

Matthew 16:1-12

Review

Last time, we looked at the last half of Matthew 15. Matthew recorded several miracles in this passage – Jesus casting a demon out of a Syrophenician Gentile woman’s daughter in the region of Tyre, Jesus healing many people, and Jesus feeding 4,000 men along with women and children (possibly both Jews and Gentiles of the Decapolis).

Finally, we took a look at several instances in Jesus’ ministry that revolved around bread – the feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000, Jesus instituting the Lord’s supper on the night He was betrayed, and the resurrected Jesus appearing to two of His disciples on a journey from Jerusalem to Emaus who didn’t recognize Him until He blessed the bread of a meal and then broke it before offering it to them.

Let’s continue now with our verse-by-verse study in Matthew. In chapter 16, Matthew moves once more from recounting the stories of Jesus’ miracles back to Jesus’ teachings.

¹And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ²He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ ³And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed.

Matthew 16:1-4 (ESV)

This story is found in each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew 16:1-4, Mark 8:11-13, and Luke 12:54-56. Recall that Matthew’s focus in writing his gospel was to convince Jews that Jesus is their promised מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**. Consequently, Matthew is the only one of the three accounts that mentions the sign of Jonah. Matthew and Luke also reported Jesus saying something similar about the sign of the prophet Jonah on another occasion. We’ll look at those accounts shortly. For now, let’s take a quick look at the other two versions of the story we read in Matthew 16:1-4.

¹¹The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. ¹²And 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.” ¹³And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side. Mark 8:11-13 (ESV)

⁵⁴He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Luke 12:54-56 (ESV)

ASIDE – Jesus’ little lesson on meteorology is quite accurate for the Levant region. When rain infrequently comes to the region, it almost always comes from the Mediterranean (to the West), not from the desert to the east and south. Conversely, when dusty, dry, and hot weather comes, it comes from the desert.

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Here in Matthew 16:1, we read that Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus by asking for a sign. Mark even goes so far as to say they came to argue with Him as well as test Him. What were they testing? Ostensibly, they wanted to know precisely whether Jesus is their promised מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**. Thus, they asked Him to prove it by performing a miracle as they had no doubt heard He did on many previous occasions. But as we mentioned last time, Jesus *never* performed His miracles on demand to put on a show or to prove something to anyone, and He refused their request on this occasion too.

Did these Sadducees and Pharisees really want to find anything out or were they just trying to pick a fight with Jesus because His ministry and His message of salvation by grace through faith threatened the neat little religious racket they had going on at the temple in Jerusalem? We see the same sort of thing at work in evangelism today. Some folks who don't know Jesus as Lord and Savior are genuinely seeking the Truth of the Gospel. They come to respected teachers and pastors with legitimate questions, earnestly seeking honest answers to the questions in their minds.

Often though, folks just want to call the Gospel into question or promote some other agenda of their own. They come with controversial questions and convoluted scenarios like the one the Sadducees brought to Jesus in Luke 20:27-40 about a hypothetical woman who had been widowed seven times. They asked Jesus which of her seven husbands would be her eternal husband in the resurrection even though the Sadducee sect didn't believe in resurrection *at all*. I think such was the case with the Sadducees and Pharisees in this story we read here at the beginning of Matthew 16. They didn't really want to see a sign. They wanted to call Jesus' power to perform such signs and His claims to be the מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach** into question, having already decided that He couldn't and wasn't.

The healings and other miracles that Jesus performed were His responses to the faith of His children, never demonstrations of power hoping to bring someone to faith. As we mentioned last time, Jesus knows that those who will believe His Gospel will believe, and those who will not believe will not – regardless of our experience of His signs of power (apart from the power of His Word). This recalls His trial before the Sanhedrin on the day He was crucified.

