

42 Mark 8:11-21

Hunting the Christ

Text

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. **12** And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." **13** And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

Introduction

Sanger Rainsford and his hunting companion Whitney are traveling to the Amazon Rainforest to hunt the fabled big cat of that region, the jaguar. After a discussion about how they are the hunters instead of the hunted, Rainsford hears shots, drops his pipe, and falls off of their boat while trying to retrieve it. He washes up on an island, Ship-Trap Island, that is the subject of local superstition. He finds a palatial chateau owned by a Cossack hunter named General Zaroff and his Cossack servant Ivan. General Zaroff, also a big-game hunter, has heard of Rainsford and read Rainsford's book. Over dinner, General Zaroff explains to Rainsford how he became so good at hunting that he became bored and unchallenged with it. He then decided to live on an island where he captured shipwrecked sailors and sent them, with only food, a knife, and moccasins, into the jungle. Three hours later, he would follow them to hunt and kill them. If they eluded him for three days, he let them go, but he has so far managed to kill them all. Zaroff tells Rainsford that he will be the next person Zaroff hunts.

Rainsford runs into the forest and climbs a tree. Zaroff finds him easily, but decides to play with him like a cat with a mouse. After the failed attempt, Rainsford builds a "Malay man trap" which injures Zaroff in the shoulder. Next he sets a tiger trap, which kills one of Zaroff's hounds. Finally, he sets a trap with his knife that kills Ivan, but not Zaroff. As the hounds approach, Rainsford jumps off a cliff into the ocean. Zaroff assumes Rainsford has killed himself and returns home. Rainsford is there, having swam around the island. Zaroff congratulates him on winning the "game," but Rainsford decides to fight him, and says "I'm still a beast at bay." The General accepts the fight, saying that the loser should be fed to the dogs and the victor would sleep in the master bedroom's bed.

Although it is not stated in the story, it is implied that the General was fed to his hounds because of the last sentence of the story -- Rainsford declaring that "he had never slept in a better bed."¹

What comes from the result when man decides to hunt God rather than man?

The Intention to Trap

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.

Mark jumps right into the mix of things with not a lot of transition. Perhaps there was a background conversation which led up to this confrontation, but at this stage in Jesus' ministry we have come to expect nothing but confrontation from the Pharisees. Initially they were asking questions, trying to figure this guy out. But it became apparent that Jesus was not going to play by their rules.

At this point they are interested in anything they can use to destroy him. They are not interested in debate unless it can lead to a way to kill him. They are not interested in asking questions of him unless he they can trap him by a question. They are not interested in signs unless, by signs they can trap him and kill him. They are looking for any way to turn the crowd, any way to get him caught by Rome. Any way that will lead to his death is OK with them.

The terminology is rather strong. They came out *exelthon*, almost like an army marching out to war.² We see here that they came to argue with him. They came not to discuss but to dispute, not to opine, but to oppose, not to talk but to trap. They asked, *zetein*. In Mark's usage, it seems designed to carry the notion of gaining control over someone or something.³ The question to put him on the defensive. They question him and in so doing they put Jesus in the dock and they reserve the seat of judgment for themselves. How backward is this? Jesus is the one to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given, so we learn in Mat 28:18. And yet these presumptuous men come as if to say, gird yourself, we will ask and you will answer. They aim to gain control of Jesus.

Finally, they came to test him, *peirazein*. That is they intended to trip him up. They wanted to cause him to stumble in some way. "If only he would trip up on one of these questions, perhaps we could get him while he is down." So it seems was the mind of the Pharisees.

The Bait

We have seen their intent to trap Jesus, and now we see the bait. They ask him for a sign. The term here is *semeion*. There are a few different terms used in scripture to designate miracles. *Dunamis* means mighty works, *semeion* means signs, and *teras* means wonders. All three are used of miracles, but each one carries a slightly different emphasis. The same act can be described by any and all of these terms, so a hard distinction is not possible and it is better to speak about their respective emphasis. If something was *dunamis* a mighty deed (like raising the dead) then naturally that would invoke wonder and be *teras*. Moreover, these mighty wondrous deeds meant something, they needed an interpretation, and in that sense they were signs, *semeion*.

