

# The Sign of Jonah

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We've just finished a sermon series through the Old Testament book of Jonah. We've studied the wayward prophet's dramatic story from start to finish—complete with Jonah's famous encounter with a giant submarine of a fish.

Well, this Easter Sunday, we're going to see that Jesus was well acquainted with Jonah's miraculous, underwater ride and even explains that it ultimately points to the climactic event of his salvific mission. Let's read what Jesus says about Jonah in order to see what it tells us about our Savior and our salvation.

## **Matthew 12:38-42**

<sup>38</sup> Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”

<sup>39</sup> He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. <sup>42</sup> The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

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There's much here that we won't dig into today. (We could look at the contrast which Jesus sets up between the softhearted Gentiles, who respond to the warning and wisdom of God, and hardhearted Israel, who won't respond to something greater than the preaching of Jonah or the wisdom of Solomon. Or, we could study the irony of this request from the religious leaders. Jesus has just performed a miraculous sign in their presence, and yet they demand more proof that his ministry is truly of God—that Jesus is truly a prophet.) There's lots of interesting stuff to study in this passage, but today is Easter Sunday. So one thing must stand above the rest.

Today, our focus is on the resurrection. We want to celebrate the Lord's defeat of death—Christ's victory over the grave. And, it's right here before us.

Many people in our time would like a sign *if* they're to be expected to believe in Jesus Christ. However, Jesus tells those in his day—as well as those in our day—that there will be only one sign, that of Jonah (v. 39). This is how Jesus explains it to the religious scholars of his time.

*For as Jonah was three days...in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days...in the heart of the earth* (v. 40).

That's the only sign that will be given—nothing more than that.

Now, why are they asking for a sign from him? Have you ever wondered that? Why—when Jesus has worked so many miracles over the course of his ministry—why ask for another? Well, Matthew has already given us the reason as to *why* earlier in this very chapter of his gospel. In short, the religious authorities don't like Jesus, and they're looking for a way to kill him (Matthew 12:14). This request isn't sincere. It's just a way to try to ensnare Jesus—to get him to do or to say something wrong, to make him publicly stumble.

You see, another sign (or another hundred signs) won't bring these skeptics to faith *because* they hate who Jesus is. Their minds are already made up about him. They don't like what he represents—peace for those who've been at war with God *and* grace for those who've failed the Lord *and* restoration for those who've sinned against him. They hate this message of God's redemption for sinners just as much as the prophet Jonah hated it for the Ninevites.

And, it strikes me that, whenever people ask for signs today, it's very similar. Their minds are already made up about Jesus. They won't believe if they get a sign (or one hundred signs) since they don't really like what Jesus ultimately represents—not the peace and grace and restoration stuff—no, they're mostly okay with all that. They don't like him when it comes to his demands; they don't like Christ's limits—limits on personal freedoms and choices. They don't like the idea of his Lordship. People today don't like or want the law of Christ. It restricts how they spend money *and* how they live out relationships *and* how they use free time *and* how they think about everything. Therefore, many people in our time will say: *Give us a sign Jesus if you expect us to trust in you and live by your rules! I need proof!*

And, in response, Jesus tells them and us (because we can often demand signs for obedience just like the unbelieving world around us) only one sign will be given.

Friends, look—let's not make any mistakes about what Jesus is really talking about here. He's talking about the resurrection. That's the sign of the prophet Jonah. We know this because he's talking to religious experts. They knew all about Jonah. They knew the significant thing about that prophet wasn't that he went into the belly of a huge fish for three days and nights, but that (by the power of God) he emerged from that tomb alive.

That's the only sign! Jesus is talking about his resurrection from the grave—his victory over death. Either you will believe in that or you won't.

This week I had an old friend post a very simple explanation on social media about why he doesn't believe in Jesus's resurrection. He suggested that the Romans may have just taken Christ's body and destroyed it, so as to keep Jesus's followers from worshiping or venerating it. It's a nice little theory, but one that flies in the face of every historical fact we have. In the end, my friend's alternative history says more about his worldview than it does about the resurrection.