66**When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, **67**“If you are the Christ, tell us.” But he said to them, **“If I tell you, you will not believe, **68**and if I ask you, you will not answer. **69**But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” **70**So they all said, “Are you the Son of God, then?” And he said to them, **“You say that I am.” **71**Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.”** Luke

22:66-71 (ESV)

This council of judges had without doubt heard the stories of the miraculous healings Jesus had performed. Some of the scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees who made up the Sanhedrin's staff, and maybe even some of the 70 members of the Sanhedrin itself had personally witnessed some of His miracles. Yet despite what they had seen and heard, most of them stubbornly refused to believe He is their מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**, and petitioned the Roman authorities to crucify Him so they could more easily rationalize their disbelief. After all, they reasoned, if Jesus really were the מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach** He certainly wouldn't allow them to kill Him. Remember them mocking Him as He hung on the cross saying,

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42 “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. Matthew 27:42 (ESV)

Some of them – like Saul of Tarsus – may have continued in unbelief even after seeing Him resurrected. Of course, this brand of stubborn refusal to accept the Gospel didn’t die out with the Jewish leadership of Jesus’ day. The great majority of people alive in the world today, continue to deny His Gospel despite all evidence of its Truth.

In response to their request for a sign, Jesus taught the crowd with a parable as He frequently did. As we know, a parable is a story that uses earthly things to represent Heavenly, eternal principles – in this case, prediction of the weather based upon the signs we observe as a metaphor for our inability to hear the Truth of Jesus’ Gospel, despite His demonstration of power by the signs and wonders He performed.

2 He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ 3 And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. Matthew 16:2-3 (ESV)

This account in Matthew 16:2-3 may be the source of the old nautical rhyme – “Red sky in the morning? Sailors take warning. Red sky at night? Sailor’s delight.”

What were the signs of the times to which Jesus alluded here in Matthew 16:3? Of course, they were the signs of His coming and His ministry that had been foretold in the Holy Scripture the Jews of His day claimed to revere.

14 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 (ESV)

...

2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Micah 5:2 (ESV)

...

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; Isaiah 61:1 (ESV)

NOTE – This is the first part of the prophecy that Jesus read to the congregation in Nazareth before proclaiming ***“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*** (Luke 4:21b) Those present on that day could make no mistake that Jesus Himself claimed to be מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**.

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Before Jesus responded to the Sadducees' and Pharisees' request for a sign, Mark 8:12 tells us Jesus "...**sighed deeply in his spirit.**" Here we see an example of Mark's emphasis on Jesus' human character as The Son of Man. No doubt in His flesh, Jesus was often frustrated and fatigued by His children's refusal to believe in Him and His Gospel. Hence, we can easily sympathize with Jesus heavily sighing before pressing on with the lesson.

Of the three accounts, Matthew's is the only one that mentions the sign of Jonah. Here in this passage, Matthew does not elaborate what Jesus meant by that saying. Matthew's Jewish audience would have been well familiar with the story of Jonah, so perhaps Matthew assumed they would understand what Jesus implied by this saying. Jesus may have given a similar teaching about the sign of Jonah many times to many people in various places. One of these occasions is reported in Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 11:29-32.

38Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40For just 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. 41The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah [Jonah 3], and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon [1 Kings 10:1-13], and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. Matthew 12:38-41 (ESV)

Of course, Matthew's intended Jewish audience is intimately familiar with the Old Testament stories about Jonah and King Solomon. In fact, Jesus blunt claim to be greater than these Jewish heroes is deeply offensive to Jewish sensibilities. That of course is precisely what Jesus intended in saying so.

At the end of Matthew 16:4 we read that after Jesus refused to give the Sadducees and Pharisees a sign, He "...**left them and departed.**" Mark elaborates on this, saying...

13And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side. Mark 8:13 (ESV)

Matthew 16:5 confirms this.

5When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. 6Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 7And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." 8But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? 9Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 10Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 11How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

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***12** Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew 16:5-12 (ESV)*

It's not crystal clear what the writers meant by "the other side." Recall that at the end of Matthew 15, Jesus and His disciples had returned (presumably from Decapolis) to Magadan (Magdala) on the western shore. It would make sense then that by "the other side" Matthew and Mark meant the opposite shore below Bashon (the Golan Heights). It is unlikely that they meant the northern shore near Capernaum and Bethsaida, because in their hometowns they could certainly have found bread to eat and would not have needed to bring any along on their journey.

