

Focus Text

“And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed.”

(Matthew 16:1–4, ESV)



“But 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. 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. 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.” **(Matthew 12:39–41, ESV)**

The Sign of Jonah

As we begin chapter 16, Jesus has returned from the Decapolis to the fields of Gennesaret in the region of Magadan, a more rural area of Galilee. Despite this, he faces resistance from the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who demand a sign of the apocalypse, hoping to witness miraculous events they believe would only occur with the arrival of the Messiah.

This request is an affront to the numerous miracles Jesus has already performed, including two large feedings, countless healings, and exorcisms. Jesus is fully aware of his messianic power and sees their demand as a sign of their stubbornness and sinful hearts.

Jesus compares their situation to how people in Ohio can predict the weather by observing the sky, yet they ignore the signs he has shown them. He reiterates his statement from chapter 12, calling them a wicked and adulterous generation, and declares that the only sign they will receive is the sign of Jonah. This sign refers to Jonah’s three days in the belly of a great fish, foreshadowing Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, and the warning that Gentiles and pagans would repent, unlike the Jews in Jesus’s time who refuse to recognize him as the promised Messiah.

Interestingly, as Jesus returns from a successful ministry among the Romans in the Decapolis, he is immediately met with doubt and questioning from the Jewish religious leaders. Frustrated, Jesus refuses to elaborate further on the sign of Jonah and departs from them, much like a weary parent tired of explaining the same thing repeatedly to those who reject him. By this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has performed numerous miracles, including calming storms, raising the dead, and healing countless individuals, yet these acts are not enough for those who should be the most religious.

A personal observation is the contrast between the love Jesus receives from the Gentiles and the rejection he faces from the Jewish leaders. It is striking that he is cherished by those who are supposed to be his enemies and scorned by those who should love him. Jesus reminds us of the sign of Jonah, symbolizing his death and resurrection, a pivotal event in his mission.

Application

“For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.” The great sign of our Lord’s mission is his resurrection and his preparing a gospel of salvation for the heathen. His life is well symbolized by that of Jonah. They cast our Lord overboard into death, even as the sailors cast the prophet overboard into the sea. The sacrifice of Jonah calmed the sea for the mariners, and our Lord’s death made peace for us. Our Lord was in the heart of the earth as Jonah was in the depth of the sea. Just as Christ rose again from the dead, Jonah was ejected from the fish’s stomach. As Jonah’s ministry was certified by his restoration from the sea, so was our Lord’s ministry attested by his rising from the dead. The man who had come back from death and burial in the sea commanded the attention of all Nineveh, and so does the risen Savior demand and deserve the obedient faith of all to whom his message comes.”¹

This week, let’s rise with confidence in Jesus and his resurrection! Reach out and offer a prayer out loud for someone in need. Initiate a meaningful spiritual conversation with someone in your life. Extend a helping hand and remind them of Jesus’ unwavering care. Hold firm to the truth that Jesus rose from the dead, and we have received the sign of Jonah. No matter the challenges, let’s stand strong and confident in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!

¹ Spurgeon. 2017. The Spurgeon Study Bible: Notes. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Additional Notes

“In 12:38–39 the Pharisees and scribes demanded an unambiguous sign to prove the divine origin of Jesus’ exorcisms. As soon as Jesus returns to Jewish territory, the Pharisees and Sadducees confront him with a similar demand. This time they explicitly label the sign as “from heaven,” a common Jewish expression (on their desire, cf. 1 Cor 1:22), probably here hoping for a uniquely apocalyptic and triumphal manifestation of Christ’s power.⁸⁸ As in 3:7 only Matthew mentions the Sadducees”²

“Red sky at morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight.” If the Jewish leaders can recognize what the weather is likely to be by the appearance of the sky, why can they not recognize the dawning of the kingdom of heaven and the messianic age by what Jesus does and teaches? Jesus has already provided plenty of signs to this end.”³

“In both Matthew passages, Jesus refuses to grant a sign except “the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matt 12:38–41; 16:1–4) to those demanding miraculous proof of his authority.

The two accounts differ significantly in their explanation. In Matthew 12, Jesus explicitly interprets the sign as his burial and resurrection—comparing his time “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” to Jonah’s time in the fish’s belly. This sign of Jonah points to Jesus’s near-death and deliverance experience, understood as prefiguring his own death and resurrection[1]. Additionally, Matthew 12 emphasizes that the Ninevites repented at Jonah’s preaching, and Jesus is “something greater than Jonah”—establishing a contrast between the responsiveness of Gentiles and the resistance of Jesus’s Jewish audience.

Matthew 16 simply restates that no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah, without elaborating on its meaning. The explanation given in Matthew 12 carries over to Matthew 16, where the sign continues to point to Jesus’s death and resurrection[1]. Matthew includes this repeated incident to demonstrate the widening range of Jesus’s opponents—now both Pharisees

² 88 J. Gibson, “Jesus’ Refusal to Produce a ‘Sign’ (Mk 8.11–13),” JSNT 38 (1990): 37–66.

Blomberg, Craig. 1992. *Matthew*. Vol. 22. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³ Blomberg, Craig. 1992. *Matthew*. Vol. 22. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

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and Sadducees unite against him^[2]—and to remind readers that Jesus’s narrative moves inexorably toward his death^[2].

Both passages employ the same language condemning those who seek signs as belonging to “an evil and adulterous generation” (Matt 12:38–41), establishing that the refusal of additional signs reflects not Jesus’s inability but the spiritual blindness of his questioners.”⁴

⁴ [1] James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 73.

[2] Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 181.