His worldview has no place for miracles or signs—*or* a God who calls humans to a transformed God-centered life.

What will you do with the resurrection? That question is at the center of it all, of everything. It's the most important question in all the world. Will you dismiss it? Will you explain it away? *Or*, will you really consider it and its implications.

Peter Hitchens (brother of deceased well known atheist Christopher Hitchens) was once asked—What dangerous idea has the greatest potential to change the world for the better? He answered without reservation that it is the resurrection of Jesus. When the surprised moderator asked him why, this is what he said.

*Because it alters the whole of human behaviour and all our responsibilities. It turns the universe from a meaningless chaos into a designed place in which there is justice and there is hope and, therefore, we all have a duty to discover the nature of that justice and work towards that hope. It alters us all. If we*

*reject it, it alters us all as well. It is incredibly dangerous. It's why so many people turn against it.*<sup>1</sup>

Did Jesus really conquer death? How you answer that changes everything!

If he did rise, there's true hope beyond the reality of our fallen, physical world. There's resurrection hope for all who'd trust in Jesus. And, this has real implications for us. Here are just a few.

If Christ rose from the grave:

- ...then Jesus is who he said he was—one greater than Jonah, one greater than Solomon. In fact, he was and is God with us; he's God in the flesh. And, he deserves our devotion and our worship. (That changes everything.)

If Christ rose from the grave:

- ...then all that Jesus said was and is true. He died for the sins of the world; he died for your sins; and, by trusting in him, you receive mercy and grace. There is salvation from death and sin in Christ. (That changes everything.)

If Christ rose from the grave:

- ...then the Bible is the very word of God; after all, Jesus said that it was. And, God's word tells us that a glorious future is coming for all his people. A future where disease and disaster and death will be eclipsed by his glory, and God's perfect joy will reign instead. (That changes everything.)

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications—implications that change everything. Some today want to make the resurrection a mere spiritual truth and dismiss any historical reality in it. That, however, isn't the message of Scripture. Christianity stakes its entire existence on real historical claims. As the apostle Paul reminds us:

*If there is no resurrection.... And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith* (1 Corinthians 15:13-14).

Friends, the disciples, claiming to have had an encounter with the risen Jesus, believed their faith in Christ's resurrection to be so real and so true (*so not useless!*) that they were willing to die for it. Now, skeptics have pointed out that many people

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<sup>1</sup> You can read Phillip Jensen's blog about Peter's answer and the implications of the resurrection of Jesus [here](#).

throughout history have been willing to die for things they believed to be the truth. Yet, that's a profound misunderstanding of the Christian argument.

These people wouldn't have been dying for something they thought was true yet wasn't. They would have been dying for what they knew was totally untrue—dying for what they knew to be a lie.

Friends—*No one dies for what they know to be false!*

It's for reasons like this one that Christians have both believed and celebrated, for nearly two thousand years, Jesus' resurrection from the grave. Not as a metaphor! Not as a misunderstanding! Not as an elaborate hoax!

But, rather, as the ultimate sign of God reconciling this fallen, physical world and most especially his fallen, physical people to himself in Jesus Christ.

Let me close with a beautiful, poetic expression of Christ's bodily resurrection from the grave. This is "Seven Stanzas at Easter" by John Updike.

### **Seven Stanzas at Easter**

Make no mistake: if he rose at all

It was as His body;

If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit,

The amino acids rekindle,

The Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,

Each soft spring recurrent;

It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the

Eleven apostles;

It was as His flesh; ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes  
The same valved heart  
That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered  
Out of enduring Might  
New strength to enclose.  
Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,  
Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded  
Credulity of earlier ages:  
Let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,  
Not a stone in a story,  
But the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of  
Time will eclipse for each of us  
The wide light of day.

And if we have an angel at the tomb,  
Make it a real angel,  
Weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair, opaque in  
The dawn light, robed in real linen  
Spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,  
For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,  
Lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed  
By the miracle,

And crushed by remonstrance.