

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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NO SIGN SHALL BE GIVEN BUT THE SIGN OF JONAH

Matthew 12:38-42

The Pharisees showed their hypocrisy when they asked Jesus for a sign proving that He was the Messiah. They were obviously not seeking to know Jesus. They had already seen so many proofs that He was the Messiah. Another miraculous work will not change their minds because they had decided already not to believe Him. Jesus, knowing their hearts, refused to give them a sign. The only sign they would have would be the sign of the prophet Jonah. In this lesson, we will explore the meaning of the sign of Jonah. Let's read this passage. Matthew 12:38-42.

Matthew 12:38-42. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."

39 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

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.

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.

42 "The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.

A sign

There are two words here that we have to define carefully. The first one is the word 'sign'. When the Pharisees asked for a sign, they wanted a miraculous sign, some miracle that would prove that Jesus is the Savior sent of God. Actually, this word 'sign', *semeion*, is often translated by the word 'miracle' in the NT. A sign can be a miracle. However, in several other verses, it refers to some less supernatural events. And sometimes it is used of things not supernatural at all. This word *semeion*, the sign that the Pharisees asked for, is also used in the expression 'sign of Jonah.'

Now, in the sign of Jonah, the emphasis is not on the miraculous nature of the sign but on the fact that we are able to see it. In the Bible, a sign is something that you can see with your own eyes and which conveys a message. For example in Luke 2:12, in the Christmas story, an angel said to the shepherds, *This will be a sign for you*. The angel was not talking about a miracle. The sign will be that the baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. When they see that, the shepherds will know that the baby is the Savior. The word 'sign' is used with a negative connotation in Matthew 26:48 where Judas said to the betrayers, 'I will give you a sign. I will kiss Him on the face. That will

tell you that He is the one you have to arrest.’ Judas was not saying that he was going to perform a miracle. He said that he was going to do something that they could see, i.e., kissing Jesus.

So here we find that the scribes and the Pharisees said to Jesus, ‘Give us a sign that we can see and that would prove what You claim to be.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘To this evil and adulterous generation, no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah.’

This generation

When the Lord Jesus says, ‘This generation,’ which generation is He talking about? Is He talking about the whole generation of the Jews of His time? If that is the case, does it mean that only the people in Jesus’ day would receive the sign of Jonah and that future generations will not have it?

We have to understand that the word ‘generation’ as Jesus uses it does not have the same meaning as the way we use it in English. In the English language, ‘generation’ refers to a particular group of people belonging to the same period of time, usually considered to be about thirty years. When the NT speaks of ‘this generation,’ it often refers to a class of people, with no reference to any length of time, who in this world stand over and against the children of light. They are described here as evil and adulterous. In the OT, we also find the same concept. For example, Psalms 14:5 speaks about the ‘generation of the righteous,’ i.e., the class of people who are described as righteous.

This means that when Jesus speaks about ‘this generation,’ He is not just referring to the Jews that He is talking to but to the whole class of people who are wicked. Therefore the sign of Jonah is not only for those standing in front of Jesus but it is for anyone in this present age in which we live.

The sign of the resurrection

Here it says that Jonah is the sign. *No sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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* (Matthew 12:39-40). The point of comparison is between Jonah and the Son of man, as well as between the Ninevites and this generation. Jonah was the sign to the people of Nineveh in the same way that the Son of man is the sign to us in this present age. But then, how is Jesus, the Son of man, a sign to us? We saw that a sign must be something that we can see. It is not just a message. How can Jesus be a sign to this age if we don’t see Him?

‘Three days and three nights.’ This is a clear reference to the resurrection. Jesus will be buried for three days and three nights, and then He will rise again from the dead. Is the resurrection the sign that Jesus is talking about? We still have the same question. How can the resurrection be a sign to us since we do not see the resurrection? If a miracle is performed in front of you, then that miracle can serve as a sign. But who has seen the resurrection? Then how can the resurrection of Jesus be a sign?

