

The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:38-50

People often say, “Show me a sign that God is real, and I will believe.” The generation during Jesus’ ministry was no different. Jesus does great things in Israel: comforting the afflicted, healing the sick, transforming tax collectors, forgiving sinners, casting out demons, preaching the truth, but none of it is good enough for the religious leaders. They want a messiah on their terms, one who plays by their rules. But Jesus does the will of His Father, and not theirs. He is greater than Jonah, and all who believe the sign and follow His Father become part of His family.

Reading the Sign

The scribes and Pharisees are unsatisfied by Jesus’ words and works (vv. 22-37), so they demand a sign (v. 38). Paul said, “Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:22). The Greeks wanted to hear new things and argue endlessly in a Socratic chat room, but the Jews wanted a man to conform to their preconceived ideas of a savior, to free them from Roman occupation and puppet kings like Herod. An evil and adulterous generation, Jesus says, seeks after a sign, and none will be given it but the sign of Jonah (v. 39). Jonah spent three days and three nights in the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (v. 40). Jesus speaks of Jonah as a historical figure, which of course he was, and his being swallowed by a whale was no less likely (one in a trillion, according to one source) than Michael Packard who spent 30 seconds inside the mouth of a humpback in the waters off Cape Cod earlier this month. In order to account for three nights in the earth, Jesus would have been crucified on Thursday night, but it has also been posited that He was tried in the “heart of the earth” as in “center of the land of Israel” by the high priest, there in the grip of death. Jonah was thrown in the Gentile Sea but then swallowed up and rescued by the whale; He sings from the whale’s belly before being spat onto the land (Jon. 2). The other “evil generation” spoken of in Scripture is the one that came out of Egypt, that saw all of Yahweh’s signs (plagues, Red Sea, manna, water from the rock, etc.) and yet didn’t believe but perished in the wilderness (Dt. 32:5). But why does He call this generation “adulterous”? Hosea’s unfaithful lover Gomer is described as evil and adulterous (Hos. 3:1). Jonah is a contemporary of Hosea (Hos. 1:1; 2 Kgs. 14:23-25), and a reluctant prophet to Nineveh, the great Assyrian city, because he knows that God will show mercy to these ruthless Gentiles while Israel continues to backslide and rebel against Yahweh. Nineveh does in fact repent, and then later they come and take the northern kingdom into exile. Jonah saw this writing on the wall, and thus complained about Nineveh’s repentance (Jon. 4:1-3). Jesus is giving *this* part of the sign, too, not just three days in the grave. Israel rejects Him and will be severely judged by the men of Nineveh, but also by the Roman Gentiles who will destroy Jerusalem in less than a generation (v. 41). The queen of the South was skeptical of all she heard about Solomon, so she brought her questions and marveled at his surpassing wisdom after hearing it (1 Kgs. 10). Jesus is greater than Solomon, but these leaders don’t ask real questions in pursuit of truth, and therefore they will be judged (v. 42).

No Such Thing As a Spiritual Vacuum

Many demons have been driven out of Israel, but without something good to take their place, they will return in greater force and make things worse (vv. 43-45). It’s not a question of whether someone will be spiritual, only what kind of spirituality they will embrace. The “empty, swept, and put in order” vacant soul will not remain that way for long. Something will fill the void. G.K. Chesterton: “When men choose not to

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believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.” Richard Dawkins knows that God didn’t create life on earth, but he wonders if uber intelligent extraterrestrials did. And of course materialism can’t escape dealing in non-material things. Carl Sagan said, “The Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be,” a poetic statement of non-material (but false) information. And then he also said, “When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual.” If a drug addict is humble and open to true spiritual things, but then by believing in himself and his own innate goodness gets clean and sober, employed and in a stable living situation, is he closer to God after rehab or further from Him? No doubt further. This is why Christians give even a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus. The hope and goal is lasting change and blessing that brings someone closer to God, rather than preparing a better place for many unclean spirits. Jesus says, “So shall it be for this generation.” The scribes and Pharisees don’t want a nation dominated by unclean spirits. They’re happy with Jesus’ work in that sense. But after He leaves, so will the effects of His ministry among those who reject Him. Many people appreciate the impact of the Bible and Christianity without putting their trust in Christ. They become “cultural Christians” and may even be baptized, but are not growing or thriving in Christ (cf. Phil. 2:13-16).

The Family of Jesus

So many people crowded to hear Jesus that they couldn’t all fit in the building. When He hears that His mother and brothers want to speak with Him, He responds, “Who is my My mother and who are My brothers?” (v. 48). He says who ever does the will of His Father is His brother and sister and mother (vv49-50). We know Jesus loved His family. He provides for His mother, entrusting her to John’s care as He hung on the cross. His brothers didn’t believe in Him at first, but later did (Jn. 7:5; Acts 1:14; Gal. 1:19). What He says here sounds harsh to us but would have totally scandalized His audience. Mary is blessed among women not because she shared blood with Jesus, but because she believed God and trusted in Jesus for her salvation. Jesus isn’t erasing our natural affection and obligation for our nuclear family members, but He is exalting the position of brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in the church. For Jesus, water is thicker than blood. He loves His nation, His town, His biological family, but none of them above His Father. Unlike the adulterous generation seeking another husband than Yahweh, Jesus says that all who do the Father’s will are His near kin. Are you more committed to your family than to Christ and His people? Only if we do the will of the Father, can we truly love our natural family. Jesus is the greater Jonah and in a sense the anti-Jonah. He went to the lost willingly, knowing they’d reject Him. He threw Himself into the raging sea of death, trusting the Father to raise Him up, which He did: “and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:21).