

THE SIGN OF JONAH

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered and said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation eagerly seeks for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.” (Matthew 12:38-45, LSB)

As the Gospel of Matthew has progressed we have seen increasing opposition to Jesus; the Jewish leaders – represented here by the scribes and Pharisees – were increasingly antagonistic. In Matthew 3 they opposed John and his preaching of repentance from sin. By the time we reach Matthew 12, they are conspiring to have Jesus put to death. Now, if we don’t think about what has happened up to this point, Jesus’ response will likely confuse us. Their request seems very reasonable. Jesus is making very big claims, after all; isn’t it fair to expect some sort of proof? But they were insincere. They didn’t want a solid foundation for their faith; they wanted reasons to reject Jesus. They wanted Him to submit to their authority; they wanted Him to dance to their tune. Just moments before these men had blasphemed the Holy Spirit. They had committed an unforgivable sin. It’s not that God *couldn’t* forgive them, but that He *wouldn’t* forgive them; their judgment was

sealed. This text is not about their request, but about the judgment they now faced for their sin. Let me put it a different way; Jesus is not debating with them, He is informing them.

THE REBUKE

Matthew 12:39a

39 But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation eagerly seeks for a sign ...”

He begins by diagnosing their spiritual condition. They are an evil and adulterous generation. On the outside they put on an impressive show of goodness and morality, but inside they are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 25:28).

Jesus is not speaking about sexual adultery, but spiritual adultery. That means that they have forsaken the God of Israel, and have given their worship to false gods, to idols. Spiritual adultery was the dominant sin for Israel. Within weeks of being delivered from Egypt, they were back to idolatry, worshiping the golden calf. They committed spiritual idolatry for 800 years, until they were taken captive by the Assyrians.

The Pharisees came into existence after they returned, wanting to ensure that Israel would never again fall into idolatry. They did this by creating a complicated system to follow; a method, if you will; the Pharisees were “methodists” long before the Wesley brothers were born. But, proving that the sinful human heart is an idol factory, and can make an idol out of just about anything, their own traditions became an idol, and they fell away once again from the true worship of Yahweh.

TRANSITION: The scribes and Pharisees wanted Jesus to show them a miraculous sign. Now, is God opposed to proving Himself to His people? Not at all.

GOD IS NOT OPPOSED TO PROOF

Gideon was a man chosen by the Lord to deliver Israel from the Midianites during the time of the judges. “If I have found favor in Your sight,” Gideon said, “show me a sign.” The Angel of the Lord touched a staff to the meat and bread that Gideon had prepared, and flames burst up from the rock on which they lay and consumed them. A little later Gideon asked for more proof; he would put a sheep’s fleece on the ground overnight, and wanted the fleece to be wet in the morning while the ground remained dry. And it was so. And then he asked for the reverse to happen; in the morning let the fleece be dry while the ground is wet. And it was so. (Judges 6).

God isn’t opposed to proving Himself.

TRANSITION: So, the scribes and Pharisees want Jesus to perform a miraculous sign to prove His authority and identity. Let’s review Jesus’ actions since the beginning of His ministry.

JESUS PROVED HIMSELF

Between Matthew 8-12, Jesus heals a leper, a Gentile servant, Peter's mother-in-law, a paralytic, a woman with a hemorrhage, and raised a dead girl to life. He also cast demons out of several men, and healed them of the harm they suffered. These specific episodes aren't even a fraction of what Jesus actually did.

Matthew makes several general statements:

And Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Now when evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill (Matthew 8:16)

And Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (Matthew 9:35)

And summoning His twelve disciples, Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (Matthew 10:1)

The thing is, miracles don't prove anything. In fact, the New Testament says that agents of Satan will one day be able to perform powerful but false signs and wonders, deceiving those who do not love the truth.

Jesus' miracles were fulfillments of Scripture; that is what made them so significant. He proved Himself not by performing miracles, but by fulfilling Scripture. He He provided overwhelming evidence of His authority and nature.

TRANSITION: So what is it that God opposes about proving Himself?

THE SIGN OF JONAH

Matthew 12:39b-40

God is opposed to proving Himself to people who have no intention of actually believing, regardless of what they see. He refuses to satisfy the demands that from arise from unbelief, rebellion, or a desire for entertainment.

Jesus does offer the scribes and Pharisees a sign, but they won't like it.

no sign will be given to [this evil and adulterous generation] but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:39b-40)

Jesus offers His own death, burial, and resurrection as the final, indisputable proof of His authority and identity. That was the only sign He ever offered His opponents. In John 2 Jesus forcefully cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem of all who defiled it. The Pharisees – who should have celebrated His actions – demanded a sign that proved His authority. He gave them the same sign as here, His own death, burial, and resurrection.

You see, the ultimate proof of Jesus' identity is not healings, or casting out demons, or even raising the dead. It is in His death and resurrection. He died for our sins according to the Scriptures; He was buried; He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. What more does a person want? If they truly want to believe in Jesus, that's enough.

