

**Faith, Followers, and Failures - The Signs of Failure**  
**From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”**  
**By Phil Brainerd**

## **Introduction**

To many, the name Madeline Murray O’Hair is familiar. She was an atheist who lived in the last century. Ms. O’Hair was very influential. In 1963 she founded a group called “American Atheists.” During the early 60s, she ran an effective campaign to eliminate prayer from public schools. Her work resulted in landmark Supreme Court cases that made her vision a reality. Because of this and other things she did, she is sometimes called “the woman who took God out of America”.

One of the things she would do to promote atheism was to challenge religious leaders to public debates. During those debates, she would present her arguments for atheism. The religious leaders would present their evidence for faith in God. During those debates, Ms. O’Hair heard everything she needed to hear to have faith in God - And she heard it from experts. However, she rejected all these arguments.

It’s interesting – her intellectual arguments weren’t her final reason for being an atheist. Her final reason was this: One night, there was a terrible thunderstorm near her home in Maryland. She decided to go out into the storm and challenge God. She looked up into the sky and called out, “Hey God – If you’re who they say you are, strike me dead with lightning!” That didn’t happen. Madalyn Murray O’Hair took this as evidence that God did not exist.

So, after all kinds of philosophy and intellectual arguments, everything in this woman’s belief system came down to this: She asked God for a sign, a miracle from heaven, ***and he didn’t give it to her.***

In this series, “Faith, Followers, and Failures”, we’re following Jesus as he spoke to different people in his day. We’re looking in particular at the reactions of his listeners. Some believed and followed him. Others did not listen - They failed spiritually.

In this article, we’ll discuss “The Signs of Failure”. If we can learn the principles that we’re studying today, it will go a long way to help us be a success in our spiritual lives.

Let’s read:

38 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.” 39 He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:38-40)”

What's going on here? Let's take this apart.

### **The leaders ask for a sign**

38 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." (Matthew 12:38)

We'll start with the first word: "Then". We're about to study what Jesus did following the conversations we examined in the last few articles. Jesus performed an amazing miracle - Just one of many. The religious leaders wanted to discredit him, so they claimed the miracle was done with the power of the Devil. Jesus gave them one of the strongest rebukes of his ministry. These men had failed so badly, they were possibly past the point of forgiveness. After that, Jesus rebuked them more. We looked at those rebukes in our last article.

Did these rebukes help? Did they change the religious leaders from horrible people to followers of Jesus? No. They jumped right back in and tried to find new ways to discredit him.

This led to their request: "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." (Matthew 12:38(b))

What's going on here? On the surface, this looks like a reasonable request. We've discussed this several times in the "King and I" series. The Jewish people were looking for the one called, "The Messiah." According to the Scriptures, when this individual came, there would be signs. There would be miracles associated with this person.

The Messiah would be a prophet who in many ways resembled Moses. Moses stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and told him the Nile River would turn into blood. Shortly after, it did. Other miracles and signs followed. On another occasion, Moses said the sun would cease to shine. Shortly afterwards, it did. So, if Jesus was the Messiah, he should be able to supply signs like Moses did - Or so it was thought. How did Jesus react to his seemingly reasonable request?

## **II. Jesus challenges their motives**

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!" (Matthew 12:39)

How did Jesus react to a seemingly reasonable request? He replied with a harsh criticism. Why did he do that? There are lots of reasons for this reaction. Let's look at a few.

### **A. The leaders weren't sincere.**

As we've said on a number of occasions, Jesus knew the hearts of these people. Luke tells the same story in his gospel account. Here's what he says:

Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. (Luke 11:16)

Look at that: "...Others **tested** him." These people were not sincere. They weren't asking an honest question. They weren't trying to find out if Jesus was the Messiah. They were just trying to make Jesus trip up.

That's what wicked people do.

### **B. Their hearts were divided.**

Also, these men had divided hearts. Notice that Jesus doesn't just call them "wicked". He also calls them "adulterous". That's a term that God had used in the past when Israel fell into sin. Centuries before, falling into sin meant worshipping false gods. We've spoken about this in the past. I write about it in my book, "The Idols on the Hills." Those gods had names like Ashtaroath, Baal, Chemosh, and Molech. People worshipped those gods because they thought the gods gave them things - Things like prosperity and protection from enemies. The God of Israel wanted a relationship with his people that could be compared to a romantic relationship, like a marriage. So, when people went to false gods, it was like committing adultery.

Over time, people figured out that these so-called gods were just statues. Statues don't give you anything. However, people still wanted the stuff they thought the statues provided. So, the stuff received the same kind of energy that people would otherwise expend when they worshipped the true God.

Jesus says that's what's happening here. The religious leaders didn't want the true God. They don't want a love relationship with him. They wanted things like power and status, comfort and even riches. Serving as religious leaders was just a way to secure those things.

Jesus was a big problem for these people. He stood in the way of their schemes. So, Jesus used the same word that the ancient prophets used when people fell into idolatry.

### **C. They were pompous.**

Next, because these men were wicked, they became pompous. Jesus already showed a sign. He performed an amazing healing in the presence of these men. He healed a man and freed him from a demonic spirit. This was just one of many miracles he performed in the past.

