

12:38

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered. That requires us to ask the question, “What are they answering?” And they’re answering His words, Jesus spoke in verses 33 to 37. Well He spoke well before that but He told them in verse 36: But I say unto you, “That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master (Teacher, Rabbi), **we would see a sign from Thee.** I guess casting a devil out of a blind, dumb man wasn’t a sign.

12:39

And Jesus says, **there shall no sign be given to this wicked and evil and adulterous generation but the sign of the prophet Jonas.**¹ Which is Jonah. You probably, many of you, in your laps probably have Jonah.

but the sign of the prophet Jonah: Well I’m not typically taking trips over to the other gospels, but sometimes taking a trip to another gospel can keep you from making an assumption that is wrong. This is one particular case. Please notice: as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of Man be to this generation. Somehow Jesus, in Matthew, says that the burial of Jonah in the whale and his being spit out again was a **sign** of the Son of God. But that’s not the completion of the sign. That’s not the totality of the sign. There’s about four to five hundred miles between the Mediterranean Sea and Mosul (or Nineveh). You know the men of Nineveh were not standing on the beach that day. Somehow a Jonah that spent three days and three nights in the belly of death was a **sign** to the Ninevites. And Jesus says, “That’s the only **sign** y’all are getting.” The resurrected Christ is going to appear in a magnified sort of way and you’re going to know that it is He and He is quite alive.

*Matthew 24:29 Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear **the sign of the Son of Man** in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*

¹Mark 8:12 does not contain this “sign.” He is the only one that does not mention the sign of Jonah. In other words, mentioning the sign of Jonah may have been meaningless to Mark’s audience. Mark wrote to somebody. What if the people he wrote to didn’t know anything about Jonah? So why introduce it and get them thinking about something else?

It’s like me looking at my three children one day and saying, “We will not be going anywhere this summer except for Grandma’s house.” One child says to her boss at work, “We’re not going anywhere this summer except for a week in July.” Why would her boss care? He’s got to work that schedule. Child #2 tells his soccer coach “We’re not going anywhere this summer except for just under a week in July.” Why would the soccer coach care? He needs to build practices around the individual roles of the players. The third child tells the neighbor girl, “We’ll be here all summer.” It’s generally true. It’s mostly true. It’s so true it’s virtually true. It’s functionally true. It’s essentially true. The neighbor girl can count on Leah to be around all summer, generally. The neighbor girl could be around so much that from the beginning of the three-month summer it’s good enough to say, “We’re going nowhere,” when vacation constitutes a mere 8% of the summer. So it could be that to Mark’s audience it was generally true. There was no sign going to be given to this generation because his audience was completely uninterested and completely unaware of the sign of Jonah.

This **sign** of the Son of Man in heaven is also **the sign of Jonah**. How do I know that? Very simple: Jesus said that generation would get one sign. They get one **sign**.

*24:31 And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When His branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh. 33 So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. **This generation** shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.*

What about that? Now connect the dots with me. Don't make me do all the work. You have the generation of Christ's day seeing a **sign of the Son of Man** in heaven. And we're told, twelve chapters earlier, that that generation gets one sign and it's **the sign of the prophet Jonah**. You have a resurrected prophet appearing to people to preach to them.

Both chapter 12 and chapter 24 recipients are **this generation**. Isn't that what it says? And in both verses, not only does it say **this generation**, the **generation** of Jesus, but it also says **the sign of the Son of Man**. Isn't that what it says in both chapters? And we're told that **generation** only gets one **sign** and it will appear in heaven, in **this generation**.

12:40

For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; It appears to be the only time the word whale is used in the entire New Testament. That is why some versions say "great fish." The word comes from a Greek word that means a gaping fish.

so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Is it three days and three nights total? Is it 72 hours? If so, how will you get 72 hours between Good Friday afternoon and Sunday before dawn?"

*Esther 4:15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink **three days, night or day**: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him. Now it came to pass **on the third day**, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house.*

She's standing before the king on the third **day**, and she says here that it would be after **three days and three nights** that she would go to the king. Now how is it possible to say it will be three days and three nights and yet it will take place on the third day?

