

Plainly Jesus' words in Capernaum were difficult for many people to swallow, but he would not back down from them. As you read through John 6, it's kind of like watching one of those suspenseful movies where you know what's about to happen and you just want to scream out, "Don't do it! Don't go into that room! Don't open that door!" But, with John 6, instead of screaming about a trap to be avoided, we hear a quiet (but no less urgent) voice in our heads. It doesn't scream because it feigns trying to be as polite as it can be to our Lord. Rather than scream in horror, it simply tries to offer God some gentle, nudging advice. "I know you're God and all," it says, "and that you know all things and that you are way smarter than I am, but in this case it seems possible that your people skills could benefit from a little work."

Do you know what I'm talking about? With all those people who walked all that way to see Jesus, you're thinking, "Would it really take that much to turn them into followers?" So you're reading along and there's that voice in the back of your mind saying, "I know these people are annoying you with they're challenges and doubts, but could you possibly consider just doing one miracle for them? You made enough food to feed more than five thousand people yesterday. Would it be so bad just to give them a little sign, a little indication of your true identity, so that they can believe? I mean, they're asking you for a sign! They're willing to follow you if you can just show them a little bread!"

But you know what? They weren't. I guarantee it. Their question did not come from faith or readiness to begin believing. In fact, I believe that's the whole point of this story, as well as hundreds of others in Scripture. The point is that hearts of faith aren't hearts that demand miracles and signs from God. **Hard Hearts Demand Miracles** and signs from God. Hearts of faith don't.

Let that sink in for a minute: Hard hearts demand miracles. It goes against conventional wisdom because conventional wisdom does not understand the true nature of our hearts. You would think that a person who is willing to ask for a sign from God would be a person who has an open heart toward God. You'd think that they asked the question because they were willing to entertain the pos-

sibility of faith and were open to persuasion. But have you ever noticed how Jesus responded to demands for miracles? Twice in the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus was asked by the religious leaders of Israel for a miraculous sign, he called those who demanded such miracles "*a wicked and adulterous generation*" (Matthew 12:39; 16:4), and he refused to give them anything but a speech.

The same attitude is obviously at work here in Capernaum. The crowd that had been miraculously fed on the other side of the lake came into the synagogue at Capernaum demanding another sign. Jesus responded not by using the miraculous powers that were his in order to produce some more food for them, but rather by giving them a speech which we have been reading through for several weeks now—a speech that, as we've noted before, almost seems like it's *designed* to drive them away!

Of course, "*God, our Savior, wants all men to be saved and to come a knowledge of the truth,*" (1 Timothy 2:3,4) so we know that Jesus' words were not intended to get rid of anyone. To the contrary. He wanted to save them by bringing them to a knowledge of the truth. The truth is, however, that hard hearts are the ones that demand miracles, not hearts that believe or are eager to believe in the one, true God.

There's an even simpler truth underlying this that makes it all pretty clear, and that is that you do not demand proof of something that you readily believe to be true. Get it? So, if you told me, for instance that a certain person was in a coma at the hospital but I had reason to believe that they were faking it as part of some elaborate insurance scam, I'd probably head down there and try poking their fingertips with a little needle or something to see if I could get a response.

On the other hand, if I was actually in a horrible accident with that person and saw them receive a massive trauma to their head, I would tend not to want proof that they were truly unconscious in that hospital bed. In fact, I would consider someone poking around at their fingertips rather disrespectful, even though I would be convinced that there would, in fact, be no response. The differ-

ence is whether or not I believe the coma is real.

Now what about miracles and signs? That's where we turn to today's First Lesson. That's the actual text for today, not John 6. I just wanted you to see how common this theme is to various texts in Scripture, and how key it is to understanding what was really going on in the crowd we've been hearing about all this time.

But now to Exodus. Really, these few verses are a picture for how the whole Exodus from Egypt went. God performed miracle after miracle for Pharaoh, but it always seemed to take just a little more to convince him. Even when his heart was actually broken in two by the loss of his own firstborn child at the first Passover, he still ultimately hardened his heart and chased the Israelites down to the Red Sea in order to bring them back again as slaves!

Yet even a heart that hard *still asks for proof, still asks for miracles*. The Lord not only knows this as a general fact, but he specifically predicted it in Pharaoh's case. He knew that Pharaoh's hard heart would demand a miracle, even though he not only *did* not believe but also *would* not believe, no matter what miracle was ultimately performed in his presence. He told Moses this.

And before you think, "Well, his magicians were able to do the same thing with their staffs," think again. Moses' words describe these guys as Las-Vegas-style illusionists at best and practitioners of satanic arts at their worst. However, even the most glib and deluded among them would know the difference between what Aaron did by the power of the Almighty God and what Pharaoh's magicians did, because Aaron's staff made a meal out of theirs! And don't forget, either, that there were many miracles done during the days of the ten plagues in Egypt that even Pharaoh's clever magicians couldn't imitate.

Now, are we supposed to learn something from this other than what is wrong with the hearts of other people who are not interested in coming to hear God's Word in church? We surely are, especially if we think that this illustrates something that is only wrong in other people's hearts!

Consider, for instance, that voice that we so naturally hear as we read John 6, that voice that wants to give God advice, to tell

God what he hasn't yet tried that would surely turn more people to faith in him. We've all heard it in one form or another, and you need to realize that such a voice does not speak from the living heart of faith that God provides us through baptism and the hearing of the gospel. Such a voice come from the calloused, superstitious and faithless hearts of our old, sinful natures.

Not only does that voice that wants to correct God's ways speak up when we read something like John 6, but it also speaks up whenever we become frustrated with the lack of growth that the church demonstrates—or when we are impressed with the growth that false teachers experience as they employ means other than the gospel to draw people in. A concern for the church that desires to do God's work in ways other than those that God himself has ordained does not speak from the new heart of faith, no matter how much it clamors about the glory of God and the salvation of the lost! Will not God save his people, and will he not do it without being faithless toward his own Word?

Pay special heed to the voice of God revealed in his Word, brothers and sisters, for this is the only way to recognize the deceit of the hardened heart. The new life within you does not question God's ways nor believe that any evil or faithless thing must be done in order to accomplish what is good. Repent today of faithless thoughts and considerations and demand not from God what he grants freely where and when it pleases him—especially when you know full well from his Word that what pleases him is your rich blessing and the salvation of everyone!

Here again the ministry and cross of Christ come to our rescue. In his life and death we see the depth of his love and the reach of his healing power—and that with no need of any help or advice from the like of us! Even more importantly, we see in his work here on earth and in the miracle of his resurrection our forgiveness, our new life and the very heart of our God who obviously desires to show love even to stubborn, weak and faithless people like us!

Leave empty and foolish demands behind. Our God knows our need and supplies our salvation for his name's sake. Amen.