

STUDY GUIDE



EASTER
JESUS' FAVORITE EASTER STORY
MATTHEW 12:38-41
04/16/2017

MAIN POINT

Easter is the only hope for: Any Christian who's heading in the opposite direction and those who find themselves in the enemy's camp.

INTRODUCE

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Are you the type of person who does a lot of second guessing, or do you typically go with your gut? Explain.

What about with people? In your experience, can you really know what to expect from a person, or is it a shot in the dark knowing who a person is and what they will do?

Name a person who has proven themselves trustworthy. How do you know you can trust this person?

It would be an unhealthy relationship if we continually demanded a person prove themselves to us, even after they have already done so. But for many, our relationship with God works exactly the same way. In looking at our present circumstances, we discount eternity past and wonder, "What has He done for me lately?" This distrustful view of God carries over into our decision making, too. We look for signs to show us what to do. In today's passage, Jesus addresses this human tendency, and calls us to a better way.

READ AND REFLECT

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 12:38-41.

Flip back through several chapters in your Bible that precede this passage. What are some miracles Jesus had performed?

Why do you think miracles like healing people, casting out demons, and calming a storm weren't enough proof for the scribes and Pharisees?

The scribes and Pharisees had been critical of Jesus' miracles (v. 24), and Jesus had called them out on it (v. 27-30). He had drawn a line in the sand saying, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me

scatters.” He had called them evil and a “brood of vipers” (34). Their request for a sign was a masked attempt to again trap Jesus. They were not genuinely seeking Truth; they were looking to disprove and discredit Jesus.

What did Jesus call these who were looking for a sign? Why evil? Adulterous, how so?

What sign had Jonah given them?

How were the evil Ninevites ahead of the scribes and Pharisees?

Jesus’ answer revealed the evil in their hearts. He had already proven Himself as Messiah; their hard hearts prompted them to continue to test Him. The evil in their hearts helps us answer the question, “If not with external signs, how can we know the will of God?” Without the transformative power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we can’t. With the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made new and join Him in a process of renewal every day that leads us into truth and the way we should go.

Back up and read Matthew 12:33-34. How do these verses speak to the one who does not truly know and follow the Lord, but who is looking for external benefits from Him?

Invite a volunteer to read Romans 12:1-2. How does Paul say we can discern the will of God?

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. The aim of the renewed mind, then, is to know God’s will (Rom. 12:2). What are some practical ways God wants to renew our minds?

How and why is seeking God through prayer and reading His Word different than trying to see or hear Him say something in various circumstances?

Renewal requires transformation. Signs do not require transformation. God’s aim is the renewal of our minds through the transformative truths of His Word to us. In other words, when we seek God Himself, we come in sync with His heart and mind. Then we are able to discern and apply the Scriptures to new situations in life by our renewed minds.

Why do you think believers today still sometimes long for signs from God rather than engaging in a Romans 12:1-2 type relationship with Him? What dangers or outcome are there for those who do that?

APPLY

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Name a time you were able to discern God’s will not by a sign but simply by walking with God along the way?

Name a circumstance where you currently need to know God’s will. How does this lesson encourage or challenge you in that?

How can this group help each other in the process of renewing our minds and discerning God’s will for our lives, both as individuals and as a group?

PRAY

Thank God that He does not leave us helpless to know Him and His ways. Thank Him for the Holy Spirit, the privilege of prayer, for His Word, and for other believers who help us know Him more. Pray specifically for adults as they make important decisions to look to God and His Word and to trust Him as He leads.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 12:38-41

12:38. It would be natural to ask a person who claims to be God's representative for some sign of his authority. In fact, the Old Testament warns against false prophets, and gives criteria by which to determine a prophet's validity (Deut. 18:14–22). By addressing Jesus as Teacher, the hypocrites attempted to mask their hostility with civility to appear reasonable in their request. Jesus had already provided abundant signs for anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see. He unmasked the hypocrites by confronting them directly. Their demand for signs was an indication of unbelief, not faith. Jesus never performed miracles for the purpose of impressing others. Miracles were part of his proclamation, never a performance.

Matthew had arranged the many miracle accounts prior to this passage so that when we see the scribes and Pharisees demanding a sign from Jesus, we also see the deep irony in their request. If these hypocrites had used their eyes with an open heart, they would have been overwhelmed with the signs that validated Jesus' identity as the Messiah-King. But they were so blinded by their narrow, selfish interests that they missed the obvious.

12:39–40. Jesus responded that their request revealed the evil in their hearts. He was not saying it was wrong to test the validity of a person who claims to be God's prophet—only that it was wrong to test him when he had already proven his validity. Such continued testing demonstrated the hardened hearts of the persons seeking the sign.

Jesus refused their request for a sign. However, he did promise the ultimate miracle one day in their future. Quoting Jonah 1:17, Jesus paralleled Jonah's three days in the belly of a huge fish with his own three days in the heart of the earth (the tomb). The attesting miracle was not Jesus' burial, but the fact that there would be an end to the period of the burial. It was only three days! Implied here is the miracle of the resurrection (28:1–10), paralleled by the miracle of Jonah's escape from the fish's stomach (Jon. 2:10).

By Jewish reckoning, a part of a day was considered to be a whole day. And it was common Jewish idiom to refer to even a part of a day as "a day and night." So three days and three nights might refer to as much as seventy-two hours, or as little as twenty-six hours (one full twenty-four-hour day, together with one hour of the preceding day and one hour of the following day). This explains why Jesus could be said to be in the tomb "three days and three nights," when he was buried late Friday and arose early Sunday.

Jesus again used the veiled messianic title Son of Man, so that those with "ears to hear" would understand he was speaking of himself. By the same token, the hardened heart would be confused by this title.

12:41. Continuing his comparison of the current situation with the story of Jonah, Jesus drew attention to the fact that Nineveh, the idolatrous city that Jonah hated, actually repented at Jonah's message (Jonah 3), while this generation, who should have known better, having been privileged with God's revealed Scriptures, was rejecting the Messiah-King. Heathen Nineveh repented before Jonah, God's prophet. Privileged Israel was rejecting the manifestation of God himself (one greater than Jonah). Thus, Nineveh had every right to condemn unbelieving Israel at the judgment.