Ah, but to these men, that wasn't good enough. Let's look again at the quote from Luke:

“Others tested him by asking for *a sign from heaven.*” The leadership didn’t just demand a sign: they wanted a sign from heaven. Forget this healing stuff. The Pharisees wanted to see something more impressive. Moses made the sun cease to shine. If Jesus was going to impress this crowd, he had better do something even bigger - Something *cosmic.*

There are several problems with this. First, Moses didn’t really do anything. He only followed orders from God. He didn’t personally part the Red Sea - God did.

Next, Jesus, only moments before, performed an amazing miracle, and the leaders brushed it off with an excuse. If Jesus performed another miracle, the leaders would just find another excuse. Jesus could look up into the sky and tell the stars to move around. The Pharisees would just say it was an optical illusion. So, another miracle would be pointless for these people.

Worse, the Pharisees wanted this on demand - And they wanted it right away. It’s like they were saying, “Hey Jesus, we’re on a schedule. We need to catch the four o’clock camel train back to Jerusalem. If you’re going to perform some magic, you need to hop to it!”

If these men hadn’t been in such a hurry, they could have seen lots of miracles. Jesus performed them all the time. If they had come when Jesus first appeared, maybe they would have seen Jesus calm the storm. Then, they would have seen more than an occasional exorcism - They would have seen Jesus cast legions of demons out of the Gerasene demoniac. These men didn’t realize who they were dealing with. Their lack of faith made them prideful and pompous - They thought they could take their time and make Jesus perform on their schedule.

### **An Illustration**

To understand this better, let’s use an illustration. Imagine that one day, you happen upon a camp of homeless people. We’ve all seen them in the press. You have a field where lots of homeless put-up little tents, or they shelter beneath a tree. One day, someone comes into some money, and they decide to buy hundreds of gift certificates to a local fast-food restaurant like McDonalds. One at a time, they walk up to the homeless and give them a certificate good for a sandwich, a salad, some fries, and a drink.

Now, imagine that one of the homeless walks up to the individual giving out the certificates. After tapping the giver on the shoulder, they say, “Hey – I’m tired of waiting - I want my certificate *now.* And forget this burger stuff – I want steak!”

The person giving out the certificates is curious and asks, “And why should I do that?” The homeless man points over to his tent. He says, “All these other people just have tents and sleeping bags. I have a shopping cart! And my cart is full of important stuff.”

Well, in reality, the man stole the cart from a nearby store. He's either stolen what's in the cart, or he picked it out of the garbage. He somehow thinks this gives him the right to make demands from a kind person who's trying to help everyone. He thinks the size of his junk pile in some way makes him more important than everyone else. Of course, it does not.

Now, the person giving out the gifts could respond in one of two ways. They could say, "Get out of here – no food for you." Or, if they were kind, they could quietly say, "You need to wait your turn - I'll get to you in due time."

For Jesus, it was something like that. A wise man once said that Christians are just beggars who have found bread. Evangelism is a beggar telling his friends. You see, we're all beggars of sorts. We are all sinners. We are all broken. We are all in danger. Jesus comes to each of us to give us a free gift: His salvation.

The Pharisees were like the homeless man with the shopping cart. They thought that because they were given the time to study and learn, that this made them more important than everyone else. They thought they could jump up to the front of the line to demand things from Jesus. However, they were just another form of beggar.

Just like the person handing out food in the homeless camp, Jesus could have told these people there was nothing for them. Instead, he did what a kind man would do: He simply told them to get back in line.

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:39-40)"

The story of Jonah and the whale is one of the best known in the Bible. Jonah went on a trip in a boat. He wound up overboard. A great fish swallowed him and held him in the depths for three days. After that, it spit him out on the shore. Jesus used this as a symbol of his death and resurrection, one of the greatest miracles of all history. He died on the cross. He was buried for three days. Then, he rose on the third.

There were many in Israel that took the time to follow Jesus. Those people saw his miracles. Others chose to go on with their lives. Those people never met Jesus. They only heard one day that Jesus died and rose from the dead. That was the "sign" that they were given - Nothing else.

If the Pharisees had been sincere seekers of truth, they would have been treated to miracles that we can only long for. Instead, they got one miracle - one sign. It was the same one given to everyone else. It was the same sign given to the world ever since the time of Jesus. They wanted to demand a sign from Jesus. Jesus told them to get back in line.

Sometimes, Jesus said things in concise ways. Sometimes, he said more. In this case, there's more. Jesus compares the Pharisees and others of that generation to people in history who believed the message of God.

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:41)

You can read about the story of Jonah in the little 4-page book with his name. Let's just summarize here.

Talk about wicked. Nineveh was one of the most wicked places on the earth - Maybe ever. They regularly attacked their neighbors, including Israel. When they attacked, they weren't content to merely kill people. They tortured their victims. They did things so horrible; we don't want to describe it for fear of ruining your next meal. God told Jonah to go preach to Nineveh so they could repent of their evil and be saved.

