

The Sign of Jonah
Matthew 12:38–41
April 9, 2023

“The message was simple: collect one million Campbell’s Soup Labels, and you get a free church van,” so begins my dear friend Michael’s account of one of the most memorable church business meetings I’ve heard about. Before I tell you the story, know that this is the church I served prior to moving to Memphis. I was on staff there *with* Michael and some other dear friends. And it’s the church where Julie and I met. So, my affection for that place and body of believers continues. The Lord used them, and continues to.

But, they did have a business meeting circa 2004 that I still have a hard believing actually happened. At that point, the church needed a new church van, badly. So, at their monthly meeting someone brought up this idea about the million soup labels. Now, Michael’s one of my dearest friends and incredibly intelligent. Further, he’s not *against* good ideas, but he’s as analytical and efficient as they come.

Sitting in that sanctuary during that meeting, he knows this church has about 170 people attending on a consistent basis. So, while the issue’s being discussed, he’s going to do the math. To tell you what happens next, I’ll read you an excerpt from his account of that Sunday night, “I sheepishly raise my hand. I was called on. ‘Um, yes,’ I said, ‘I was just doing some quick calculations over here, and I’ve determined that if every single man, woman, and child brought a label every single week it would take us just over 113 years to get enough labels for a van.’”

Mike says that he was discouraged by the arithmetic. But he thought that it was his duty to share the information he’d discovered on his calculator. As his account goes on, he writes, “Just then, a Label Advocate spoke up. So, I turned to listen and looked at them with eyes that said, ‘We’re in this together.’ But I’ll never forget the words I heard: ‘Well, I say we do it anyway.’” The church voted. And it passed.¹

As you know, evidence *alone*—even what seems to be sufficient evidence—doesn’t always change people’s minds. Confirmation bias is a real thing, in all kinds of arenas. You can lay out fact after fact after fact and the other person won’t come close to changing their mind. This happens in religion as well. Someone once asked Richard Dawkins what it would take for him to believe in God. He responded, “Well, I used to say it would be very simple. It would be the second coming of Jesus or a great, big, deep, booming bass . . . voice saying, ‘I am God, and I created.’ But I was persuaded . . . that even if there *was* this booming voice in the second coming in clouds of glory, the more probable explanation is that it’s a hallucination, or a conjuring trick by David Copperfield . . .” The interviewer then asked, “So what would persuade you?” Dawkins replied, “Well, I’m starting to think nothing would, which, in a way, goes against the grain, because I’ve always paid lip service to the view that a scientist should change his mind when evidence is forthcoming.”²

We saw this last week in John 12 as well. Jesus had *just* raised Lazarus from the grave. People heard and saw the same evidence; and yet, they came to vastly different conclusions: **The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus** (John 12:9–11).

That skepticism toward Jesus in John 12 is alive and well in Matthew 12, today’s text. Notice first,

¹ The 113 years seemingly didn’t matter, nor that a million cans of soup costs a good bit more than a church van.

² <https://www.str.org/w/why-evidence-will-not-convince-some-atheists>

1. Seeking a Sign (vv. 38–39a)

Verse 38: **Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.”** If we were reading through the book of Matthew together, you would quickly see how disingenuous this question actually is. On the same page of my Bible, with Pharisees present, Jesus had just said to a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12:13): **“Stretch out your hand”! He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal.** Then, a few verses later in verse 22, Matthew records, **Then a demon–possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw.**

It’s in *that* context, and Matthew puts these events *right next* to one another on purpose, that the scribes and Pharisees say, **Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.**³ In the Gospel of Luke’s account of this same period, Jesus assigns a motive to those seeking signs. They’d asked for a sign to **test Him** (Lk 11:16). What they’d *already* seen hadn’t convinced them. The evidence seemingly wasn’t enough. In fact, they’d actually misinterpreted it. If we were to read closer, we’d see that they’d attributed the healing of the blind man to a demon (Matt 12:24). You might say that they saw what they wanted to see.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrated His authority over the demons, over disease, and over death. But He wasn’t *merely* doing party tricks in the Galilean hills. He was demonstrating His authority over the physical and spiritual realm as object lessons of His rule. So, when He calmed the storm or raised Jairus’ daughter, He did it, in part, *so that* people might know who He was.

So, is the request for a sign something Jesus would *never* do? He’d done it prior. We’ll see in a moment that He *will* give them a sign in the future. So, it’s not *necessarily* the bare–bones request He critiques; it’s the motive of the people behind the request. Their desire for a sign was *not* also a desire to see or know Him. Verse 39 tells us how Jesus sums up this crowd: **But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign.”**

I skimmed an article yesterday entitled, “Our Many Jesuses.” In it, one professor said, “The different gospels give us different versions of Jesus. We put them together . . . for ourselves, because no one’s Jesus is going to be like someone else’s Jesus.”⁴ Much of the article was full of that kind of garbage. But nothing will correct your understanding of Jesus better than actually reading the Bible. While *no one’s* more loving and compassionate than Him, at the same time, *no one* knew and spoke the unvarnished truth like Him either. He didn’t flirt with flattery. Here He calls them an evil and adulterous generation.