Moreover, if the resurrection is a sign, then the Lord Jesus gave that sign before. You remember that in John 11, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in front of many people. On another occasion, He raised the daughter of Jairus. She was dead, but she returned to life. Many people were able to see that sign. On a third occasion, He raised from the dead the widow’s son at Nain. He stopped the funeral procession to raise the dead man to life. And again, a whole crowd was there and saw what happened. So they had already seen the power of the resurrection that Jesus had.

As for Jesus’ own resurrection, they did not see it. Remember that Jesus was not talking about the disciples. He was talking about this evil generation, those who did not believe in Him. The disciples saw Jesus after His resurrection, but this evil and adulterous generation never saw Him. What this evil and adulterous generation do not see cannot be a sign to them.

Comparing Jonah with Jesus

Let us ponder again on the sign of Jonah. The comparison is with Jesus. Now as soon as we compare Jonah with Jesus, we seem to be comparing white with black. Jonah was the prophet of the OT who ran away from God after he was called to preach at Nineveh. And even after his amazing experience of being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, and then being saved, we find that when he did preach to the Ninevites and they repented, Jonah was angry. He was not happy with the good results of his preaching because he knew that God would now spare Nineveh, a wicked nation. So what comparison can we make between Jonah and Jesus? How is Jonah a sign? How is Jesus going to serve as a sign?

Let us put Matthew 12:40 and Luke 11:30, two parallel verses, side by side.

Matthew 12:40. 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.

Luke 11:30. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of man will be to this generation.

Jonah became a sign when he spend three days and three nights in the fish. Notice that Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites only after he was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. And he would become a sign to the Ninevites not only after that event, but because of that event. In the same way, Jesus would become a sign to this generation, to you and me, in virtue of His death and resurrection. And just as Jonah became a sign after the event, so Jesus becomes a sign to us after the resurrection.

If you are observant, you might object to this last point. Some might say, ‘How can Jesus be a sign after the resurrection? Because after the resurrection, this generation didn’t see Him at all. At least, before His death and resurrection, anyone could see Him. But after His resurrection, the Pharisees and the scribes would not see Him again. In fact, that’s what Jesus said to His disciples. ‘The world will not see Me anymore, but you will see Me (John 14:19).’ So how can He be a sign to this generation?

The Son of man

That is a good point. Now here, we need to understand what Jesus means by the term ‘Son of man.’ Notice that He didn’t just say, ‘I will be a sign.’ He said, ‘The Son of man will be a sign.’ This expression has as its background the vision in the book of Daniel where Daniel saw one like ‘a son of man who came to the Ancient of Days and was given dominion, glory and kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14).’ When you read the book of Daniel, you will make this unusual observation. You will notice that this title sometimes refers to one person and sometimes it refers to many people. This is where the mystery is. We have a similar situation in the NT with Jesus’ teaching on the vine. Does the vine refer to one person or to many persons in John 15? The vine is both one person, Jesus, and all the churches together. Jesus is the vine, but we are also the vine in the sense that we are the branches of that vine. You see that the vine is both one person and many people, i.e., the whole church. Similarly, we can say that the Son of man is one person and it is also the whole church.

This is what the apostle Paul wants to express when he says that Jesus is present in the world today. How is Jesus present in the world today? In His body. And we are that body. The church is the body of Christ. The indwelling of Jesus in His people is often expressed by Paul with the expression ‘Christ in you’ (Romans 8:10; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27). This is what the church is about. Christ is in you. Christ dwells in you. We, as the church, are the manifestation of Christ in the world

today. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:22, *In whom (i.e., in Christ) you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.* God dwells in the hearts of His people who, together, constitute the church, the body of Christ. The Lord Jesus is the head. We are the body. After all, if I see your body, I can say that I see you. Even if I only see your hand, I still see you. Therefore, when people see the church, they see Jesus.

