

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT

Matthew 16:1-4

Key Verse: 16:3b

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."

In the last passage we studied about Jesus feeding the four thousand through which we learned Jesus' divine compassion. Once Jesus fed five thousand people, but when he changed his topic to spiritual bread, they all ran away. They came back again; this time there were four thousand people. They were desperate people because of their sicknesses. They were the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others. "Many others" may have included mental patients, paranoia patients and men and women with leprosy. They didn't deserve Jesus' welcome because they had run away when he told them about the kingdom of God. So Jesus could have not welcomed them. He had wanted to take a break with his disciples and had failed so many times. This time Jesus was indeed helpless and his disciples were miserable because of their tiredness and hunger. But Jesus welcomed the crowd and healed the sick one by one for three days, day and night. When Jesus finished healing the sick, his divine compassion went out to the crowd of four thousand. He wanted to feed them because they came from long distances and had fasted for three days while watching him heal the sick. In their amazement they forgot to eat for three days. Jesus thought they would collapse on the way home if they didn't eat. So Jesus fed them. This time Jesus' disciples did not grumble, but coworked with him saying, "Aye, aye sir! I will distribute food to them." After distributing the food, each of his disciples came back and reported, "Master Jesus, we have distributed it as you said, sir! Thank you, sir, for the privilege of distributing food to the hungry people." In today's passage Jesus talks about the bad influence of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were the ruling class, but they were useless, like old wineskins. There are two lessons: One is about a sense of history; the other is about the importance of spiritual insight.

First, the sign-seeking Jews (1). Look at verse 1. "The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven." They had seen enough signs in the last few days. Jesus had healed the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many other kinds of sick people for three days. That was a miraculous sign more than enough for the political Jews to know the divine compassion of Jesus. But they were asking for a sign from heaven. Here "a sign" is the same as "a miraculous sign." Modern people have declined to recognize the miracles Jesus performed. So they use the word "sign" instead of "miraculous sign." According to the flow of the Bible, in verse 1 "sign" means "miraculous sign from God."

Originally, miraculous signs had great spiritual meanings. For example, when Moses was called to go to Pharaoh king of Egypt and liberate the Israelites and bring them out of Egypt, it was an absolutely impossible demand of God to Moses. At that time Moses was surrounded by seven women and received so much dishwashing training. And he almost became mute. He had no power of God within him, circulating in his soul. He only had one staff to tend his

father-in-law's sheep. But Moses went to Pharaoh and asked him to liberate his people. A miracle happened. Through Moses' performance of miraculous signs in many [contests](#), and through many other struggles, King Pharaoh of Egypt liberated the captive Israelites, whom he needed for labor power. The Exodus was a great miraculous sign.

The people of Israel were liberated and came out from under the oppression of the Egyptian Empire and the iron fist of King Pharaoh. Still, they were nothing but slave-class people. For a long time, about 430 years, they had only worked hard under constant whipping by taskmasters. Their spirits were broken by slavery. The crowd of people who came to Jesus were like them in many ways. But God wanted to train the Israelites as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and use them as Bible teachers for the whole world. Their first training was to cross the Red Sea. After liberation, the people of Israel were joyful, eating, drinking and dancing as they marched on to the promised land. Soon they confronted the Red Sea overflowing during the summer season. So they stopped in front of the Red Sea. What was worse, behind them the reorganized Egyptian army was coming with thousands of chariots. They were in a boundary situation. They could not advance because of the Red Sea. They could not retreat because of the advancing Egyptian army with its thunderstorm of chariots. At that time the people of Israel cried with a loud voice, "We are going to die. It's only a matter of time. We're going to die very soon." But Moses had faith in God. Standing on a rock, he raised his staff in the sky and prayed, "May God divide the water of the Red Sea." Then the water of the Red Sea parted and stood in walls on both sides. The people of Israel passed through the Red Sea as on dry land.

The people of Israel thought that once they had crossed the Red Sea, they could enter the promised land flowing with milk and honey immediately, after a few minutes. But it was not so. After forty years in the desert they arrived at the border. They lifted their eyes. What a surprise! There was the fortress of Jericho, which was invincible. Their joy turned into sorrow. Children began to cry; then women began to cry; then women-like men began to cry. Finally all of them began to cry. But they saw the walls of Jericho fall down when they obeyed Joshua, their commander. When they heard the sound of the collapsing walls of Jericho, their joy came back, and 600,000 Israelites felt like they were each a four-star general. Here we learn that miraculous signs were designed to increase the power of faith in the hearts of the leaders of Israel and the people.

Jesus had fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. They were excited by Jesus' miraculous sign and wanted to force him to be the king of bread so that they could eat enough meals every day. Jesus refused to be the king of bread for them. They argued that their ancestors ate manna from heaven for forty years in the desert, so he should be their king of bread. Then Jesus slipped away. Again four thousand came. This time Jesus did not talk about the good news of great joy the kingdom of God but he healed the sick who were desperate because of their crippled situations. It took a full three days, probably day and night. Then he fed them. This miracle was designed to teach them the divine compassion of God for them.