Mark's gospel would seem to confirm this. He says that after Jesus gave His disciples this warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, they all then traveled to Bethsaida on the northern shore where Jesus healed a blind man. From there, they journeyed up the Jordan to Caesarea Philippi – the source of the Jordan in the northern allocation for the tribe of Dan, where Peter made his inspired confession that Jesus is "***The Christ – The Son of the living God.***" We'll look at Peter's declaration about the deity of Christ, and Jesus' comments about it in detail next time.

But Jesus wasn't thinking about earthly bread at all as they journeyed to "the other side," wherever it was. He was recalling His recent run-in with the Sadducees and Pharisees who had asked Him for a sign to prove He is the מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach**. He wasn't worried about physical hunger. His deep concern was for the lost sheep of the house of Israel – particularly their leaders whom He knew would soon deliver Him up to the Roman authorities to be crucified. Jesus wanted to give His disciples a warning reminder of the dangers posed by false teachings.

In God's Word, leaven is almost always used as a symbol for sin. Jesus' main concern was His people would be led astray into sin themselves through the heretical teaching of their religious leaders. Of course, this same warning is even more applicable to modern Christian life. The allegory of false teaching to leaven is quite apropos. Throughout most of Church history, the Bible was unquestioningly considered to be the very Word of God – perfectly and inerrantly applicable as God's direction for the way in which we should live our lives.

But beginning during the Protestant Reformation in the early 18th century, European scholars and philosophers began to call into question the authorship and divine provenance of the Bible. Of course, it wasn't a big intellectual leap to go from questioning the source of the Scripture to denying the validity and accuracy of the texts themselves.

From this seemingly insignificant seed of "leaven" introduced into Christian theology by a small group of scholars, heresy and apostasy has spread like a cancer throughout Christendom until most of the ostensibly "christian" churches throughout the Americas and Europe and the Roman Catholic church worldwide no longer teach Biblical inerrancy as a fundamental doctrine. This in turn has led from questioning the source and divine inspiration of the Bible into full fledged denial of and rebellion against its ***teachings***, not only among unbelievers, but also throughout the "household of God." In the modern world, one is hard pressed to find "rank and file" Christians who even ***know*** what the Bible says, much less understand its lessons and apply them to our daily lives.

Small wonder then that Jesus gave His disciples such a stern warning about the "leaven" of the Sadducees and Pharisees. He knows that any small compromise can mushroom quickly into dangerous disbelief and rebellion against God. The same principle applies not only to compromise in our beliefs about the authority of the Word of God, but more importantly to compromise in how we

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apply it to our lives as individuals and as Christian fellowships. Thus, Paul warned the church at Corinth about the dangers of allowing blatant sin in their midst, and even congratulating themselves on their “loving” tolerance.

6Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 (ESV)

Does this sound familiar? Do we not see the same “leaven” finishing its work of corruption within the modern “church” which values tolerance, inclusion, and “seeker friendliness” over sound doctrine and humble obedience to God and His Word as we strive to work out our salvation with fear and trembling?

ASIDE – “The festival” Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 5:8 is of course the Feast of Unleavened Bread – the seven-day springtime festival ordained by the Law of Moses in Exodus 12. It takes place in the week following the Passover **שַׁבֹּת** *šabāt* when the Jews commemorate the death angel passing over the homes of the Israelites as he went through Egypt killing all the Egyptian first-born children and livestock. This final plague upon Egypt finally caused Pharaoh to release the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened bread commemorates the fact that the Israelites departed from Egypt hurriedly into the Sinai desert and didn’t have time to allow the bread they baked for the journey to rise. Of course, we have seen that the leaven used to make bread rise is used as a symbol of sin throughout God’s Word. Paul points out here in 1 Corinthians 5:7 that Jesus’ sacrifice of His own life on the cross for the forgiveness of sin has replaced the sacrifice of the Passover lamb by the Israelites as protection against the judgement of death pronounced by God against Egypt. Throughout the Bible, Egypt is used as a symbol of worldly devotion in opposition to reliance upon God’s provision and protection.

