

# How to Read a Sign

*Behold a man raised up by Christ!  
The rest remaineth unreveal'd;  
He told it not; or something seal'd  
The lips of the Evangelist.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>46</sup> ... but **some of them went to the Pharisees** and told them what Jesus had done.

<sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.

<sup>48</sup> **If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."**

<sup>49</sup> But one of them, **Caiaphas**, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all.

<sup>50</sup> **Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."**

<sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year **he prophesied** that Jesus would die for the nation,

<sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

<sup>53</sup> So **from that day on they made plans to put him to death.**

<sup>54</sup> Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the **region near the wilderness**, to a town called **Ephraim**, and there he stayed with the disciples.

<sup>55</sup> Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* w; in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 420; also cited by Bruce, p. 249.

<sup>56</sup> They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?"

<sup>57</sup> Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

*John 11:46-57*

## Signs

**John 12:18** says, "... because they heard that He had performed this sign." The sign refers to **raising Lazarus from the dead**. It is the **seventh** and final great sign Jesus performed in the Book of John during his ministry (seven standing for the perfect number, since Jesus obviously performed many more signs than this). Immediately after Jesus raised his beloved friend from the dead, the story tells us of **Caiaphas** the high priest made a proclamation about Jesus: "It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (**11:50**). **Verse 51** refers to this as a **prophecy**, something that Caiaphas did not say of his own accord. This prophecy was also a sign, a sign of things that would come to pass very soon. In light of this, I want to talk with you

a little bit about signs. What are they? Why did Jesus perform them? What is to be our response to them?

What is a “sign?” A sign is a representation of an object with some relation between it and the object. You can have natural signs or man-made signs. Thunder is a sign of an approaching storm. Its relation is that of a warning. A period is a sign that a sentence is over. Its relation is that of a marker. An atlas is a sign of a physical piece of land. Its relation is that of a map. It shows you how to get from point A to point B. You can think of English words with “sign” in them to show you the diversity and purpose of signs: Signal, signature, signet, signify, significant, signpost, signalman.

I’m explaining “signs” to you through words and language. But did you know that words are themselves signs? They are not the reality itself. We have a language that helps you understand this: *sign language*. People use their hands and arms to make words that deaf people can read with their eyes. But the written word is a sign too. Letters are signs of sounds that we make. Words are signs of things that we are talking about. Sentences are signs of ideas that we think. Every time you speak you are signing what is in your head to someone else. You are

trying to help them understand the reality of your thoughts.

Signs are **helpful and necessary**. I mean, how could you ever know what I was thinking unless I used words and gestures which are signs? The **best thing** you can do with signs is to **read them and heed them**. If you are in the high country on a warm evening and see a ring around the moon, you can head back to the cabin so as not to get caught in the approaching blizzard unprotected. If you come to an intersection and see a red octagonal sign with the letters “stop” in them, you can obey the sign so that you won’t hit the pedestrian walking in front of you.

Through signs are meant to be understood, because they are not the reality itself but merely signify or signal the reality, signs have some inherent limitations. For this reason we can often go wrong with signs. What are some ways we can do this? One thing you can do is to **misunderstand them**. I can think of several reasons why someone might misunderstand a sign. Perhaps you don’t have **the necessary context**. There is sign, I’m told, at the South Pole. It is a **Wall Drug sign**. It says 9,333 miles to Wall Drug, South Dakota. What does this sign signify? You won’t know if you don’t have the context. If you’ve never been on I-90 between, oh, Montana and

Minnesota, you would just scratch your head at this sign and think it was misplaced. But for the insiders, they know it only meant to be funny (perhaps it is a clever marketing ploy too). Wall Drug has so many signs along I-90 that it becomes a joke to people driving the road.

You could be **ignorant** of what the sign stands for, and this could be for many different reasons (you forgot, no one ever told you, you never bothered to find out). For example, let's say you are a Scotsman traveling outside of your country for the first time. You need to use the **public restroom**, so you walk to the bathroom door and see the figure with the skirt on it. You *might* believe this for the men's room. Your ignorance could become a rather embarrassing mistake.<sup>2</sup>

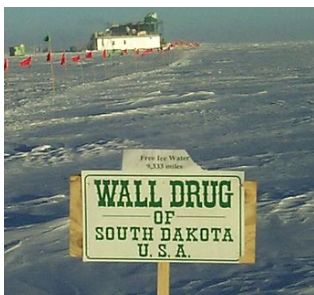
---

<sup>2</sup> I also think of a call made to a radio station in Fargo recently by a woman furious over deer crossing signs. She had hit three deer in the same place, right where the deer crossing sign was and she couldn't figure out why they would put that sign in such a dangerous place for the deer. Why couldn't they move the sign to a safer place for the deer to cross, like say a school crossing zone where traffic was supposed to move more slowly. She couldn't figure out why her senators, congressmen, police, and fire departments wouldn't take her advice seriously.





