Mark 8:11-13 Signs

11 And the Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, demanding from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him.

After Jesus and His disciples crossed the lake, and arrived at Bethsaida after the feeding of the 4,000 people, Jesus is accosted by the Pharisees again. The authorities from Jerusalem had accused Jesus of being in league with Satan, so these are probably different ones—presumably the ones who had accused Him of being allied to Beelzebub did not want to consort with Jesus further. A sign is a mark, an indicator by which the true nature of persons or things are distinguished and made known. In the Bible, signs are used to let people know by their natural senses that something unusual is occurring, to the point that the supernatural must be at work. The plagues of Egypt were "signs" of divine displeasure at the Egyptians worship of false gods, and especially their treatment of God's chosen people Israel. See Exodus 4:1-9 and following. The 10 plagues of Egypt, by which Egypt was destroyed, taking decades to recover, would not have been necessary, if they had Egypt had the faith to believe that Moses was sent by God, and the Egyptians had obeyed God in the first place. Once the Egyptians had made their choices, and God sent the plagues on Egypt, these signs then became something that the Israelites could look back on in faith, knowing that God had brought them out of Egypt. Joshua 24:17 **17 for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves, and did these great signs in our sight and watched over us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed.** So, God got much good for Israel out of 10 plagues that destroyed Egypt. He does the same thing today—bringing good out of difficult situations. Psalm 91:7 **"A thousand may fall at your side And ten thousand at your right hand, But it shall not approach you."** And, if you watch carefully, there are often signs to those who are paying attention, that God is at work, and that He is caring for you. Isaiah 43:2 **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you."** We have God's promise of protection through overwhelming and dangerous circumstances — symbolized by waters, rivers, and fire — assuring His presence and deliverance. So, signs are both evidence that God is at work, and a marker that God expects our faith to rise to the occasion of belief in Him, and in the sign that He has sent!

The sign of the brazen serpent in Numbers 21:6-9 was a call to faith in God, looking to Him for salvation from death, and as Jesus said in John 4:14-15 **14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him.** Again, we see the critical importance of recognizing the signs, trusting in God; that the signs He gives us point us to salvation!

The very first sign that Jesus pointed to was His death on the cross. In John 2:18-19 **18 The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as Your authority for doing these things?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."** They remembered this, and even used it as an accusation against Him at His trial! But the miracles of Jesus were "signs" to attest to His role as Messiah and savior. Those signs were to point us in faith to the fact that Jesus was sent by God. In fact, John the Apostle makes sure that we understand the importance of these signs as evidence of Jesus' divine nature as the Son of God, and the expectation that we recognize them, and believe in Jesus for salvation, that He says that it's the reason he wrote His gospel. Seeing or hearing of the signs of Jesus is enough to cause God to hold you accountable for believing in Him for salvation, according to John. John 20:30-31 **30 So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.** Seeing is believing.

Hearing from God's Word is believing. And, yet, even after all of the signs that Jesus did, most people didn't get it. Acts 2:22 **22 "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a Man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 But God raised Him from the dead, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.**
Jesus used signs for the purpose of inspiring belief. We see this at the beginning of the Disciples walk with Jesus, in Luke 5:4-6 **4 Now when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon responded and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets." 6 And when they had done this, they caught a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to tear; 7 so they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, to the point that they were sinking. 8 But when Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"** So, the sign did what it was supposed to do—inspire faith in Jesus as Lord as Messiah, as the Son of God. Jesus used them like this continually in the training of the Twelve apostles. But, just as they had read about God using signs to point to the divine commission of prophets in the Old Testament (Isaiah 20:3, etc.) they were expected to understand that these signs testified to the character and mission of Jesus. And, in fact the unbelief of the Jews, and their belief only if they saw signs was a source of frustration for Jesus. John 4:46b-50 **And there was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum. 47 When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and began asking Him to come down and heal his son; for he was at the point of death. 48 Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe." 49 The royal official *said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." 50 Jesus *said to him, "Go; your son [p]is alive." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went home.** It was great that the man believed, but it would have been a lot better if He had believed without the sign. In John 20:29, Jesus tells Thomas, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed,"** Signs point to Jesus in a tangible way, but when they are given, they reduce the opportunity to for faith. Hebrews 11:1 **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."** Faith is trusting without physical proof, and so signs reduce the opportunity to develop faith. Jesus forsakes signs, for "to force the evidence upon one would make a faith response by its very nature impossible." Faith that depends on proof is not faith, but only veiled doubt. In fact, with the increase of faith the necessity for signs will gradually decrease. Signs are indicators which vouch for the truth. And so, after all the proof He has given, this demand for a sign—a demand that God prove Himself, is of course offensive. The Pharisees have taken on the role as guardians of religious orthodoxy and practice in the area, and are perhaps feeling threatened by the wide popularity and influence of this unorthodox teacher, so they aim to put him in his place by demanding to see his credentials. They're disputing with Jesus, trying to trap Him. Their aim is simply to discredit Jesus, and so He is going to put them in their place.
12 Sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, "Why does this generation demand a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation!"
The recognition that a sign is primarily an evidence of trustworthiness, not of power, sheds light on this verse. It indicates that the demand for a sign is not really a request for a miracle, since Jesus had already done so many, they certainly were not going to accept one more as proof. His signs and miracles were not considered true signs by the Pharisees. They had witnessed his mighty works but had concluded they were of works of demonic activity (Mark 3:22–30). That is why the Pharisees

demand a sign in spite of Jesus' deeds. The request for a sign is a demand that he demonstrate the legitimacy of his actions. They were focused on the question of authentication, but there was nothing that they would have accepted as proof, since they'd already made up their minds that Jesus was not from God! It's difficult to see just what they might have accepted as proof! They were disingenuous, just testing Him, with the idea that there was nothing He could do to pass the test, and not a readiness to be convinced, but an excuse for refusing to respond to the clear evidence already available in Jesus' teaching and ministry. That stiff-necked unbelief is what is upsetting Jesus.

The original Greek reads that Jesus "groaned in his spirit." The word for "groaned" (Gk. anastenazein) is not an expression of anger or indignation so much as of dismay or despair, but is used to describe persons who find themselves in situations where they are pushed to the limit of faithfulness—struggling to cope with the situation in a spiritually appropriate manner! We've all been close to this at times. Jesus acted under the direction and authority of the Spirit of God (Mark 1:11, 3:28). He had already pronounced the scribal norms decayed and sterile (Mark 7:1–23) and he now rejects their authority to ask anything of Him, especially in unbelief! It is always a mistake to ask for unmistakable proof that God is at work in Jesus' ministry—because there is no such thing as unmistakable, incontrovertible truth to someone who has unbelief! It's a denial of the call to radical faith which is integral to the gospel. Jesus rejects the way of signs as fundamentally wrong because it excludes personal decision in response to the word of God in revelation of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

13 And leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side.

That is a physical description of Jesus departing from one place to another, but is also Jesus' deliberate disengagement from discussion with the Pharisees and the unbelief they represent. 13 Jesus' abrupt departure from the Pharisees gave visible expression to his indignation. Nothing good could be expected to result from further discussion with them. The gospel remains hidden when confronted with unbelief. He gets into the boat to leave Galilee and its crowds, in order to concentrate on the instruction of the disciples who now go with him into the boat. The Pharisees turn and walk away; the disciples follow Jesus into the boat. "faith comes when one steps into the boat with Jesus and does not prefer to remain in safety on the shore."