When we were in James, we were constantly reminded of James quoting His brother’s words. Here, hearing Jesus’s words, it reminds me of James calling those divided believers, **adulteresses** (James 4:4). The context is similar too. In the verse immediately preceding, James writes, **You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives** (James 4:3). *That’s* the context in which James calls someone an adulteress. It’s *also* the context Jesus calls a group of people an adulterous generation. Verse 39 goes on: **and yet . . .** Note secondly,

2. The Sign Given (vv. 39b–40)

Verse 39: **and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet.**

Maybe it’d be helpful to define what a “sign” is, at least biblically. Most often a sign in the Gospels is something visual, though it can be heard. Either way, the sign itself is intended to

³ The question, “seems highly incongruous given the ‘sign’ just performed by Jesus.” Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 206.

⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/our-many-jesuses-6c5d82f2?mod=e2tw>

confirm, corroborate, or authenticate something or someone else.⁵ Again, Jesus did a good bit of this. The Gospel of John's first 12 chapters can be described as Jesus revealing Himself—who He is—through signs.⁶

Here in Matthew 12, *after* He's made plain to the scribes and Pharisees that He knows something of their motive, He *still* tells them a sign is coming. He *will* give a sign. And that sign to come is not something they don't know about or have categories for. The sign He'll give is the sign of Jonah the prophet.

Does this mean it's a sign performed *by* Jonah? Is it a sign given *to* Jonah? Neither seems to be the case. Instead, Jesus is saying Jonah is *himself* the sign.⁷ It's the sign: *of* Jonah. What's that mean? Is Jesus going to run away from a city he's supposed to preach to? Is Jesus going to sit under a plant that is attacked by a worm (Jonah 4:7)? We don't have to overthink it. What would Jesus' hearers think of *immediately* when He mentioned Jonah? It's the same thing a 5-year-old thinks of. It's the same thing *you* think of.

Verse 40 makes it clear that *this* is what Jesus means by the sign of Jonah: **for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster.** Why, Matt, does my NASB Bible put that phrase in all caps? Is it yelling? No, it's in caps because it's a direct quote from Jonah 1:17.⁸ Jesus references a line they knew. *They* knew the story. We do too. Jonah was swallowed by the great fish. On the third day the LORD commanded the fish, and Jonah landed on dry ground.⁹

The sign Jesus will give is the sign of Jonah. We know what happened to Jonah. How does this relate to Jesus? He continues in verse 40: **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.** Did the scribes and Pharisees know what He meant by this? That's a good question.

Do *we* know what He means? Of course we do. He was revealing Himself, telling them what sign would ultimately corroborate and authenticate who He was. He—the Son of Man—would be buried for three days. But *only* for three days. As Jonah didn't stay in the water, the Son of Man wouldn't stay in the heart of the earth. He's telling these scribes and Pharisees, "Here is the sign I will give you: resurrection."

I attempted to remind us a week ago that the events of Jesus's final week happened in categories of time we can understand. We know what a week is. We've had a few. So, since last weekend—since Mary washed Jesus's feet with her hair and He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey—He gathered with His disciples in an Upper Room—teaching them all the things we've discussed on Wednesday nights, about humility, about the Helper, about hate, and about a home prepared for them (John 13–16). Then, either late on Thursday or early Friday, He prayed to the Father that He might glorify Himself. Further, He prayed that His Father might keep *us* (John 17).

Moments later, His betrayer came accompanied by a mob. In the hours ahead, on a Friday, He was mocked, cursed, and bloodied. The hands of lawless men crucified Him (Acts 2:23). They then carried His lifeless body to a tomb.

On the next day—Saturday—Pilate told guards to make that tomb as secure as they could (Matt. 27:65). So, on one Saturday—after Mary anointed Him—Jesus hinted it was for a burial. The

⁵ See Moisés Silva on σημεῖον in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4, 284.

⁶ See Andreas Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*.

⁷ It's a genitive of apposition, according to Charles Quarles, *Matthew*, EGGNT, 136.

⁸ The Septuagint Greek of Jonah and the Greek New Testament of Matthew are identical on this verse.

⁹ For those doing the math, "Three days and three nights" was an idiom for *any part* of three consecutive days. Blomberg, 207; Quarles, 136; and Beale/Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 44.

following Saturday He was in a tomb. Then, on one Sunday, He was greeted by shouts and palm branches. The *next* Sunday He'd risen from the dead.