*Matthew 16:21 From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto His disciples, how that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again **the third day**.*

Now, how can both passages of Scripture be true? How can this be true that says that He'll be raised the third day, and the one we're examining here in chapter 12 that says He'll be in the

grave **three days and three nights**? Yet we see in Esther that somehow in the Jewish mindset it was possible for three days and three nights to somehow still be true as well as her entering “on the third day.”

By Jewish reckoning a part of a day was considered to be a whole day. And it was common Jewish idiom to refer to even a part of a day as a day and a night. So three days and three nights might refer to as much as seventy-two hours or as little as twenty-six. One full twenty-four hour day together with one hour of the preceding and one hour of the following. This explains why Jesus could be said to be in the tomb three days and three nights when He was buried late Friday and rose on early Sunday.²

So if you can think like a Jewish person long enough to read this verse you realize that any part of Friday counted as a day and a night. Any part of Saturday counted as a day and a night. Any part of Sunday counted as a day and a night. So it is possible that He did die on Friday, having been raised from the dead just before dawn on Sunday.³

Shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth It either means exactly what it says or we have to find a pretty good reason for not thinking it means exactly what it says.

*Psalm 139 I will praise Thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are Thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from Thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought **in the lowest parts of the earth.***

The Psalmist seems to be calling his mother’s womb the lowest parts of the earth. Many times in Jewish custom they saw the womb and the tomb both kind of the same; the womb is a sort of a tomb. And so the birth of a child was kind of like a resurrection, because there he is, hidden in a tomb so to speak, hidden in a womb, and he comes out at birth. The reality is, children often died before they were born and so it was a great thing when a child and a mother endured pregnancy and a child was delivered.

There’s another possibility.

*Ephesians 4:8: Wherefore He saith, When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first **into the lower parts of the earth?** He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.)*

It really looks like the writer of Ephesians is saying that the Lord went into the center of the earth, or the lower parts of the earth. Or is he using it in the same way that the writer of Psalm 139 was using it to refer to the tomb? I believe He went to the lower parts of the earth. See my commentary on Revelation (9:1).

12:41

² Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 179.

³ Luke 24:21 does introduce another dilemma, having occurred on Sunday afternoon.

The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; One might allow for a reference of a fictional character named **Jonah** here, but the problem is that the folks of Nineveh are spoken of as nonfictional people that will take part in a future judgment. And so Jesus is referencing the people of Nineveh, they'll be at the future judgment, then it doesn't make any sense that Jonah didn't exist. Jonah is one of many Old Testament personalities that have been mentioned in Matthew so far. He's mentioned Moses and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in chapter 8, Elijah in chapter 11, David in chapter 12.

rise in judgment I'd like you to also see that there's the contextual connection of judgment.

Matthew 7:21-23 Not everyone that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.

*Matthew 10:15 Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in **the day of judgment**.*

*Matthew 11:21-24 Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment. 23 And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell. 24 But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in **the day of judgment**.*

*Matthew 12:36 Out of every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in **the day of judgment**.*

Jesus is far more concerned about the day of judgment than typically we are. If Jesus believes that day is so dreadful that He will continually warn us, then I say to you we need an eternal perspective once again. Oh, I'm afraid we're not thinking eternally. Most of the time we're thinking about tomorrow, we're thinking about yesterday, and we're irritated at the things people are doing to us that are absolutely attached to time. Oh, but Jesus Christ has an eternal perspective and He's in no danger of the judgment. God help us! I hope that your choices are made with an eternal perspective. What will I wish I had done differently when I'm standing before Him?

Apparently, the people of that generation will stand at the judgment with great accountability, great accountability. And here's the scary thing: somehow people from this life will be at that judgment and quite possibly bear witness against you and I. You say, "Where do you get that from the text?" I don't. I get the possibility from the text. Jesus says the men of Nineveh will rise with this generation and condemn it. They're going to be witnesses at the judgment of that first century people. Only that generation can look forward to such things Biblically, but I wonder if by application America will give a special account for the riches that it

has experienced, and the wisdom of God preached from pulpits, thousands, tens of thousands of pulpits, and they would not repent. I wonder.

They repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here. I mean Jesus has no issue saying, "I'm better than Jonah." Jesus, consistently through the book of Matthew, says He's greater than these things, these people, the temple, and the Sabbath. Matthew is, very, very good about continually saying things like, "I'm better than that. Better." We talked about how with Jonah He was better than the greatest prophet. With Solomon, in the next verse, He's better than the greatest king. He's, no question, stating His own qualification for the office of the Christ, the Anointed One. No question.

and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here. And it seems like that goes well because in the first twelve or thirteen verses He's telling them that He's actually better than their Sabbath, and He's better than their temple, which means that He compares Himself with a priest. And so in the context He says, "I'm better than your priestly system, I'm better than your prophets, I'm better than your kings." A very clear, very clear vein of thought Jesus is reintroducing in this passage: "I'm better than all of your anointed offices. I'm better than your best. You can't do any better than me."

*Acts 2:14 Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: For these are not drunken, as ye suppose... 22 Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a Man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by Him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because **it was not possible that Jesus should be held of it.***

Now think that through. Jesus couldn't have stayed dead if He wanted to. That's the eternal life you and I have promise of. I couldn't die if I wanted to. As long as God lives, I live. I'm guaranteed infinity.

*Colossians 3:1-4 You that are risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. For when Christ, **who is our life**, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory.*

I'm as alive as God is, for as long as God is, because He is, His life is in me. And so Jesus: it was not possible for Him to be held of death. He had to come alive. It's almost as if, I'm going to give it away, it's almost as if God spoke to the tomb and the tomb spit Him out.

Jonah 1:17 The Lord prepared a great fish.

And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, Chapter 2: the entire chapter is a prayer from Jonah out of a fish. Look where Jonah says he is in 2:2. He said

he was in “the belly of hell.” Jesus said they’re parallels. Jesus said Jonah was **a sign** of Him. Jesus, in Psalm 16 as quoted in Acts 2, said, “You’ll not leave My soul in hell.”

Jonah 2:10 And the LORD spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

Jonah couldn’t have stayed in the fish even if he wanted to. The Creator spoke to the fish and there was no discussion. It was impossible for Jonah to stay in the fish.

But it gets just a little better. What happens to a fish when it beaches itself? It dies. Jonah called the fish’s belly “hell.” What Jonah called “death” died, because God spoke. When God spoke, death died, and Christ was vomited out of the grave! Surely, **a greater than Jonah is here.**

The men of Nineveh It was the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. Basically what happens is when Jonah finally does get right with God, and finally does go to Nineveh, and finally does preach to it, and they finally do repent, they actually stay right with God for a few decades and that actually, delays their attack on Israel a couple of decades. Now think that through. Assyria are the people that brought great savagery to the land of Israel. God said, “Well, I value Israel to the point where I want to put off their judgment and I’m going to use this prophet to go to that people, to get them to repent and keep them right with God long enough to give Israel an opportunity to repent.” Think about that.

So, Jonah, chapters 1-2 goes down to Joppa, down in the bottom part of the ship, goes down into the water, and then down into the whale, and down onto his knees.

And then you have a lot of other strange terminology: In 1:3 Jonah rose up to flee from “the presence of the Lord.” That’s only said of two other people in the entire Bible. One of them is Cain, the one who killed Abel. And the other is Satan, in the book of Job. So Jonah is sharing company, Biblically and in a literary sense, company with Satan and the first murderer. Have ever rebelled against the Lord? And you look around one day and wonder, “How did I get all these friends?”

But God is creative in how He finds His people. He doesn’t need coaching on how to find His abolished, His banished, His exiled. He finds ways, creative means, and so you find in the last verse of Jonah 1: “the LORD prepared a great fish.” Now that means to me that that species didn’t exist previously. The Creator, long after the fifth day of creation, on this day, prepares another one. Why? Well because He needs something to pick up a package and to not digest it. And it won’t matter because in just a matter of a couple of days he’ll be dead. The fish will be dead. It will have to beach itself to get rid of its cargo. And God uses amazing means to bring us to Himself.⁴ I wonder if we ever think for a moment that things that we want taken out of other people’s lives are their whales that God has prepared. I wonder if we ever think for a minute that it is not always supposed to be “God, heal. God, save. God, deliver. God, protect.” Sometimes the best thing that can happen is that God “prepares a fish.”

