

THE PROPHETIC SIGN OF JONAH (Matt. 12:40-41)

Jonah was a prophetic sign. What happened to Jonah in the belly of the great fish was a type of death and burial, which was followed by a restoration to life. Jesus said:

Matthew 12:40 (NKJV)

40 For 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.

In effect, Christ says that Jonah's experience illustrates His own death, burial, and resurrection.

The parallel is clear: Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, and the Son of Man would be in the heart of the earth (meaning the grave) for three days and three nights.

The Bible is clear that the whole of Scripture revolves around a main theme, which is the person of Jesus Christ and God's salvation plan centered in Him; the focal point was Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Luke 24:27 (NKJV)

27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

"[Here] the Lord Jesus Christ gave them the great key to the understanding of Scripture – that He Himself is its subject and that in Him the entire Book finds its unity." - **C.I. Scofield**

But here is the thing about revelation. We only know God's plan as He reveals it to us. We never figure God out on our own. We only know the significance of what God is doing as He unveils it. And revelation was progressive – meaning we understand more and more as more and more is revealed. And it all builds on previous revelation. And the point is the revelation is now COMPLETE! The Book of God is complete! (cf. Jn. 16:13)

At the time of Jonah's experience with the great fish, no one at that time said, "*Oh yeah, this is clearly a SIGN of the coming Messiah involving His death, burial, and resurrection.*" No one saw that, but God did!

However, looking back we can see that this is what God had in mind all along. He sovereignly orchestrated it so that ultimately it would be a picture

of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. But here is the point: We wouldn't know this apart from God's further revelation. We wouldn't know it except for the fact that Christ has told us.

As such, Jesus became the fulfillment of the SIGN in Jonah that God intended all along, and it fits perfectly with the overall picture of what the Messiah would do.

Jonah 1:17 (NKJV)

17 Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Because of the SIGN as found in Jonah and the language of Jonah as quoted by Christ in Matthew 12:40, some have insisted that Christ had to have been in the grave for three full days and three full nights in order for this to be accurately fulfilled.

So, various arguments have been put forth as to whether Christ was actually crucified on Wednesday, on Thursday, or as has traditionally been thought, on Friday.

The problem with insisting on 3 full days and 3 full nights is that it then pushes the resurrection into the fourth day, and the Bible is clear that Christ rose again on the 3rd day after His crucifixion. Christ repeatedly said that He would be "**raised the third day**" – not the fourth (cf. Mt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19).

The most logical answer to this is that in Jewish reckoning any part of a 24-hour day can stand for the whole (cf. 1 Sam. 30:12-13; 2 Chron. 10:5, 12; Esther 4:16; 5:1).

"A day and a night make an 'onah (i.e. a 24 hour period) and the portion of an 'onah is reckoned as an 'onah".

– **Rabbi Elazar** (c. A.D. 100)

So, the sense is that it was common for the Jewish people to regard even part of a day as representing a full 24-hour day. We see this in a number of places in the OT Scriptures (cf. 1 Sam. 30:12-13; 2 Chron. 10:5, 12; Esther 4:16; 5:1).

So, in this way of thinking: He was buried on Friday afternoon and resurrected on Sunday morning. Part of Friday is regarded as one 24-hour day, Saturday is one 24-hour day, and part of Sunday is regarded as one 24-hour day. Hence, in the Jewish way of reckoning, Jesus was in the heart

of the earth for three days and three nights and at the same time He arose on the third day. This is most probably the proper way to understand this.

Footnote: The old KJV translated the sea creature as “whale,” which is inaccurate. The Greek word (“ketos”) literally means “**great sea creature**,” which is translated in the NKJV as “**great fish**”.

The number THREE is of great significance as found in Jonah and as repeatedly referred to by Christ.

Matthew 16:21 (NKJV)

21 From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.

Matthew 17:23 (NKJV)

23 and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up.” And they were exceedingly sorrowful.

Matthew 20:18–19 (NKJV)

18 “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death,

19 and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”

Luke 24:21 (NKJV)

21 But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened.

It all fits perfectly. Christ was indeed in the tomb for parts of three different days. Jonah had a 3-day experience in the belly of the fish; Christ repeatedly predicted He would rise again on the third day; and the disciples testified that indeed He was reported to be alive on the third day. This did not happen on the second day or on the fourth day – but precisely on the THIRD day, just as Christ said it would happen in perfect accord with the Jonah typology and the Jewish understanding of “three days”.

Jonah was as good as dead – pictured as dead in the belly of the fish for 3 days. But he didn’t stay in that position.