Another thing you could do is be **confused** because the same sign might be used for different things. Take the **skull and bones** figure. The same sign is used for a secret society, to mark something poisonous, and for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. If someone were a rabid Bucs fan, but not well versed in poison, if they happened to see a bottle of orange liquid with a skull and bones on it in a Bucs merchandise shop, I suppose they might think this could be Gatorade, drink it, and then die. In other words, there are various levels of seriousness attached to misunderstanding signs.



A second thing you could do is **ignore** the sign. This may or may not have fatal consequences, again it depends on the sign and the circumstance. Perhaps you see a sign for **Duncan Donuts**, but you drive past, ignoring it because you don't want to eat there. This may or may not save your life! Let's say that you do want to eat there, but

you are a hippie from Eldorado Springs, and so quite naturally you do not wear shoes or a shirt. You see the sign on the door “No shoes, no shirt, no service” but ignore it and walk in anyway, only to find yourself thrown out by the policeman who just “happened” to be eating inside. But ignoring could have dire consequences. Perhaps you are on a golf-course and you hear a nearby thunderclap but continue playing with those metal rods in your hand because you are in the middle of the best game of your life like old man Bishop in Caddyshack with Bill Murray as his caddy. You are taking a serious risk with your life if you ignore that sign.



A third thing you can do is to **confuse the sign with the thing signified**. This can have dire consequences as

well. We can move into the realm of religion and get a bit more serious for a moment. Catholics believe that the **Lord's Supper** literally becomes the body and blood of Jesus. This is the *hocus pocus* of transfiguration; in fact "hocus pocus" is derived from part of the Latin used in the Mass, "*Hoc est enim corpus meum*" or "this is my body."<sup>3</sup> They also believe that **baptism** in water literally saves a person. Again, the sign is confused with the things signified. This creates serious problems with salvation by faith alone, especially in the case of a baby who is baptized and didn't have any input in it. The parental baptism of the child is believed to save the baby apart from any faith it may or may not have been given by God.

Probably the worst thing a person can do with regard to signs is to **deliberately disobey** them, even when they know what they signify. Here we have not only mental lapse, but **moral culpability**. (Or course, moral culpability can also be involved in the previous examples as well). Think of the suspect fleeing the scene of a crime in a car. He ends up in a high speed chase, runs a red light, and smashed head first into an oncoming car, killing the

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hocus-pocus/>



driver and its occupants. He deliberately disobeyed the sign for moral reasons and people ended up dead.

## **Moral Disregard for God's Sign**

In our passage today, there is **one response** that stands out above all others. It is this last response. It is the willful disobedience to the sign. It is morally culpable deliberate negligence to heed and believe the sign. Let us look at it now. Again, the main sign here is Jesus' raising of his beloved friend Lazarus from the dead. This was the great sign that he performed (**John 12:18**). There was **a reason** Jesus gave it. It was performed "**for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it**" (**John 11:4; 40**). The function of the sign was to point the person who saw or heard about it (and still today who hears about it), to Jesus Christ that they might believe upon him and be saved. Jesus Christ is the reality, the thing the sign signified. It demonstrated the power of God, the authority, the deity, the compassion of the Son, and it warned all people that his words were true and needed to be heeded by one and all.

We have seen that many people believed in this sign and turned to the one whom it signified (**John 11:45**). However, today we are looking at this other reaction to

the sign. “But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done” (11:46). You might be tempted to think that this was the “telling” of evangelists, the natural outcome of being so excited about the good news that even the Pharisees must be told.

The context screams that this is not the case. The verse begins with “but” (*de*, which is the second word in Greek), not the strongest word that could be used to show an adverse reaction to the prior belief of the people, but one translated “but” in every significant English translation because of what follows. One group believed, *but* this group did not. The reaction here was different. To tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done was to **tattletale on Jesus**, not to spread the gospel, and this is made clear by the Pharisees’ previous aversion to Christ, their desire to kill him, and their reaction to this news now.

