



"Men have grown to accept excellence, not obedience, as their aim in life. To aim for obedience is to aim for perfection. Excellence allows room for a mixture."

—Steve Arterburn

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The Signs of God (Part One)

In [Matthew 12:39](#), [Jesus Christ](#) says that "an evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign." Luke's account shows that this statement was in response to the people testing Him by seeking a sign *from heaven* ([Luke 11:16](#), 29). By this time in His ministry, Jesus had already performed numerous miracles and signs, and it is unlikely that those who were testing Him had not heard of His works. Rather, they likely wanted something performed for them personally, and they wanted it to be so tremendous as to be undeniable—something from heaven, like manna or perhaps divine fire. But Jesus tells them, in essence, that He is not going to satisfy their every whim. If they would not believe what He had already done, then the sign they should look for would be in the timing of His burial and resurrection—the sign of Jonah.

Jesus calls them an "evil and adulterous generation" because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant. Had they been faithful through obedience, their minds would have been working along the correct track, and there would have been less enmity toward the Messiah. Jesus was not against signs in the least. [The gospel](#) of John has a deliberate structure built upon eight signs that point to highly significant things. The [Old Testament](#) is likewise

filled with signs, as we will see, and they do the same thing—they reveal [God](#) and His [faithfulness](#). What Jesus was responding to on this occasion was their hardness of heart, which was unwilling to believe unless they were entertained or had their senses titillated. Christ refused to indulge them, especially when He had given ample evidence already. A miracle so great as to be unbelievable would not actually instill true belief.

The Old Testament contains numerous God-given signs, which—had they been believed—would have made the people of Christ's day more likely to recognize their Savior. When God gives a sign, He expects it to be carefully considered so that it can form the basis of later decisions. Notice, for example, what the pre-incarnate Jesus—the Lord of the Old Testament—said to [Moses](#) regarding His signs:

Then the LORD said to Moses: "How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. ([Numbers 14:11](#), 22-23)

From this we can see that when God gives a sign, it must not be taken lightly. He expects His people to remember His works. Notice that in verses 11 and 23, God links a lack of belief in His signs with a rejection of Him! The people rejected God by not allowing the signs He gave to be an integral part of their thinking. We will see later that forgetting God's signs leads to forgetting Him.

By way of definition, a sign is a symbol that communicates meaning. The primary Hebrew word translated as "sign," *owth*, is also translated as "mark," "miracle," and "token." Not all signs have the same significance, though. The mark that God put on Cain ([Genesis 4:15](#)) and the banners carried by Israel ([Numbers 2:2](#)) were distinguishing indicators, but they do not have the same significance for us today as some of the manifestations of divine revelation. A miraculous omen often accompanies the revelation, but not always. By and large, the signs we are going to consider in this series do

not involve miracles, but they are symbols of divine communication and meaning nonetheless.

[Deuteronomy 11:18](#) contains a major sign that remains for us today:

"Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

God is emphasizing the importance of His words, not just the ones found in the context, but all of His instructions. He says they need to be impressed or fixed in the heart and life. He says that they need to be bound to the hand as a sign. The hand is a symbol of activity, especially work. If something is bound to our instruments of work, it will influence everything that is done, and this is exactly what God wants. He wants His instructions bound to us in such a way that every activity is guided and hedged by the words He has given us.

When we do this, it becomes a sign, not in the sense of a miraculous omen, but in the sense that something meaningful is being communicated. The verse does not give many details, but we can infer some of the ways in which obedience becomes a sign. The first is that it is a sign to the one who is following God's instructions because it reminds him that he has received a revelation from God about how to live—a revelation that most of mankind does not see the value of. The person binding God's instructions to his activities receives a communication of the best way to live, and a perpetual statement that there is a God who has made a covenant out of His grace. *Obedience is a testimony that there is a God who wants us to learn to live like He does.*

But there is something else. [Romans 10:4](#) says that "Christ is the *end of the law* for righteousness to everyone who believes" (emphasis ours). Because of that translation, many think that Christ brought an end to the law—that He ripped up His own instructions, as if He had made a mistake! In reality, though, it means that Christ is the *goal* of the law. The goal of obedience to God's instructions is not salvation—for that is a gift—but rather to have the same holy, character image as Jesus Christ. Binding His instructions to our hands is a sign of the goal we are pursuing: trying to live just like the Son of God. That is quite a sign!

Next time, we will continue to examine the sign of heeding God's instructions, and see how God identifies further signs within this sign.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[John \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The book of John, written decades later than the other gospels, has a unique purpose. John omits entirely certain topics which the other gospels go into detail. Where the other Gospels have short narratives, John goes into lengthy descriptive and quantitative detail, providing in-depth characterizations of the disciples. From the perspective of an eye-witness to the events, a Jew (from a well-to-do family) having been thoroughly acquainted with Hellenistic culture, John, a physical cousin of Jesus, is able to bridge the gap explaining the significance of these events to an emerging gentile population not acquainted with Hebrew culture or tradition, but familiar with Greek patterns of thought- including the Platonic (and Gnostic) dichotomy of real and corporeal. Building on this concept, John presents Jesus, not as a phantom emanation, but as the reality, transcending the shadows represented by the temporal physical life. John presents the miracles of Jesus (not so much as acts of mercy) but as signs of the reality of God- indicating the way God works and thinks.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Is Obedience Required Before Receiving God's Holy Spirit?](#)

by Earl L. Henn

Acts 5:32 says very clearly that God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him, yet some argue that keeping God's law is not necessary. What is the truth? Earl Henn clarifies this contentious point.

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