Jonah didn't want any part of that. First, he hated these people - They killed his friends. Next, if they tortured innocent people for no reason, what might they do to someone who annoyed them by preaching to them? Jonah responded to God's command by taking the first ship he could find that was going the opposite direction. God responded by causing Jonah to go overboard. That's where the fish came in. He swallowed Jonah, held him for three days, and then spit him out - *pointed towards Nineveh*.

Now, here's something interesting: When we speak of the miracle of Jonah and the fish, we're talking about a miracle that was observed by only one person: Jonah. That miracle was for his benefit. It was God's way of telling him that he was the right person for the job, and that God would be with him. So, Jonah went.

Now, let's note a few things. Jonah's heart was not in this. He didn't want to be there. Next, the Ninevites had no direct knowledge of the God of Israel. They were a totally pagan people. How did things turn out? Let's read from the book of Jonah.

1 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." 3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. 4 Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:1-5)

Motivated by the miracle of the great fish, Jonah decided he should listen to God. So, he headed to Nineveh. The city was so big, it took three days to travel through it.

For three whole days, here's what Jonah did. He just said, "God is really mad at you. If you don't repent, you're going down."

Here are some more interesting notes: Once the fish was out of the picture, there were no more miracles. No signs. No wonders. Nothing but words. And then, a people who had no history with the God of Israel **believed**. And they **repented**.

So, centuries later, here was Jesus talking with men who were steeped in the history, the learning, and the traditions of Israel. And they didn't get it. So Jesus warned them: A bunch of gentiles listened when they were told the truth by the prophet Jonah. And they didn't get any signs. But now, something greater than the prophet Jonah was standing before them.

If that wasn't enough, Jesus used another famous example from Jewish history.

42 The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here. (Mathew 12:42)

This is the famous Queen of Sheba. Her country "Saba", or "Shaba" was probably Ethiopia or Yemen. In either case, it represented the furthest reaches of civilization in those days. The Queen of Sheba, or the Queen of the South, heard about the wisdom of Solomon. She was so intrigued that she gathered a caravan with all kinds of riches and travelled over a thousand miles to see if what she heard was true. In those days that was a monumental journey.

So again, we're talking about a woman who had no substantial history with the God of Israel - This was a gentile woman. And again, if you read this story, there were no miracles or signs. After listening to Solomon, here's what happened:

8 "How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! 9 Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness." (I Kings 10:8-9)

A woman who had no prior experience with the God of Israel believed. And she praised God. Like the people of Nineveh, she was shown no miracles or signs. All she heard was the words of God from Solomon.

Solomon was regarded as the wisest man ever to live. And again, Jesus said, "Something greater than Solomon is here." So again, Jesus warned: This woman will be your judge.

## What does this mean for us today?

So, what does all this mean for us today? We're reminded of a very important principle:

*Miracles do not produce faith.*

I cannot tell you how many times I've heard people suggest that they would believe if they saw a miracle. It doesn't work that way. If you spend all your time looking for miracles, you will fail.

What works? What produces faith? The apostle Paul tells us in Romans:

“...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” (Romans 10:17)

Faith comes by hearing. So, we are constantly reminded: Read the Scriptures. There, we meet God. As we meet him, his Holy Spirit opens our eyes to his truth.

Next, never demand anything from God. A demanding spirit is a prideful, pompous spirit. God works in his own time. If you find yourself getting angry because God isn't giving you what you want on your schedule, beware. No one tells God what to do. He gives grace and good things to people when he chooses.

This is a problem for all kinds of people.

22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (I Corinthians 1:22-24)

In the 2,000 years since the time that Paul wrote this, there has been one “sign” for all people.  
- Christ crucified. That's it! That's all we get.

Let's pull this all together.

## Conclusion

We started with the life of Madalyn Murray O'Hair. What ever happened to her? Well, she died a horrible death. A criminal kidnapped her and tried to extort money out of her. After that, he killed her. Her demand for a sign was never answered. God answered her demand with the answer given to all people: He answered by giving her time to repent. However, she never listened.

The woman who shook her fist in the face of God, and who spent her life trying to remove God from a nation, learned the hard way the evil people have a funny way of running into other evil people.

However, there was a sort of a sign for the rest of us. Her son became a Christian.

Although O'Hair's life is an extreme example, we are reminded that demanding things from God is never a good idea. Why? Because God is good and kind and giving. However, he is also a sovereign king who works on his own schedule.

This story has taught us an important lesson: The more you walk with Jesus, the more you'll see his goodness. Choosing to ignore him and then demanding things from him on your schedule is a good way to wind to wind up empty.

I hope that we will all join with the people of Nineveh who believed even though they saw no miracles. I hope that we will join with the famous Queen of Sheba to travelled from the ends of the earth to hear God's wisdom - And who was rewarded for her efforts.

I hope that we will all lead a successful spiritual life of faith. How? By hearing the Word of God. No need for signs.

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Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church: [TrinityTeaneck.org](http://TrinityTeaneck.org)

Phil's Site: [PhilBrainerd.com](http://PhilBrainerd.com)

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: [PeaceWithGod.net](http://PeaceWithGod.net)

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