It says that the **chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council** (John 11:47). This “council” refers to the **Sanhedrin** council made up of 70 priests, mostly Sadducees, who interestingly did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:23). The Sadducees were like the theological liberals of their day and the Pharisees would have been like the conservative

fundamentalists. Why did they gather the council? The Pharisees were mere a religious group, but this council of Sadducees held the political power and the Pharisees needed their help to carry out their wicked plot. This makes what the Pharisees did here all the worse, since they did believe in the resurrection and yet were willing to conspire against Jesus with their religious nemeses!

As we read we can see how it all unfolds. Together they asked, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs” (11:47). They recognize that this is a sign. But what is their problem? Is the sign completely out of their context so that they misunderstand it? Doubtful. Are they confused about its teaching? Possibly. Are they ignorant of its meaning? Maybe. None of those are mutually exclusive. However, Jesus has been talking to these people for three years, so it is difficult to believe that the problem is purely or even mostly rational.

The next verse provides the answer. “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (11:48). In other words, they are conspiring together to stop Jesus once and for all. It will be made clear in a moment how they intend to do this. First,

however, notice the motivation for stopping Jesus. It is a **moral motivation** couched in political and pragmatic excuses. Beware of making excuses to justify your sin, you only compound sin upon sin when you do this.

We know from earlier in the book that the Jewish leaders had come to hate Jesus for the things he said and how he threatened their power and authority. This is only getting worse since Jesus raised Lazarus. People are following him everywhere: “**Everyone will believe in him**” (**John 11:48**), they admit. Do not skip over those words, for they show the true motivation behind the plot. They do not want people to believe in Jesus any longer, for he threatens their control, their authority, their power, their very existence. Don’t make any mistake, politicians who crave power have the same reaction today to those who might expose them for what they are, and they do whatever it takes to take the threat away. This kind of sin knows no political party boundaries.

Though they admit the real problem, they are clever self-deceivers. They justify their hatred by suggesting that the Romans would come and take away their place and their nation because of Jesus. The “place” refers to the **temple**, the heart of their worship and way of life.

They would later say the same thing about Stephen (“he never stops speaking against this holy place”; Acts 6:13-14) and Paul (“This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place”; Acts 21:28). Jesus had himself threatened to tear down the temple back in chapter 2, *hadn't he* (asking facetiously)?

But why would they think that Jesus would bring down Rome upon their heads? Remember, first, that Israel was like a vassal state to the Roman Empire. It had a kind of self-rule, but it only went so far. Each Roman State was still always under the authority of the Roman Empire. Now, combine this political tug of war with Rome with their warped understanding of the **Messiah**. Messiah for these people was a **political king**, a valiant warrior sent by God to overthrow Rome and win final freedom for Israel. Their temple had already been destroyed once, in the days of the Babylonians. The Greeks had almost destroyed it, until Judas Maccabeus circled the wagons and saved it from Antiochus Epiphanes. Here, you can see how twisted the logic becomes just to kill someone that threatens them. How exactly was Jesus doing anything to bring Rome down

upon the Jews? He wasn't doing anything. And if they really believed Messiah would save them from Rome, why say that this man who is winning so many followers and claims to be Messiah and is proving it by his miracles wouldn't in fact do just that? Their reasoning is irrational, because they aren't reasoning at all, they are justifying unjustifiable actions to themselves.

No, these people are not worried at all that Jesus would bring Rome down upon them. It just became a convenient political excuse to murder the Son of God. This was a deliberate, malicious scorning of Jesus' climactic sign. He just raised a man from the dead, and they don't even in awe. Their rage is too great see the glory before their eyes. They hated Christ, would stop at nothing to stop him, and made themselves feel good about it by justifying it to one another, patting each other—the enemy of their enemy—on the back for how they were all willing to set aside their difference for the common defense of the national good.

Here, then, is a great warning. As you see others before you purposely heedless of the signs of the times before them, you must not allow moral corruption to twist your logic to allow you to justify to yourself or



anyone else what Jesus has done, and what he will one day soon also do. He has raised men from the dead, a sign not only of his power, but of his own soon coming death and resurrection, the greatest sign of all, that he is God in the Flesh, sent from heaven by the Father to save people from their sins. Not only this, but Jesus went into heaven and in the same way he will return again to judge the living and the dead. Make no mistake about it. His earlier signs guarantee that his return is certain.