As Christians, we rely upon faith in the cleansing and healing blood of Jesus – our Passover lamb – in the place of the blood of the Jewish Passover Lamb to protect us from God’s rightful punishment of death for our sins. Recall that this too was fulfillment of prophecy. When God called upon Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac:

6And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. 7And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” 8Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. Genesis 22:6-8 (ESV)

Instead of removing the physical leaven that is symbolic of sin in our lives from our earthly households as the Jews purge leaven from their homes during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Christians strive by the power of God’s Spirit dwelling in our hearts to purge the symbolic “leaven” of sin from our lives – not just during one week in the spring but throughout our lives day-by-day.

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Mark's parallel account to Matthew 16:5-12 gives us some additional insight into this warning about false teaching from Jesus, also extending a warning about the corruption of the ostensibly Jewish Herodian tetrarchs whose puppet governments were established and undergirded by the occupying Roman authorities.

***14**Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. **15**And he cautioned them, saying, **“Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”** **16**And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. **17**And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, **“Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? **18**Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? **19**When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?”** They said to him, **“Twelve.”** **20**“And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they said to him, **“Seven.”** **21**And he said to them, **“Do you not yet understand?”** Mark 8:14-21 (ESV)*

I don't often use others' commentaries in preparing to teach Bible lessons. I strongly believe that God's Word is its own best commentary, and I focus most of my lesson preparation effort seeking out cross-references within the Bible itself. But I was intrigued by Jesus' mention of these specific numbers of loaves and baskets here in Mark 8:14-21. So, I decided to see what some of my "go to" Bible teachers have to say on the subject.

As I was listening to and reading what some commentaries have to say about Mark 8:19-20, I didn't find any that gave me any better insight into the significance of the specific numbers of loaves and baskets of fragments Jesus mentions here. We mentioned last time that in the feeding of the 5,000, 12 baskets were used – one for each of the apostles. We also mentioned that the number 7 always represents perfection or completeness in God's Word, and that is perhaps the only significance of the specific number of 7 loaves and 7 baskets in the story of the feeding of the 4,000.

One of my favorite commentators is Pastor Dave Rolph of [Calvary Chapel Pacific Hills](#). He made an interesting point about the specific numbers of loaves and baskets Jesus mentions here. He said that when Jesus compared the feeding of the 5,000 with the feeding of the 4,000 in Mark 8:19-20 He emphasized that in the first miracle He fed more people with less food to start and had more leftover than in the later feeding. In that message, Pastor Dave said that whatever the situation, Jesus is willing and able to provide precisely what we need without requiring any earthly resources to start with. ([Dave Rolph-Calvary Chapel Pacific Hills – Mark 8 An Elevated Perspective](#))

ASIDE – Another one of my favorite commentators [Pastor Chuck Smith](#) mentioned that the Greek word translated as “baskets” in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 – **κόφινος** *kophinos* – refers a type of small wicker basket favored by the Jews of the time for various uses, while the word we find in the stories of the feeding of the 4,000 – **σπυρίς** *spyris* – is a larger basket used by the Gentiles. It is a much larger basket like the one used by the Christian brothers of Damascus to lower Saul of Tarus down outside the city wall so he could escape from the Jews of the city who were trying to kill him for proclaiming the Gospel in the days immediately following his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. (Acts 9:22-25) The use of these two distinct Greek words in these stories is yet another clue that

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the feeding of the 4,000 took place along the eastern shore of the lake in the region of Decapolis populated by a mix of Jews and Gentiles.

Certainly, the specific numbers of loaves and baskets mentioned in the stories of these miraculous feedings might be fodder for some ThD dissertation, but they aren't particularly important. The point that Jesus made in this story doesn't revolve around the specific numbers, but rather the general principle that Jesus provides for our needs in perfect sufficiency, just as He promised in the Sermon on the Mount.

31Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

34"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Matthew 6:31-34 (ESV)

Matthew tells us that the disciples did finally understand Jesus' warning about the false teaching of the Sadducees and Pharisees after He chastised them about their distracting focus on their physical hunger.

12Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew 16:12 (ESV)

Looking Ahead

God willing, next time we'll continue our study of Matthew with the story of Peter's divinely inspired confession of faith in Jesus as his מָשִׁיחַ **mâshîyach** at Caesarea Philippi.