TRANSITION: Here's the thing, though; the fulfillment of the sign of Jonah is not simply Jesus' resurrection, but what happens on the day of judgment. What will happen then?

THE GENTILES WILL JUDGE ISRAEL

41 The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42 The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:41-42)

Nineveh was a hated, despised nation, and for good reason. They were not only gross idolators, they were savage toward their enemies. But some of those hated, despised people will stand up and condemn Israel for her unbelief.

Do you remember the story? God commanded Jonah to go preach against the city of Nineveh. Jonah said, "No way," and ran in the opposite direction. God sent a storm, which got Jonah pitched over the side of the boat, and then God sent a great fish to swallow him. Jonah waited three days, finally repented, and so the Lord had the great fish vomit Jonah up on the shore. Yahweh said, "Let's try this again: go to Nineveh and preach against it," and Jonah said, "Sure, be glad to." He walked through Nineveh for a full day, preaching the shortest sermon ever given: *od arabayom ningveh hafach*: yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown. And they repented, from the king in his palace to the animals in the fields, and Yahweh did not destroy them. They were saved from their sins and converted; their faith was

counted as righteousness.

And they will stand up on the day of judgment, Jesus says, and look upon those who heard the Word of God Himself preaching the Word of God in immeasurable glory, and saw Him perform thousands of miracles, and yet did not believe, and those Ninevites will condemn those Jews for their unbelief.

Jesus also says that the Queen of Sheba heard of the wisdom of Solomon and traveled a vast distance, more than 1,800 miles, to hear him personally. What was that wisdom?

And God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of understanding in his heart, like the sand that is on the seashore. (First Kings 4:29).

At the typical speed of a caravan in the desert, it would have taken her six months to reach Jerusalem. She did it in order to hear the Word of God. The scribes and Pharisees had easy access to Jesus. They heard Him over and over again. They saw His mighty works. He was infinitely greater than Solomon – Solomon *spoke* the Word of God, Jesus *IS* the Word of God – but the nation of Israel disregarded Him.

THE SPIRITUAL ISSUE

Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation. (Matthew 12:43-45).

Within the context of Matthew 12, these words are not simply describing what happens when a person is freed from demon possession, but what was happening in Israel.

Israel's rejection of Jesus was not merely a social or political issue. It was, at its core, a spiritual issue. The Light of the World stepped down into the darkness of the world. He cast out many demons from many people. The devil's hold on Israel was badly broken. But the nation did not believe, and so the house of Israel, although "swept and put in order," was also unoccupied. There was no place for them in the inn, and there was no place for Jesus in Israel. They were "an evil and adulterous generation," Jesus says in Matthew 12:39. And then end of generation would be even worse. Like the apostate man in Hebrews 6, they were enlightened by Jesus' teaching, tasted of the heavenly gift, saw the Spirit at work, heard the Word preached, and saw a sample of the power of the age to come. But just like the man in Hebrews 6, they did not believe. Their experiences and observations did them no good. And after Jesus ascended to heaven, the devil came back with a vengeance, and Israel suffered mightily for the remaining 40 years of its ancient history.

TRANSITION: It's a very dark picture, isn't it? But there is light for us.

BRINGING IT HOME

Personalization - what does this say to me today?

Every Christian is a sinner who took the claims of Jesus Christ seriously. By the grace of God we are born again and regenerated. Through faith we are joined to Jesus Christ for all eternity. The proof that we have been born again, that we have truly believed in Jesus Christ, is that we continue to believe and follow Him; we continue to trust and obey. It is those who endure to the end who will be saved (Matthew 24:13).

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (First John 3:8). He did that by redeeming those whom the Father gave Him. The Holy Spirit actually carries out that deliverance when we are converted and born again. The Bible says to us,

You are from God, little children, and have overcome [those who are antichrist]; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. (First John 4:4).

To be a Christian means to have the Spirit of God dwelling within us (Romans 8:9). To be a Christian means being transferred out of the domain of darkness and into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption (Colossians 1:13-14). To be a Christian means to be the home and temple of the Holy Spirit (First Corinthians 3:16).

We don't have these blessings because we make it a habit to hear preaching. We don't have these things because God has worked countless miracles for us. We have these blessings because by God's grace we have received faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Appropriation - what is my response and commitment given this Word?

So, what shall we do with this truth today? For one thing, let's not put God to the test. The full and perfect proof of His love for us is the gift of the Savior:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And, let's rejoice in the truth of our deliverance. Those whose faith in Jesus Christ never need fear the devil's hatred or attacks. The Lord will not abandon us to him; the Holy Spirit who resides with us is infinitely greater than the devil and all his minions combined.

Let's pray.

"Lord Jesus, this world is uncertain, and life can be hard, and there are so many things that I don't understand, or wish were different. But none of those uncertainties shakes my trust in You. I don't see the road ahead; You do. I don't know what my tomorrow holds; You do. I don't know how I will get from here to heaven; but You do. You are leading me, and sanctifying Me, and nurturing me with Your Word and Spirit. You are my faithful High Priest, interceding and mediating for me with the Father. You will bring me home, and you have all my thanks and praise!"