All that said, it is interesting that Mark rarely uses *semion*. It is almost always *dunamis*. Given his consistent usage, is he here indicating that the Pharisees were seeking a sign of a different sort? Or does Mark intend by this to highlight the unbelief of the Pharisees. There have been many signs already given, some of which the Pharisees were definitely present for. Mark seems to be highlighting their unbelief in that while there were many mighty deeds already done, the

Pharisees do not acknowledge them as signs. One wonders what else they could ask for. Now why would this be a tempting bait? Because prophetic utterances were frequently accompanied by signs to authenticate them. Many of the prophecies had both a short and long fulfillment. There was a short fulfillment to validate the distant prophetic utterance. Moses' calling and ministry is an outstanding example. Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal is another one. As already mentioned the combination of near and distant prophecies are other examples. Not only is the OT rich with such material, it was also a very Jewish notion. These prophets should be tested.

The Spring

At this point we may be wondering about the intellect of these Pharisees. There has been no other prophet who has given more miracles than Jesus. There has been no period in the history of redemption with greater miraculous activity than is currently being experienced under the ministry of Jesus. The Pharisees themselves know that Jesus can do miracles. That is plank one, Jesus is abundantly capable of miracles.

Plank two: Scripture regularly gives this as a means to know a true prophet. We saw that in the previous point, and much more could be added to it.

Finally, it seems that the Pharisees are setting themselves up for one massive failure. Why on earth would they give Jesus a biblical test of which they know he is more than capable of passing? That is like asking Elway to prove that he was a quarterback by challenging him to throw a football further than 10 yards. It is like challenging Michael Phelps to prove that he is an Olympian by swimming the length of the pool! You have got to be kidding me. Not only has he swam the length of a pool before, but he has done it many times and has set world records many of those times, and you yourself watched him do some of these. Surely they can't be serious in their challenge. How exactly is this going to be a trap? It seems more like they are trapping themselves. So what gives?

In the OT, in Deut 18 we read

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.'

21 And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?'— 22 when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

So far so good. However, in

Deut 13:1-3 If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams.

Lane has suggested, and it seems plausible to me that they could expect a miracle of sorts, but then run to Deut 13 to hold it against him.⁴ You see there are two things that must go hand in hand, the doctrine and the miracle. You can't give new revelation without some form of authentication, thus the miracles. But what of other wonder workers? Does the working of wonders mean that whatever they say is good? According to Deut 13, no. They cannot contradict

earlier revelation. The new message needs to be both verified through miracles and harmonious with earlier revelation.

Clearly, Jesus would pass on both accounts. Still, the Pharisees need not actual proof, but only the appearance of it. I think they have long since forsook getting Jesus through legitimate avenues. If they can get Jesus to agree to this challenge, and if they can give the appearance that some of his teaching contradicted earlier revelation, then they can hold him to Deut 13 and then 18 and put him to death.

Excursus

Allow me now to take a small excursus into the question of signs and wonders. With all this talk of authenticating miracles, what sense does it all make in light of Deut 13? If other people can do miracles, what is the point of them? Why not just stick with earlier revelation? We may look at the magicians of Pharaoh's court and wonder how we can tell the difference?

