

2009 Resurrection Sunday

The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:38-42

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The Sign of Jonah

Scripture

Today is Easter Sunday, the day that the Christian Church around the world celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Two thousand years ago Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus knew that his life mission was “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He knew that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners. On one occasion Jesus said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43).

But as Jesus preached the good news of God’s grace, opposition to his ministry increased—particularly from the religious leaders. In spite of Jesus’ extraordinary preaching and remarkable miracles, at one point the religious leaders demanded that Jesus give some proof, some sign, of his claim to be from God.

It is the narrative of that encounter that I want to examine on this Easter Sunday. So, let us read Matthew 12:38-42:

³⁸Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴²The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.” (Matthew 12:38-42)

Introduction

The reason Jesus came to earth was to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). His entire life was given to the successful accomplishment of that mission.

Jesus began his preaching ministry at about the age of thirty. He taught people about the good news of the kingdom of God. He taught them how they could be saved by grace alone through faith alone in him alone. His preaching was accompanied by miracles that authenticated he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and Savior of sinners.

On one occasion he cast a demon out of a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute (Matthew 12:22-32). The Pharisees, however, declared that it was only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that Jesus cast out demons (Matthew 12:24). But Jesus showed them that his casting out demons by the power of Satan was absurd and contradictory. Jesus' answer stung the Pharisees.

But rather than adjust their misconception of Jesus, they came back at him demanding a miraculous sign to prove that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners.

Lesson

So, in today's lesson we see, first, the request for a sign, and second, the response of Jesus.

I. The Request for a Sign (12:38)

First, notice the request for a sign.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you" (12:38).

The scribes and Pharisees were still smarting from their verbal defeat by Jesus. But, not wanting to submit to him, they pressed him for **a sign** to verify that he truly was the Messiah.

They were clearly hypocritical in their demand for a sign. Je-

Jesus had performed hundreds, if not thousands, of miracles already. Just prior to this incident, Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had sent word to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one [i.e., the Messiah] who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up" (Matthew 11:3-5).

Clearly, Jesus had given many signs to authenticate that he really was the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners. But **the scribes and Pharisees** were so opposed to Jesus that they wanted him to perform some personal sign for them. They did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and they wanted to trip him up.

Now, someone may ask if God gave signs to people in the Old Testament. He did, but, as commentator Matthew Henry said, "Signs were granted to those who desired them for the confirmation of their faith, as to Abraham and Gideon; but were denied to those who demanded them for the excuse of their unbelief."¹

II. The Response of Jesus (12:39-42)

So, how did Jesus respond? Let's notice, in the second place, the response of Jesus.

A. *Jesus Criticized the Request (12:39a)*

Jesus' first response was to criticize the request.

But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign. . ." (12:39a).

Jesus said that they were "**evil**" because they stubbornly refused to believe that he was the Messiah. Even though he had already performed many miraculous signs, they did not want to be-

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996, c1991), Matthew 12:38.

lieve that he was the one sent from God to be their Savior.

And Jesus said that they were “**adulterous**” because they were spiritually unfaithful to God. Of all the peoples on earth God had chosen the Jews to be his chosen people. He had given them “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the worship, and the promises” (Romans 9:4). But they rejected the spiritual privileges God had given them in favor of relating to God on their own terms, which was entirely wrong.

That is like people today, isn't it? God has given us the Bible and preachers and churches that faithfully teach that the only way to heaven is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And yet, some people still say that there is not enough evidence to make them believe that Jesus is the Savior of sinners.

Pastor James Montgomery Boice once said, “I sometimes say that even if God rearranged the very stars of heaven to read, ‘Jesus is my Son with whom I am well pleased; believe on him,’ people would look at the stars, scratch their heads, and say, ‘Isn't that unusual? I wonder how the stars managed to rearrange themselves that way.’”² People are stubborn in their unbelief.

So, Jesus criticized their request.

B. Jesus Commended the Sign of Jonah (12:39b-40)

Jesus' second response was to commend the sign of Jonah.

Jesus did offer them a sign, a sign that would be given to everyone, not then, but in the future. It was the sign of his death and resurrection. He called it the sign of Jonah. Jesus said, “. . . **but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth**” (12:39b-40).

Jesus was referring to the prophet Jonah in the Old Testa-

²James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 220.

ment. God told Jonah to go and preach in the pagan city of Nineveh, but Jonah refused to obey God. He decided to go in the opposite direction. God sent a storm at sea, and eventually Jonah told the sailors that they should throw him overboard. They did, and God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah. He was as good as dead, spending three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish before the fish vomited him on to dry land. This time Jonah obeyed God, went to Nineveh, preached God's judgment against the city, and the people of Nineveh repented.

Now, Jesus said that the sign showing that he was the Messiah would be that **just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so would the Son of Man spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** That was a clear reference to his death, burial, and resurrection.