Jonah 2:10 (NKJV)

10 So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

This is a picture of resurrection – the resurrection of Christ. Normally, we would never envision this picturing the glorious truth of resurrection. Again, we would never figure out God’s pictures unless He tells us what He means by them.

But again, this reality of 3 days in the tomb followed by the resurrection is the ultimate sign that verified all of Christ’s claims. From there on out God holds the world accountable for the truth of the resurrection.

Acts 17:30–31 (NKJV)

30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

The resurrection changed everything. God now holds all people everywhere accountable to the truth of it. He now commands all people to repent – that is to in faith align their thinking with the truth of Jesus Christ as the risen Lord Who is the God-ordained Judge of all. The proof of this is found in the resurrection which happened in perfect fulfillment of prophecy as illustrated in Jonah and predicted by Christ.

In the experience of Jonah, we have pictured in summary form the FULL gospel message. The GOSPEL means good news and it is what Jesus has done to save us from our sins. Paul spells it out in 1 Corinthians 15.

1 Corinthians 15:1–4 (NKJV)

1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel...

3 ... Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:11 (NKJV)

11 ... so we preach and so you believed.

The GOSPEL is all about Jesus and what He did. And He did it all – that is why it is a GOSPEL of GRACE. The only thing we do is BELIEVE and even this is because of God’s work in our hearts.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (NKJV)

8 For by **grace** [the CROSS] you have been saved **through faith**, and that **not of yourselves**; it is the **gift of God**,
9 **not of works**, lest anyone should boast.

It's not by works of any kind. Not by rituals, not by sacraments, not by baptism, not by acts of kindness, not by church membership. Only by faith in Christ and His finished work on the cross are we saved.

Then Jesus made this application...

Matthew 12:41 (NKJV)

41 The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire.

The emphasis here is interesting. Even though Jonah is ultimately a sign of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, here Christ pivots and makes the issue that of Jonah's preaching and the Ninevites response of repentance.

In the grand scheme of things, there are two great issues:

- 1) The person of Christ and His work of salvation.
- 2) How we respond to Him in belief or unbelief.

We might expect the emphasis at this point to be on some sort of SIGN that Jonah performed, but that is not it. As far as we know, Jonah did no sign whatsoever. As far as we know, the Ninevites had no knowledge at all of Jonah's experience inside the fish.

What Jonah did was preach, yes, reluctantly, but he did preach, and the people repented. That is the point of emphasis here! Not a sign – but preaching.

Jonah 3:4–5 (NKJV)

4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"
5 So the people of Nineveh **believed God**, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

I want you to note that in Jonah 3:5 it says that they **believed God**, but here in Matthew 12:41 Jesus says they "**repented**". Well, let me ask you: did they believe, or did they repent?

Repentance and believing always go together in saving faith. You can't have one without the other. Repentance literally means "**to have a change of mind,**" and that element, whether explicitly stated or implicitly implied, is always a reality in true saving faith.

But Jonah, reluctant as he was, PREACHED and the people responded in repentance and faith. And then Jesus says, "**and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.**"

This is interesting because the word "**greater**" is neuter in gender and not masculine in the Greek, indicating something rather than someone is in view here. There is something GREATER on the scene than was found in Jonah. The emphasis here is on preaching, so the sense would seem to be that a greater PREACHER with an even greater MESSAGE is now on the scene in the person of Christ than was seen in the person of Jonah.

"The comparison was not between two people, but between the two functions – a prophet's and the Messiah's, between a messenger of salvation and the instrument of salvation." – **Ed Glasscock**

And Christ was a PERFECT preacher.

Isaiah 11:1–2 (NKJV)

1 There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

This was seen in Christ's ministry. When Jesus went back to His hometown of Nazareth and opened up the scroll to Isaiah and began to read and then explain that these things applied to Him, the text in Luke 4:22 says the people "**marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.**" When Jesus got done teaching His Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:28 says the "**people were astonished at His teaching**". It blew them away. In John 7:46 they said, "**No man ever spoke like this Man!**"

When Jesus says the men of Nineveh will rise up in judgment, the reference is to the custom in Jewish courts requiring the witness to stand when testifying in a case. In other words, the converted Ninevites will, in the final judgment, serve as witnesses against them.

This would really have rankled the Jewish pride – to think that these Gentiles in the OT would in the end be a witness against them as the favored people of God had to be humiliating.

These Gentiles at Nineveh in the OT responded to the preaching of Jonah, but in contrast, these Jews on the scene during Christ's ministry, who had an even greater privilege of having even more light through an even greater preacher as seen in the Messiah's ministry, failed to repent (cf. Matt. 11:20-24).