In 2 Thess 2:9 Paul talks about "The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders." I think that is key. These are not real signs and wonders, they are false. There are some good magicians out there. There were also magicians of sorts in ancient times as well. They had their bag of tricks, their slight of hand and their illusions. But they are not real. And as we saw with Moses, these magicians quickly ran out of tricks. They could put on a show for a bit, but then they came up short. James Boyce talks about how "The coincidence in doctrine is necessary to protect against pretended miracles and the tricks of unprincipled men."⁵

There are passages that talk about signs and wonders being done by false Christs and such, but reason seems to dictate that we understand these as tricky, clever, but nonetheless false miracles. In Galatians 1:8 Paul says, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." Does Paul really believe that an angel from heaven would preach a false gospel? No. Is Paul actually teaching that an apostle of Christ would teach a false gospel? Again, no. Paul is stressing the same thing we see in Deut 13, past revelation serves as a guide. There may be false apostles that want to teach a false gospel, or there may be doctrines from demons (as spoken of in Colossians) and it is against these that Paul is warning. Even if they seem like real apostles, if they teach something different from than the real gospel, don't listen to them, no matter how convincing they may be.

It seems to me that this is how scripture also speaks of miracles. There is this twofold grid for new revelation, conformity to past revelation and divine attestation through miracles. One ought not believe without both of these in place. When you look at the Exodus encounter with the magicians of Pharaoh's court, something interesting shows up. During the third plague the magicians tried to replicate it but were unable. Their own explanation to Pharaoh is found in verse 18, "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'" Why did it work for Moses but not for them? By their own word, the miracles Moses wrought were by the power of God. As opposed to what? As opposed to the tricks of men.

Is this not good reason for being students of the Word of God? How many hucksters are out there masquerading as ministers of the gospel? Know the Word and test their teaching. We cannot afford to be ignorant of our own faith. We must know it. How silly that I even need to say that! It is logically incoherent to claim to be a follower of Christ without knowledge of what he

commands us to believe. The greatest threat to the church has always come from within. Therefore know the Bible! It is amazing how much clarity of thought can come by simply reading scripture on a regular basis. You become familiar with its contents, you see its themes. You notice great movements within the text and within the flow of redemption. Suddenly the trifling proof-texting that characterizes so much of evangelicalism is seen for man-centered prop that it is. Pick up and read dear Christian. Know your faith!

Back to the text. To review: It seems likely that the Pharisees were hoping to trap Jesus by a combination of his miracle, their spin on his teaching, the condemnation of Deut 13 and the penalty of Deut 18.

The Trap Avoided

12 And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." 13 And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

Jesus simply refuses to play their game. The hearts of men are laid open before him and he sees the intention for what it is. Although it was carefully crafted, it is obvious to Jesus. He will not place his foot in the trap. His time has not come.

He sighed deeply in his spirit. J.C. Ryle notes, "Enemies as they were, Jesus could not behold them hardening themselves in unbelief without sorrow."⁶ In grief he asks, "Why does this generation seek a sign?" We have seen Jesus' emotion before as he would sigh over the the deaf man. But this term *anastenazas* is only this once in the NT, and is only used some 30 times in all of Greek literature. It expresses an extreme grief and dismay.

Again, J.C. Ryle comments, "The feeling which our Lord Jesus Christ here expressed, will always be the feeling of all true Christians. Grief over the sins of others is one leading evidence of true grace."⁷ Is that our heart?

Jesus adds, "Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." Verse 13 says, "he left them." This phrase often carries overtones of judgment. It carries a sense of abandonment. Their full rejection is almost complete. Jesus begins teaching in parables as the first real act of abandoning them to their hardness of heart. This is the second act. He resolutely declares that they will receive no sign and removes his presence. There will be one more abandonment when he leaves the temple for the last time later in Mark. At that time their fate is sealed. The glory has departed and nothing is left but the fearful anticipation of judgment upon this unbelieving nation. What a frightening thing to have Jesus walk away from you! To oppose the work of God in your life is to pursue a most dangerous game!

1 Wikipedian entry on "The Most Deadly Game."

2 Edwards, 235.

3 IBID.

4 Lane, 278.

5 Boyce, Abstract of Systematic Theology, ch 3.

6 Ryle, Expository Thoughts on Mark, 8:12.

7 IBID