Now, people have often said that this passage presents several problems regarding the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

First, Jesus said that he would spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Years ago, when I was a student at the University of Cape Town, a famous Muslim apologist named Ahmed Deedat gave a talk on campus. At one point in his lecture he referred to this verse. He said that the Bible was wrong because Jesus was not in the tomb for **three days and three nights.**

In the traditional handling of the events of the Passion Week, Jesus was crucified on a Friday and raised from the dead on Sunday (see Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54: and John 19:31). That is clearly only two days and two nights.

The traditional way of dealing with this problem is that “**three days and three nights** represents a Semitic idiom for any portion of three calendar days.”³ And that may be the case.

I suppose it is like when we say that we are going on three-day cruise. We mean that we are going on the cruise for three days and either two or three nights.

However, I don't think that this is a satisfactory answer. Je-

³ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 244.

Jesus clearly said that he would spend **three days and three nights in the heart of the earth**. It seems clear to me that three periods of day and also three periods of night must be accounted for.

Second, the days of the Passion Week are not all properly accounted for in the traditional view. Everyone agrees that Jesus was resurrected before dawn on Easter Sunday morning. From the arrival of Jesus in Bethany, six days before the Passover, until the resurrection, every moment seems to be accounted for. Yet when the events of these days are pieced together, two days seem to be missing. One day was the first Sabbath (a Saturday) that Jesus spent in Bethany. But what about the other “missing” day? It cannot be accounted for in the traditional view of Jesus being crucified on Friday and then being resurrected on Sunday morning.

And third, there is a problem regarding the actual date of Jesus’ crucifixion. The dating of historical events back as far as Jesus has been virtually impossible because of the days and times of solar and lunar eclipses and new moons. But, in recent years, thanks to the use of computers, much of what was previously uncertain is now known. We are now able to know exactly when the Passover took place in any given year during Jesus’ lifetime.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the regular Jewish Sabbath was always on a Saturday. The Passover, however, which commemorated the Exodus, was also treated like a Sabbath. The day before the Sabbath and the day before the Passover were called “the day of Preparation,” that is, preparation for the Sabbath or for the Passover.

Passover always falls on Nisan 15th in the Jewish calendar. Thus, it is like our Christmas, which always falls on December 25th. Therefore, Passover falls on different days of the week.

Jesus was crucified on the day before Passover. Therefore, Jesus was crucified on Nisan 14th. When did Nisan 14th fall on a Friday when Jesus died? Nisan 14th fell on a Friday in 26 A.D., which is too early, and then again in 33 A.D., which most scholars agree is too late.

So, how do we solve these problems?

There is a solution to the problems, and it is obvious, though we have to overcome the view that the crucifixion *had* to take place on a Friday, as the traditional view holds.

The solution is simply that there were *two* Sabbaths during Christ's Passion Week. One Sabbath was the regular Sabbath, which always fell on a Saturday. The second Sabbath was the Passover Sabbath, which, in this particular week, had to occur on Friday, Nisan 15th. Jesus was thus crucified on Thursday, Nisan 14th.

One of the strongest texts to support this solution is Matthew 28:1, which says, "Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb." In the Greek text, the word for "Sabbath" is actually plural! The plural has puzzled translators, who usually translate it (incorrectly) into a singular "Sabbath." But the word is plural, and the plural is explained if there were two back-to-back Sabbaths in that week—the Passover Sabbath, which fell on Friday, Nisan 15th, and the regular Sabbath, which fell on Saturday, Nisan 16th.

How does this solution answer the problems we raised?

First, there are three actual days and three nights. Jesus died on Thursday afternoon at 3 p.m. Therefore, the period from 3 p.m. until sundown was the first day. Then followed Thursday night, Friday daytime, Friday night, Saturday daytime, and Saturday night. That is a total of **three days and three nights** in precise order. According to this view, Jesus was raised from the dead sometime during Saturday night before the women got to the tomb before dawn on Sunday morning.

Second, each day of the week is accounted for. According to this view we have the following:

Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath): Jesus did not travel on this day but rather remained in Bethany with his disciples and Lazarus. Many came to see Jesus and the man he raised from the dead.

Sunday (Palm Sunday): Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey after having first made arrangements to secure the animal. He went to the temple area, but it was late by this time and he returned to Bethany without further recorded actions or teaching.

Monday: Jesus returned to Jerusalem. On the way he cursed the fig tree as a symbol of the barrenness of Israel and as a prophecy of what was coming to the nation. In Jerusalem he cleansed the temple for a second, final time (John 2:12-22) and returned again to Bethany, where he spent each night of this week, except the last.

Tuesday: On the way back to Jerusalem the disciples found the fig tree withered and received Christ's explanation. In the city the disciples commented on the magnificence of the temple and were told that the day was coming when it would be torn down. On the way home Jesus paused on the Mount of Olives to give what has come to be called the Olivet Discourse concerning things to come. Prophecy dominated the teaching of this day.