Jesus offers a way out from under your sins, to be forgiven of them once and for all, by believing in his blood. How horrible is it to scorn God's forgiveness by heaping your sins by justifying to yourself and others that he really hasn't done what he proved time and again to do and to be? Instead of perish in your way, turn from your sins and believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Jesus himself is God's great Sign to you, a Banner lifted high, a man born of a virgin, a Ladder reaching between heaven and earth, a Serpent on a pole, the Temple and very dwelling place of God on earth that God has had mercy on this world and will not hold a person's sin against when they come to Christ. God

desires to gain great glory by showing men his mercy. So turn to him and do not disdain the Sign of God.

## **Another Sign from Disobedience: God's Glory Even in Rebellion**

But now, at just this point, it might be tempting to think that this moral disobedience and disregard for God's signs was somehow out of God's purview of knowledge or his sovereign hand of power and purpose for the Son. Is the disobedience of man something that caught God by surprise? This, of course, is completely wrong. And if you or anyone hearing this message today were to scorn the signs, would God be flabbergasted, shaken, stunned? The passage now makes a fascinating turn by using the words of one of the perpetrators against himself, thus displaying the Glory of God even in the rebellion of sinners.

“But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish’” (John 11:49-50). This turns out to be an extremely ironic statement, but **before seeing how** let's try to understand why he said this. The idea was not unlike

**Spock** in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” Commenting on **2 Samuel 20:1** and the death of **Sheba**, a man who tried to steal the throne from David, they said, “It was taught: If a company of people are threatened by heathens, ‘Surrender one of you and we will kill him, and if not we will kill all of you ... Better that you should be executed rather than that the whole community should be punished on account of you’” (**Gen Rab 94:9**). This was the case of a wicked man dying in the place of a whole group of traitors.

But there were sacrificial overtones in their thinking as well. In the book of 2 Maccabees one of seven martyred brothers proclaims, “But I, as my brothers, offer up my body and life for the laws of our fathers, beseeching God that he should speedily be merciful to our nation; and that you by torments and plagues may confess, that he alone is God; and that in me and my brothers the wrath of the Almighty, which is justly brought upon all our nation, may cease” (**2 Macc 7:37-38**). This time the speaker is the victim rather than the judge. He desires the salvation of the nation, and if his death might help bring that about, more the better. In either case, Caiaphas’ idea was

deeply rooted in Jewish thought. But in his case, there is no reason to think that he had anything other than **political expediency** in mind (he seems to have been a master of diplomacy<sup>4</sup>), for Caiaphas does not seem to have cared one way or the other about Jesus. He was simply looking for a way to appease the Pharisees and to keep the peace of Israel, so if this rabble-rouser Jesus had to die, then so be it.

Here is where it gets fascinating and ironic, and from a Reformed perspective, completely unsurprising yet still marvelous to behold. We are told that Caiaphas was not speaking of his own accord. This does not mean that he suddenly became a puppet of God. Rather, it explains, “**being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad**” (**John 11:51-52**). Caiaphas had one purpose for the statement; God had a completely different purpose. Thus, the one who gave the authority to the men to find Jesus and kill him (**vs. 53**) ends up being used by God to give a greater sign than the sign of

---

<sup>4</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2: John, Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 116.

Lazarus. Jesus would not merely die as a martyr, but as a sacrifice that appeases the wrath of God and allows God to gather in his children.

What does this mean to “gather into one the children of God?” Both the Bible and the Jews were of the opinion that the coming Messiah would gather the scattered people of the world. To them this meant the Jews of the dispersion, those who had been displaced by Assyrian, Babylon, the Persians, Greece, and Rome (cf. **Ps 106:47; Isa 11:12; Jer 23:3; Ezek. 34:11–16; Mic. 2:12; 1 QS 9:11**). However, Isaiah, Zechariah, and others also depict Gentiles streaming to the mountain of God saying, “all nations shall flow to it” (**Isa 2:2-3; cf, 56:6-8; 60:6; Zech 14:16; 1 Peter 1:1**). And this seems to be the very promise given to Abraham before the Jews even existed. This was beautifully written about by an unknown Christian writer in a Christian section of the ancient book called The Odes of Solomon:

<sup>4</sup>I took courage and became strong and captured the world,  
and it became mine for the glory of the Most High, and of God my Father.

- <sup>5</sup>And the gentiles who had been scattered were gathered together,  
but I was not defiled by my love for them, because they had praised me in high places.
- <sup>6</sup>And the traces of light were set upon their heart,  
and they walked according to my life and were saved,  
and they became my people for ever and ever.  
Hallelujah.