Now we begin to see the meaning of the sign of Jonah. The Lord Jesus is telling us something wonderful. He is saying, 'I am going to give you a sign. And that sign will be the expression of the power of the resurrection.' The power of the resurrection did not just raise Jesus from the dead 2000 years ago. The power of the resurrection is here and now operating in the world. You and I can experience it as Christians. It is not something that we experience only when we first become a Christian. We never cease to know the power of the resurrection in our daily experience as we become a new person, a person who is more and more conformed to the image of Christ. That is why in Philippians 3, the apostle Paul says, 'That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection.' This doesn't mean that he doesn't know the power of Jesus' resurrection. Of course he knows Jesus and the power of His resurrection. What he means is this. 'I need to know more about it. I want to know everything there is to know about the power of the resurrection.'

The sign of changed lives

When we become Christians, we begin to experience the divine power that raised Christ from the dead in our own resurrection from spiritual death to a new life. As we walk in newness of life, the power of the resurrected Christ is now operating in our lives. And the change is drastic. We no longer live according to the things of the flesh. We live a life of holiness in Christ. People can see the sign of the resurrection in our lives.

Now we see what the Lord Jesus promised to this generation. The sign of Jonah is the sign of the resurrection. It is the sign of changed lives. This is what the power of the resurrection is about. For when we talk about a changed life, what are we talking about? It is to pass, as the apostle Paul says, from death to life. When God transforms a person, He takes him out of the power of sin where death is, to the power of life, where righteousness is. He becomes a completely new person.

This doesn't mean that he becomes perfect. Here we see the point of the comparison with Jonah. The sign was not just Jesus Himself. We cannot really compare Jesus, in His perfect self, to Jonah, a sinful man. That would be no comparison. The comparison is to Jesus and His new community. The sign is to be seen in His church. Notice that even after the transforming experience that Jonah had in the belly of the fish, he still had much of the old character in him. Similarly, Christians are far from being perfect, even after experiencing God's transforming power. Now we begin to see the beauty of the sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah is the sign of the Son of man which is the sign of the church.

Resurrection: alive to God

There is another point that we must mention. In a sense, Jonah was literally baptized in the water and rose up to a new life. While inside the fish, he offered thanksgiving for his deliverance from drowning and finally accepted to be used by God. When we are baptized, like Jonah, we go through the depth of the water and we rise up to a new life. And like Jonah, it is not the physical baptism that made the difference. There was a spiritual change in Jonah's heart. Becoming a Christian is not simply a matter of being baptized. It is a matter of spiritual transformation. And that is the point that is emphasized when we talk about the power of the resurrection. We become dead to the world, to sin, and alive to God. Jonah died to the world when he was in the belly of the fish. As far as the world was concerned, he was buried under the water. But he became alive to God. In his beautiful prayer, he

offered thanksgiving for his deliverance from drowning. He was ready to preach repentance to the city of Nineveh. And there, he became a sign to the Ninevites.

Becoming a Christian involves a spiritual change in which we die to the world and to our sins, and we become alive to God. That is the resurrection. And as a consequence of this, or rather, because of this and after this, we become a sign to this generation. From now on, you and I, everyone who is truly a Christian, we are the sign that the world can see. That is how the world knows Jesus. People see Jesus through you and through me. So, this is what Jesus is telling us in that passage. That we, in our own life, as Christians, as the church, are the sign of Jonah to this evil and adulterous generation.

If you are not a Christian and you have only heard about the resurrection, then I would like to encourage you today not just to listen to it, but also to experience that power in your own life. Perhaps you are right now running away from God. But the joy of the Christian life is that you may also become like Jonah, a sign to this generation. Jonah was swallowed up by the power of death. If he did not call out to God when he was in the belly of the fish, he would have probably perished. But God delivered him and Jonah became the sign to the people of the world, to the people of Nineveh. He became that sign precisely because he experienced in his own life the power of God's resurrection.

Is that story true? Well, you can find out whether it is true or not in your own experience. You see, when we read the book of Jonah, we are not just reading a story about Jonah. That story tells us about something that you can experience personally. You can know God and the power of His resurrection. The God who saved Jonah can save you. His power is at work today in the world. And Christians, the regenerated people, are the sign that proves that this divine power is real and active.