Wednesday: Jesus sent the disciples to make preparations for the Passover, which was, however, eaten that evening without the Passover lamb. Jesus was arrested that same night as he deliberately tarried in the Garden of Gethsemane on what would have been his normal trip back to Bethany.

Thursday: Jesus was tried and eventually crucified. The trial began on what we would call Wednesday night (but which was actually the early hours of Thursday by Jewish reckoning) and was completed in the morning. Jesus was crucified on Thursday morning. Darkness covered the land from noon to 3:00 p.m., when Jesus died. Interestingly, Jesus died at the same time that the Passover lambs were being killed. Jesus was buried before sundown by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. The women observed where Jesus was buried and bought spices, but as soon as the sun set it was now the start of the Passover Sabbath (that is, the Passover Sabbath that began at sundown on Thursday evening), they were unable to anoint the body until Sunday morning.

Friday and Saturday: The body of Jesus remained in the tomb. The women and disciples observed the two Sabbaths. Jesus rose from the dead sometime between the coming of darkness on Saturday evening and the coming of the dawn on Sunday morning.

Thus, all the days of the Passion Week are accounted for.

And third, we can determine the actual date of Jesus' cruci-

fixion. The day before Passover, Nisan 14th, did not fall on a Friday between the years 26 A.D. and 33 A.D. But how about Thursday? Strikingly, Nisan 14th fell on a Thursday once during those years, and this one time perfectly fits the situation. Nisan 14th fell on a Thursday in the year 30 A.D., the most probable year of Jesus' crucifixion even by other calculations.

Thus, we may conclude with reasonable certainty that the crucifixion of Jesus is to be dated as Thursday, April 6th, 30 A.D., and the resurrection dated as Sunday, April 9th, 30 A.D.⁴

I have taken a lot of time to review this material because it provides powerful evidence for the truthfulness of Christianity.

It shows that the Bible is accurate down to the very details.

Further, it shows that Jesus was supremely aware of what was about to happen to him.

And finally, it shows that **the sign of the prophet Jonah** is still the greatest of all signs, because it affirms that the resurrection is proof that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners.

C. Jesus Condemned Their Generation (12:41-42)

Jesus' third response was to condemn their generation.

Jesus condemned their generation using two examples.

First, Jesus condemned their generation through the men of Nineveh. Jesus said, **“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here”** (12:41). Jonah was a mere man, but Jesus was God in human form. Jonah went to Nineveh as a stranger, but Jesus came to his own. Jonah preached only a message of judgment and wrath, but Jesus preached a message of mercy and love and grace. And finally, Jonah did no miracle to authenticate his message, but Jesus produced multiple miracles to authenticate

⁴This information is taken from Boice, 222.

his message. The people of Nineveh repented, but the Jews did not. On the day of judgment, the Jews will be appalled when they realize that the men of Nineveh have gained heaven, but they, with all their spiritual advantages, will have lost heaven.

And second, Jesus condemned their generation through the queen of the South. Jesus said, **“The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here”** (12:42). The queen of the South was also known as the queen of Sheba. She had no invitation to come to Solomon, but she came anyway. The Jews had an open invitation to come to Christ. Solomon was a wise man, but Christ is wisdom itself. The queen of Sheba had the difficulties of a long, perilous journey to go through to get to Solomon, but the Jews had no such hindrance in getting to Christ. Again, on the day of judgment, the Jews will be appalled when they realize that the queen of the South has gained heaven, but they, with all their spiritual advantages, will have lost heaven.

Conclusion

We live in a day of unprecedented spiritual advantages. When Jesus spoke his words to the scribes and the Pharisees, he had not yet died, nor had he yet risen from the dead.

But we know the history of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. As much as people want evidence, proof, and signs, Jesus has already told us about the greatest of all signs: **the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**

On that first Easter Sunday morning, on April 9th, 30 A.D., Jesus came back to life again—proof that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners.

Will you believe that he is your Savior today? Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father in heaven, thank you for **the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**

Thank you that on April 9th, 30 A.D., Jesus rose from the dead. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

May no-one hearing these words today be like the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day. But rather may we all be like the men of Nineveh who repent of our sin and believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners.

Friend, if you are here today and you want a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then pray with me:

O Lord God, I believe **the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so I believe that Jesus, the Son of Man, was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** I believe that he is who he claimed to be: the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners. I know that I am a sinner and that I deserve to go to hell for all eternity. I repent of all my wrongdoing and sin. I turn from all of my sin. I want to start a new life. Please forgive me for all of my sin today. I believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for all my sin. I believe that he rose again from the dead, and will forgive me because I am asking him to do so today.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you would like to talk about what it means to be a Christian today, please speak to me following the service. I have a little booklet that I would like to give you. It is called *Do You Know?* And it describes how you can be sure that you are a Christian.

CHARGE:

If you would like to talk about what it means to be a Christian today, please speak to me following the service. I have a little booklet that I would like to give you. It is called *Do You Know?* And it describes how you can be sure that you are a Christian.

And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.