Jesus' death is not itself the gathering, but his death allows for the Holy Spirit to gather together through his call all the Father gives to the Son, because his death is for them especially, with the specific intent that they would be gathered. And gathered together they are and continue to be each time God saves a sinner and adopts him into his family. The cross is not the gathering, but it becomes the hill that draws the nations to Christ, where they see and acknowledge the sign of the cross for the forgiveness of their sins.

Who didn't understand, the Pharisees or also Caiaphas? Did he know he was speaking prophetically? Did he have the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God in mind when he gave the order to kill the Lord? Of course



not. The Apostle Paul tells us, “None of the rulers of this age [this includes earthly and heavenly] understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). They neither recognized Jesus as being sent by the Father from heaven, nor did they see him as the Messiah (the one to come), nor did they believe him to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

But God knew. God is not shocked by such actions of wicked men. He ordains them from the beginning of time to glorify himself and though they have one intent, God’s intent is different. God did not only know, but he actually planned for it all to come to pass just this way, so that he might be glorified through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. As the Apostle had just said, “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (vs. 7). In the plan of God, there was a perfect moment for Jesus to die. This was not that moment. So we find the Lord no longer going publically among the Jews, but returning to the wilderness to a town called Ephraim where he stayed with his disciples about 10 miles from Jerusalem until the fated Passover (John 11:54-57).

## What Will You Do with the Sign?

So let's review. A group of unbelievers tattled on Jesus to those who hate him. Those who hate him take the matter to the Jewish ruling council, their own enemies in the faith, in hopes of finding common ground in their desire to destroy Jesus. The council agrees to put him to death, but not before the high priest utters a prophecy that he knows not about, a prophecy that will mean the salvation, not only of Jews, but of Gentiles and the bringing together of God's chosen children.

We have talked about signs today, specifically about the sign of resurrection. Signs are not evil, but an evil generation asks for signs (**Luke 11:29**). We live in an evil generation. Many people today clamor for signs from God, don't they? In everything from seeking a sign about when to move or what job to take or which person to marry, to running to Israel in a kind of Christian vision quest, to gathering by the thousands to see a statue of the Virgin Mary weep, we are a people that demand signs. **"God, send us signs that we may believe you!"**

But signs are funny things. Wicked people won't believe them. Why? We have seen many reasons. Let me add one more. As soon as a sign appears in the Bible,

a true sign, what happens? The miracle becomes normal. The extraordinary and unique becomes common. That which can't possibly occur has now occurred. So, the very moment a sign occurs, it loses its exceptionality. The people come to expect them and they lose their power.

That is why the Bible shows you signs, but never tells you to put your trust in them. You must not look to the sign and confuse it for the reality. You must look to thing which the sign signifies. Your faith must be in Christ, not in his signs. Otherwise, you will dismiss the sign out of hand. As we have seen, even if someone is raised from the dead, they will not believe.

Unbeliever, Jesus has given you signs ... signs upon signs. It is as the **Five Man Electric Band** sang in their one hit wonder, "**Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign.**" These are physical marvels for you to see and ponder. They really happened. Everyone admitted it. The signs destroy all objections to unbelief. Yet they cannot create belief. In fact, in wicked people they only create rebellion, for they are read as law and not gospel. The song quoted above is one of rebellion and disregard for signs. "**Don't do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign.**" One stanza is especially apropos:

And the sign said, “Everybody welcome. Come in, kneel down and pray”  
But when they passed around the plate at the end of it all,  
I didn’t have a penny  
So I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign  
I said, “Thank you, Lord, for thinkin’ ‘bout me. I’m alive and doing’ fine.” Wooo!

Only the gospel can cause us to see a sign as good news, and the gospel is what they point you to: Jesus’ death and resurrection, his conquering of sin and death and Satan.

Christian, God has also given these signs to you, to strengthen your faith that these things really happened. You are about to partake in the Lord’s Supper. This, too, is a sign of Christ’s death, instituted on the night he was betrayed, to be taken perpetually by the Church until he returns as a sign proclaiming the truth that he has died for our sins that he might gather together the children of God. As a sign pointing you to the future reality of the wedding supper of the Lamb of God with his glorious

bride. In this and all other things, look not to the sign, confuse not the sign with the thing signified, be not angry at the sign, ignorant of the sign or confused by the sign. But look that that which the sign signifies. Flee to Christ who is the reality all the signs invite you to see.