Thus far, we reviewed the true meaning of a miraculous sign from

God. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus, they demanded a sign from heaven. But their motive in seeking a sign was devious. After Jesus' death and resurrection the people of Israel began to seek the Second Coming of Jesus. From that time until now clever people have made use of people's desire to see miraculous signs in order to make a huge amount of money. In 1992 many witch doctors told people that Jesus was coming on October 29th at 9:00 p.m. So, many people sold their property and gave all their money to these witch doctors. On the day Jesus was anticipated to come, it was cloudy. So they could not see Jesus coming again in glory and honor. It was getting cold. Jesus did not come by 12:00 midnight. Then those who were waiting for his coming went back home one by one, shivering. Their dream of a utopia vanished. It is indeed surprising that in 1997 these witch doctors again began their propaganda about a euphoric day when Jesus would come again. Many people began to follow. It is a very tragic story. There are so many witch doctors hidden in beautiful and quiet mansions. They attract those who are very rich but have lost the meaning of life because they could not buy happiness with money. These magic artists foretell their fortune. None of the magic artists foretell misfortune; they all foretell nothing but great fortune. They call themselves "astrologers." In 1969 there were 10,000 full-time astrologers in the United States. Since then the number has increased a lot. People suffer living in this hard world, but they do not come to church to hear the word of God. Instead, they go to magic artists, fortune tellers and astrologers. In one sense Americans are very rational and intellectual. But in fact, Americans along with the Japanese are a most superstitious and miracle-seeking people.

Here the Jews' sign-seeking was justified by Bible history, but their motive was deceptive. They demanded Jesus to perform a miraculous sign. They wanted Jesus to miraculously change the world and bring the world under the rule of the people of Israel so that the Pharisees and Sadducees might be rulers of the whole world. We can understand them: they were helpless, so they were seeking miracles. But they were against God's purpose, and they did not know the true concept of a miraculous sign. Actually, Jesus' disciples followed him with the same dream of an earthly messianic kingdom they thought Jesus would establish, and they dreamed of becoming his Prime Minister or his Cabinet members.

Second, Jesus encourages them to have spiritual insight (2-4). Look at verses 2-3. "He replied, When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red," and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.'" The land of Israel was very humid and egg-boiling hot. The Jewish leaders knew how to read the weather forecast. They said, "It is fair weather, for the sky is red," and caressed their beards. They had the power to interpret the weather. But they did not have the power to interpret God's work and history.

For example, God chose Israel as his own people among all peoples and made them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Therefore, when the worldly situation was getting worse and worse, they should have had spiritual insight to see the times and lead the people in God's way. But they only tried to squeeze the poor. They became rich, but they

bled poor people white. They should have believed that they were chosen people and that God wanted to use them as Bible teachers. They should have been sanctified by the truth and lived holy lives in order to be shepherds of one people, and then shepherds of all people. They had a sense about the weather forecast. But they completely lost spiritual insight into how God was leading the times and history. So they could be weather forecasters on a TV station, but they could not be servants of God.

The children of God do not live for momentary pleasure. The children of God do not live momentarily. The children of God live in the history of God. Therefore, each Christian must have spiritual insight into the times and know the direction of God for himself. There are two eminent persons in United States history among a cloud of heroes. One was from the land of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln. The other was an African American, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. President Abraham Lincoln saw the signs of the times and decided to wage the Civil War. At that time, southern Americans followed England's heritage. They used a feudal system. There were many classes of people and there was a slave system. Since Southerners possessed huge amounts of land they were very rich compared with Yankees in the northeast, the first area pioneered in America. But Northerners who were living in the Boston area were very intellectual and had historical insight; sincere Christians had spiritual insight as well. They saw the future of America. They could not condone the feudal system of Southerners. At the same time, President Lincoln and so many intellectual leaders could not allow this country to be divided into two parts, and later, into four parts which would become enemies of each other. Soon it would have become like South America which is divided into more than ten countries. More than that, they didn't want to compromise their Puritan faith based on the Bible. They could not ignore God's purpose to make America a city on a hill, like the city of Zion. They believed America must be a land where all people had the freedom to worship God, not through a government religion, but according to personal faith. They believed that all men are created equal by God and have the right to life and liberty. At last, the Yankees could not but fight against rich southerners. The war lasted four years. It took more American lives than any other war in history. It was very costly to maintain a sense of history and follow spiritual insight. But we must have a sense of history and spiritual insight. Otherwise, we become like worms wiggling in a decayed pond. Man is obligated to have a sense of history and spiritual insight for God's purpose.

These days many young people have lost their sense of history. When young people lose their sense of history, they become shameful. America took over Vietnam after France was defeated in a war. America did so simply because France was an allied country during World War II. America wanted to teach the Vietnamese a lesson. So America sent 500,000 soldiers to teach them a lesson. But American soldiers didn't have any clear meaning of fighting against the Vietnamese. The consciences of young people cried in their souls, not knowing why they had to kill pure and naive Vietnamese. Vietnam was doomed to be smashed and turned to powder by American bombs. But it did not work that way. One leader, Ho Chi Minh, who was 72 years old at the time, planted faith in his people: "The truth wins in the end. America's proud weapons will never destroy us. Therefore, let's all decide to die for

our country. Then final victory will be ours." Until that time, America had never lost a war. But these days historians gradually recognize that America lost the war to Vietnam. Sorry to say, these days most graduate students and Ph.D. students in renowned universities in America are foreigners. If you go to Harvard University you can see so many Vietnamese students. There is an impression that Harvard will turn out to be a Vietnamese ivory tower.

America's real problem is not the politicians' unceasing wrestling matches. The people of Minnesota elected a wrestler as their governor and said, "You politicians wrestle too much, neglecting your job. So we send you a wrestler." But the real problem is a lack of spiritual insight. We American Christians must have spiritual insight into the condition of this country and work hard. Most American churches are too quiet, like a tomb, instead of speaking out the word of God against this adulterous and perverse generation. We must decide either to be worms in a decayed pond or true Christians who have spiritual insight into the work and history of God. These days people habitually drink instant coffee and eat instant food like a Big Mac or pizza because they don't want to cook. Let's cook. More than that, let's have spiritual insight to know the purpose of God for each of us. I want to finish my message by quoting the last part of Acts 2:17. It says, "...your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."