By putting it in those terms—in relation to time—we want to be crystal clear about what we're saying. We're saying, "This isn't a fairy tale. It actually happened."

Why is that so significant? Because our death is actually going to happen too. This weekend we're confessing with saints throughout history that *because* He rose, we can too. How might we be certain God accepted the atonement of Christ on our behalf? How might we know that God can give life to those headed toward death? A resurrected King.

We're saying it happened. And we're saying He *said* it would happen. All the way back in Matthew 12, He'd said: **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.** A few chapters later in Matthew's Gospel, He'd tell the disciples, **The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill him, and He will be raised on the third day** (Matthew 17:22–23). Then, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, what did the angels say? **He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said** (Matthew 28:6).

We're saying it happened. We're saying He said it would happen. *And* we're saying those that opposed Him *knew* He said it would happen. Right before it did, in Matthew 27 we read: **the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again'"** (Matthew 27:62–63). He *said* it would happen. They *knew* He said it would happen. It *did*.

Would that be enough evidence? Are the facts always enough to convince someone? Hear what Jesus said in Luke 16:31: **If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.** Jesus knew their hearts. That's why He critiqued their request for a sign. They hadn't been convinced by the signs He'd performed *already*. They wouldn't be convinced when Lazarus walked out of a tomb. Nor would many of them be when Jesus conquered death Himself.

3. The Superior Sign (v. 41)

In Matthew, Jesus knew what He would soon do. He'd give a sign. And He knew *their* future as well. The clear sign *still* wouldn't be enough. So, He says in verse 41: **The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment.** On this verse, the ESV gets it just right, **The men of Nineveh will rise up.** The verb can mean to rise from the dead.¹⁰ The context seems to favor that definition as well.¹¹ So, when the scribes and Pharisees ask for a sign, Jesus says He'll give them one—the sign of Jonah—pointing to His *own* resurrection. But that's not all. He, *then*, points to the future resurrection of the Ninevites.

What would happen then? **The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation.** What generation is He referring to? This evil and adulterous generation referred to back in verse 39. What will the risen men of Nineveh do in relation to that generation? **The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it.** Why? **Because they repented at the preaching of Jonah.**

Jesus is arguing here from the lesser to the greater.¹² Keep in mind that the Ninevites likely did not witness Jonah being spit out on dry land. They didn't see him being—in essence—given life.

¹⁰ Quarles, 136.

¹¹ The verb *εγείρω* (rise up) in verse 42, for example.

¹² Carson/Beale, 45.

Yet, *without* that sign, they'd repented at the preaching of Jonah.¹³ Had the scribes and Pharisees been given *more* evidence than the Ninevites, in terms of signs? Absolutely. Matthew 12 alone seems to be more than what Nineveh received. Yet, the ones who'd seen more *still* wouldn't repent. So, the risen men of Nineveh would condemn them.

Because, in part, they'd repented with less evidence. Further, some of that *lesser* evidence is the one that called upon them to repent.¹⁴ Again, it's an argument from the lesser to the greater. The Ninevites had been told to turn to the Lord by a man that ran from the Lord. The scribes and Pharisees had been instructed to turn to the Lord by the Lord Himself. And that's precisely what Jesus says, **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 *something* greater is certainly concerned with Jesus's teaching, in part. Yet, we dare not separate His teaching from His person. *Something* greater than Jonah is also *Someone* greater than Jonah.¹⁵ And Jesus says that Someone greater than Jonah **is here**. In fact, He was standing right in front of them.

Conclusion

Maybe you dismissed those folks that clearly missed the obvious math about soup labels. Maybe we think, "They saw what they wanted to see." Or, we wonder in another instance, in our own lives, "How could this person not see this?"

The sign of Jonah—Jesus' resurrection from the dead—wasn't hidden. He predicted it time and time again. Then, on a Friday, a city saw Him die. On the third day—a Sunday 2000 years ago—His tomb was empty. The stone moved. No "body" ever found. After that brutal crucifixion, hundreds of witnesses saw Jesus of Nazareth alive and well. And in the years ahead men and women *the world over* gave their life to tell others. One of those—Paul—would soon say, **For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today** (Acts 24:21).

So, the question for us this morning isn't, "Is there evidence that Jesus rose from the dead?" The question isn't, "Have we heard about it?" The question is, rather, "Is the death and resurrection of Christ enough for us?" Or are we still asking for a sign?

But if it *is* enough, let's confess a resurrected Christ as our only hope in life and death.

¹³ Craig Keener, *Matthew*, IVPNTC, 233.

¹⁴ Blomberg, 207.

¹⁵ Quarles says the grammar allows this interpretation as well, writing, "The substantive adjective is most naturally a reference to Jesus personally," 124. It's not unlike Matthew 12:6.