This “fish” is not the only time that God is busy preparing things in the lives of His people. In chapter 4 we have God preparing something else. God, it says in chapter 4, God prepared a gourd plant. So God provides him a shadow and Jonah sits there and gripes under the

⁴For more on this, listen to a sermon preached at a sermon on the woman of Tekoa who preached this sermon to David: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/playpopupvideo.asp?SID=42151348123> [accessed November 15, 2017].

shadow that God provides. And so, verse 7, God prepared a worm. “I gave you the shade and now I’m going to take it from you.” And in verse 8: It came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind. God is always preparing. He’s preparing fish, He’s preparing plants, He’s preparing worms, He’s preparing unpleasant hot wind. Why? Often it’s for the procurement of His people.

In verse 9, God says, “Are you doing the right thing by being angry?” And in verse 10, God said, “You had pity on a stupid gourd plant that you didn’t plant, you didn’t make grow, you didn’t water, and you didn’t work photosynthesis in it. You didn’t do any of that and yet you want Me to just kill 120,000 people,” verse 11.

So, how is Jesus **greater than Jonah**? Jesus runs toward the will of God.

Jonah 1:4 But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea.

That is the idea of hurling out. It’s the same word used by Saul, or rather by the writer of 1 Samuel, when Saul threw a javelin at David. The Lord sent out a great wind into the sea. Now isn’t that something? God is busy making the lives of His follower unpleasant. And we have said many times in the book of Genesis that God will make those around you, who are not saved, blessed because you’re among them.⁵ Notice how the inverse works here. Jonah is running from God and the lives of those around him who do not know the God of Israel are made more miserable, because he’s not walking with God.

Jonah 1:5 Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea.

So God throws out a wind and the people on the ship are throwing out their gear. And they were going to lighten the ship. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship, and was fast asleep. Jonah, causing disruption in the lives of others, runs away from God. And he says, “I’m a person of the Hebrews.”

Jesus, on the other hand, identifies with the sinful Hebrew people like Jonah does, but He is not a sinner like Jonah is (Hebrews 4:16, 7:26, 12:3; 1 Peter 2:22). He did something rather un-Jonah like, **greater than Jonah**, and that was that He was running to the will of the Father and not away from it like Jonah was. Only Jesus could do so as the righteous among the wicked. Isaiah had to say, “I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips and I have unclean lips.” But Jesus could only say, “I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips and I will bear their guilt (Isaiah 53:10).

shall rise in judgment with this generation. Somehow, either in a very literal sense in a future judgment, or in a very figurative sense in a figurative judgment, and we’re not going to reargue our case here, but somehow, in verse 41 we’re told that there’s going to be a future judgment with witnesses. Witnesses. Now we already know there’s going to be evidence there. Revelation 20 says there will be books opened. We’re told that there will be a great white throne. We already know there’s going to be a judge there. We already know there’s going to be a judge, there’s going to be books; we know there’s going to be a courtroom. We know all of this and now we get word from Jesus that there will be witnesses that will condemn it. Maybe even strong, beyond the language of witnesses. You’ll understand of course that the Lord did not

⁵Potiphar’s house because of Joseph and Laban’s house because of Jacob, for instance.

author the constitution, so you'll have to forgive Him if it doesn't fit that whole bicameral house and the three branches of government. But there's this idea that there are witnesses who will act as a jury against you and pronounce your guilt. And they're going to condemn this generation because they, the men of Nineveh, they repented. They changed their mind, they changed the direction, they had a different attitude because of the preaching of Jonah. Now that is really something. We're going to see why that's something. But Jesus would say, now get this: Jonah lived about 800 years before Jesus did. Think about the weight, think about the gravity of such a statement as saying something like, "Preaching worked back then. It should work now." And He holds them accountable because it doesn't work with them.