

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #95: SIGNS

By John Temples

Signs are an important Bible subject. The word *sign* or *signs* occurs 129 times in the Bible. The vast majority of those references are to some kind of omen or symbol of God's power. A Biblical "sign" is an object, act, situation, or unusual display that has significance as an indicator of something else past, present, or future. Here are some enlightening facts about Biblical signs:

TRUE SIGNS ALWAYS CAME FROM GOD--THEY DID NOT COME BY THE WILL OR POWER OF MAN

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Nicodemus acknowledged this truth when he said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him" (John 3:2).

SIGNS COULD BE MIRACULOUS OR NON-MIRACULOUS

Here are some references to miraculous or supernatural signs:

- John 20:30,31—"And truly Jesus did many other *signs* in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."
- 2 Cor 12:12—"Truly the *signs* of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds."
- Instantaneous healings, speaking in tongues, raising people from the dead, parting of the Red Sea, walking on water, etc. are all examples of miraculous signs.

And here are some examples of non-miraculous signs:

- Constellations of stars. Genesis 1:14—“Then God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for *signs* and seasons, and for days and years.”
- Rainbows. Gen 9:13-15—“I set my rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the *sign* of the covenant between me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”
- Circumcision. Gen 17:9-11—“And God said to Abraham... ‘This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants after you: every male child among you shall be circumcised....And it shall be the *sign* of the covenant between me and you.’”

PURPOSES OF BIBLICAL SIGNS

- *To guide people.* The sun, moon, and stars were to be for signs and seasons, Genesis 1:14. They serve as navigational aids, they mark seasons, etc. Every Boy Scout learns to look to the North Star to get directions.¹ The Pillar of Fire and The Cloud were navigational signs for the children of Israel in the wilderness.
- *To remind people* of great past events. The rainbow is a constant sign or reminder of God’s promise not to destroy the world by a flood. Joshua set up 12 stones in Gilgal to remind the Israelites of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 4:19-24).
- *To notify people* of wonderful events that were to come. An angel gave a sign to the shepherds of the birth of Christ: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11-12).

¹ I suppose they still do. Or maybe they just whip out their GPS.

- *To convince people* of God's divine power or authority. Moses was given power to turn his rod into a serpent as a sign of the power of God, Exodus 4:1. Jesus and the apostles performed miraculous signs to authenticate the gospel message.

Like everything else God does for us, God's signs have been for our good, to help us and draw us nearer to Him. (Think how helpful road signs are.) But like the Jewish leaders in Jesus's day, people can become enamored with the signs and discount what the signs point to. Here are some negative aspects or limitations to Biblical signs that we need to remember:

IN BIBLE TIMES THE DEVIL WAS ABLE TO COUNTERFEIT SOME SIGNS

He seemingly could duplicate or produce something resembling some of the miracles of Moses (Exodus 7). 2 Thessalonians 2:9 suggests that even if Satan cannot do miracles, he can do things that look like miracles: "The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved."

SOME PEOPLE IN THE BIBLE WERE REBUKED FOR PUTTING TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON SIGNS

To ask God for a sign in the face of incontrovertible evidence was an indication of wickedness, stubbornness, or lack of faith. Matthew 12:38-40—"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks [keeps on seeking] after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For 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.'" Jesus had already given them many signs of His divinity; but they wanted to see signs relating to an earthly kingdom and military power. They wanted to dictate the number, the terms, and the nature of the Lord's signs, a privilege they were summarily denied.

There is also the case of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. While serving as a priest, he was told by an angel that he and his wife would have a son. Luke 1:18 says, “And Zacharias said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? [In other words, I need a sign.] For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.’” What was the problem here? Well, if an angel in blazing glory is standing before you and makes you a promise, I think that's a sign! The angel immediately told him (verse 20)—“You will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”

Many people today have the inspired word of God in their hands, and yet keep on looking for some kind of miraculous “sign from God.”

FOR SOME DIVINE EVENTS, THERE WERE (OR ARE) NO SIGNS

The people of Noah's day received no warning of the Flood. In Matthew 24, Jesus gave many signs for the impending destruction of Jerusalem (verses 1-35). But concerning His second coming, He said there would be no signs (verses 36-42). In spite of His plain declaration, many preachers today get all wrapped up in world events, wars, etc, and regard them as signs of the Lord's return; and they deceive many people in so doing.

SIGNS BY THEMSELVES DO NOT CONVERT PEOPLE

A sign is not the destination; it is a pointer to the destination! To truly obey God and go to heaven takes hearing and accepting what (or Who) the Biblical signs are pointing to. That is why Jesus condemned the Pharisees for demanding signs. They were not interested in the Lord's message; they just wanted to be dazzled by some miracle. Paul rebuked the Corinthian Christians for craving the miraculous signs (such as speaking in tongues) and not paying attention to what the signs were pointing to.

DO WE STILL HAVE SIGNS TODAY?

That is the big question on many people's minds. Some non-miraculous signs are still with us. We still have rainbows to remind us of God's promise. Constellations and stars still mark seasons and aid us in navigation. But as far as miraculous signs go, we can categorically say that they have ceased--they are no longer available or in operation.

You can think of it this way: Miraculous signs are no longer operative because:

- The NEED is gone;
- The SOURCE is gone;
- The PROOF is gone.

The need is gone. Signs were done by Jesus and the apostles because they were needed to authenticate the divinity of Jesus, to get the church started, and to complete the Bible. Since all three of those purposes have been accomplished, there is no longer any need for miraculous documentation.

The source is gone. There were only two ways a person could obtain miraculous power in the first century: direct bestowal by Jesus Himself (or the Holy Spirit), or the laying on of the hands of an apostle (Acts 8:18). Jesus has gone back to heaven, and the apostles are all dead; so there is no way to obtain miraculous power today.

The proof or demonstration is gone. It is fairly obvious to most people that we just don't see people being raised from the dead or being instantly healed, snakes handled with no harm, etc. What happened in Bible times is not happening today.

And why is it that God is no longer giving us miraculous signs? Remember, the purpose of a sign is to guide you or get you to a destination. Once you get there, the sign becomes irrelevant and unnecessary. The purpose of Biblical signs was to prove the divinity of Jesus, to authenticate the gospel message of the gospel, and to complete the Scriptures. Once those purposes were served, God took down the signs.

But what about Jesus's promise that the signs would follow those who believe (Mark 16:17-18)? The signs are still following, but by *documentation*, not by ongoing *demonstration*. God caused the miraculous signs to be recorded and documented in His word, so we today have the same signs the people had in the first century. To seek miraculous signs today while ignoring the Biblical record is to make the same mistake the Pharisees made--to keep on asking for something that God has already abundantly given and which has served its purpose! --John Temples