John was Elijah, whom they believed would return (John 1:21). And some people thought that Jesus was the Prophet that Moses prophesied would come (Deu 18:15). But Peter, speaking for the disciples, declared, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* a confession of the Person and work of Jesus. The Son of Man is the Messiah, the Savior prophesied in the Old Testament. He is also the Son of God, who is God himself in the flesh. He himself is the sign that the Pharisees have been demanding to see from him.

Jesus then blesses Peter and tells him, *“Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”* It is not through his own knowledge that Peter could declare his confession, but only through the Father’s revelation through the Spirit. It is never through one’s own will or knowledge that he is saved, because an unbeliever’s mind is dead in sin (Eph 2:1).

The next three verses are some of the most debated verses in the Bible. Jesus says, *“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”* The name Peter means “rock,” so Roman Catholics teach that Jesus is handing down his authority over the Church to Peter. But why would Jesus say, “and on *this rock*,” when it is much easier to say, “and on *you* I will build my church”? And who is the rock on which the Church is founded? It is not Peter or any of the Apostles, but Christ. Peter himself preached later, *“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone”* (Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7). Jesus is the Cornerstone of his Church, while the Apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the Church (Eph 2:20).

The next phrase in verse 18, *“the gates of hell cannot prevail against it,”* is also much discussed. Most preachers interpret this as the Church being assaulted by Satan’s evil forces. But it is not hell who attacks, but its gates, which is hardly real. Gates do not attack, rather they defend from attacks. Others say that Church is on the attack against the devil. Put the devil on the run. Reclaim the devil’s strongholds for Christ. “Onward, Christian Soldier!” But this interpretation is also unconvincing, because Jesus never commanded Christians to attack the devil. Nowhere does he tell us to say to Satan, “I rebuke you, Satan!” It is Jesus who has defeated the devil (Col 2:15; Heb 2:14; 1 John 3:8). It is Jesus who tells Satan, *“Be gone, Satan!”* (Matt 4:10) This is why Paul commands us to “stand firm” against the devil’s attacks four times in Ephesians 6, using the armor of God.

To what then does “gates of hell” refer? One of the most important rules in Biblical interpretation is that Scripture interprets Scripture itself. This is a Jewish term for “realm of the dead,” or the dwelling-place of the dead. This term is found in the Greek translation of Job 38:17, *“Have the gates of death been shown to you?”* and Isa 38:10, *“In the prime of my life must I go through the*

*gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?"* Therefore, "gates of hell" does not refer to hell where the evil, unbelieving dead dwell, but to death or the abode of the dead itself. Also, in our text and elsewhere in the New Testament, the Greek word for "hell" is also *hades* (NIV, NASB). Hades can mean several things: hell (Matt 11:23; Luke 10:15; Rev 20:14); or grave, the dwelling-place of the dead (Psa 16:10; Acts 2:27, 31); or death itself (Luke 16:23). Therefore, Jesus tells his disciples that death cannot triumph over his Church. The Church will live forever.

The third and last portion of what Jesus tells his disciples is also a matter of debate. He tells his disciples in verse 19, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* Here, the word for "you" refers to Peter alone, but in the same words in Matthew 18:18, Jesus uses a plural form of "you." This means that Jesus gives the keys of his kingdom not only to Peter, but to the twelve disciples. What are the keys of the kingdom? Again, searching what Scripture says elsewhere, we find a prophecy about a high Jewish official in Isaiah 22:22, *"I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open."* But the Apostle John applies this prophecy to Christ in Revelation 3:7, *"the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens."* This is why Jesus is the only way into heaven (John 14:6).

This is why in our reading in the Heidelberg Catechism, the keys to the kingdom of heaven are two things instituted by Christ: *the preaching of the gospel and church discipline*. To those who hear and believe the gospel, the keys to heaven and the Lord's Supper will be opened. But to those who do not, these two things will be shut. But Jesus charged his disciples not tell anyone yet that he was the Christ, the Son of Man and the Son of God. It was not yet his time to suffer and die.

## **The Sign of the Cross**

Therefore, in verse 21, Jesus began telling his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish leaders, and then be raised from the dead. At that time, he explains to his disciples how he will save his people from their sins. He would intentionally go to Jerusalem because *"it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem,"* where the evil Jewish court sits (Luke 13:33). He would intentionally suffer and die on the cross.

These events were part of his Father's eternal decree, as Peter later preached to the Jews in Acts 2:22-24, *"This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God."* But at this moment, Peter again impulsively rejected Jesus' death. He and the other disciples did not fully understand Jesus' mission until after his resurrection, so he rebuked his Master, "No way, Lord! I won't let this happen to you!" At that moment, Peter was acting on behalf of Satan whose plan is to hinder Jesus' work. So Jesus says to Peter, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me."*

Then in verse 24, Jesus charged the Twelve concerning discipleship. This threefold charge is also for us: We must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. First, like Jesus, we must be willing to sacrifice for the sake of God's people. We are *"to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions,*

*and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives” (Tit 2:12). This is why Paul exhorts us, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). Second, Jesus also warns us, “In the world, you will have tribulation” (John 16:33), because, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Suffering and persecution are part and parcel of Christian life. But bearing our cross also means that we take action, no matter how inconvenient or hard that action may be. It could be sharing our resources, visiting the sick, listening to the lonely. Lastly, Jesus commands us to follow him, to obey all his commands and teachings (Matt 28:20; John 14:15), even on pain of suffering, persecution and even death.*

**B**eloved friends, These three things have eternal results. The one whose only goal is to preserve his life without loving God and neighbor will lose it. The one who rejects his worldly desires to love God and neighbor will preserve his life. He warns those who reject him that though they gain their worldly desires, they will lose their soul. For when he returns in glory, he will exact vengeance on all those who reject him and have done evil deeds against God and his neighbor.

Jesus is the sign that the unbelieving Jews demanded. He is the better Jonah who preached the gospel of salvation to them, to us, and to the whole world. He is the Son of Man and the Son of God in our midst. He is the Sacrifice on the cross to save us and all his people from their sins. Let us therefore live godly lives in the midst of suffering as we await his return in glory so we may finally gain eternal life in the age to come.