

Resurrection: The Ultimate Proof

Matthew 12:38-42

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38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 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. 40 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. 41 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. 42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here (Matt 12:38-42)

We are in the middle of a lengthy study of the Gospel of Matthew, and I timed our journey through this book such that we would land today on a passage that is connected to what we celebrate today – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 12 introduces us to a growing conflict between Jesus and the religious rulers. Jesus is attracting large crowds, and he is challenging the status-quo of the religious establishment. He declares that he is Lord of the Sabbath (12:8), breaks the traditional rules by healing on the Sabbath (12:13), accuses the religious leaders of committing an unforgivable sin (12:32), and asserts that the real problem is the evil that is in their hearts (12:34).

However, the conversation and conflict doesn't end there, and what follows in verses 38-42 is an opaque statement from Jesus about his coming resurrection. In other parts of the New Testament, Jesus is very clear about his deliverance from the grave (see Matt 16:21 or 17:23). However, here he hints at it and connects it to the prophet Jonah. Let's first figure out what he meant by that.

The Sign of Jonah

Our passage begins with a request from the religious leaders. Verse 38 says, "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." They are responding to the previous conversation, and it sounds innocent enough, doesn't it? They almost sound respectful. However, "teacher" is a title that Matthew only records for those who are challenging Jesus.

They request a sign from him. What are they looking for since he has just performed a substantial miracle with the healing of the man who was blind and mute (12:22)? It seems that a sign was viewed differently than a miracle. A sign was divine credential that the person had God's approval (e.g., The voice at Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13-17). They seemed to believe that miracles could be accomplished through various powers so they request that once and for all Jesus prove his messiahship. "Prove that you are the Son of God" is what they are saying, and it sounds very similar to what Satan said to Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness (see Matthew 4:3 and 4:6).

Jesus knows however what is really going on and that is why he makes a terse statement in verse 39 – "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign..." Jesus sees their desire for proof not as a genuine desire or an honest discovery process. Their request for a sign shows how far off they really are.

Their problem is that the greatest evidence they need is standing right in front of them. Jesus is the full revelation of God to mankind, something the Bible often calls "light." But they refuse to acknowledge what is right in front of them and what should be obvious. The Apostle John reflected on this when he wrote the following in his gospel:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him (John 1:9-11).

Here is what happens so often. People refuse to believe what should be obvious because they want some kind of "proof." They want God to write it in the sky, drop them a message, or make it clear, but the problem is that this kind of desire comes from a heart that will never believe.

Now skip ahead to verses 41 and 42 because we see in these verses that Jesus talks about judgment. He uses two historical figures from Israel's past as means of spiritual comparison. First, he uses the story of the repentance of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, Israel's arch-enemy who repented through the ministry of Jonah (see Jonah 3). Secondly, he uses the story of the Queen of the South who came to visit Solomon (see 1 Chronicles 9).

These illustrations are designed to make three points clear:

1. Even pagan, non-Israelites took aggressive steps in response to God's activity. Nineveh repented and the Queen of the South traveled a long distance.
2. Jesus is greater than Solomon or Jonah – "Something greater is here."

3. Therefore, the right responses of non-Israelites will be used in judgment against the religious rulers who are looking for sign.

The religious rulers are seeking a sign. Jesus says that it is because of their rebellion that they even ask for one, and he tells them that people outside of Israel will judge them for their lack of response.

However, the most important part of what Jesus says is found in verse 39: "but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 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" (Matt 12:39-40).

Jesus points back to the story of Jonah when he was swallowed by a great fish and spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish (Jonah 1:17) as a foreshadowing of what will happen to him.¹ Jesus is predicting his resurrection. Later in his ministry, Jesus will be even more explicit: "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, 23 and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day" (Matt 17:22-23)

But what Jesus says here is simply that there will be no other sign given than the resurrection. In other words, the resurrection is the ultimate sign from God. There will be no other sign given than the sign of Jonah.

Why is the Resurrection the Ultimate Sign?

That raises a really important question regarding the resurrection and what we celebrate today. Why is the resurrection presented as the only sign? Let me help you understand what it is about this event that would qualify it to be THE exclusive sign.

1. The resurrection signaled the defeat of death and sin.

Sin and death are intimately connected. In the Garden of Eden and before there was any sin in the world, there was no death. God told the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, that they could not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God said, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). As I'm sure you know, they directly violated a command of God by eating of the tree, sinned against God, and death entered the human existence. Death was the immediate consequence of sin, and it became the ultimate distortion of creation and the enemy of human beings.

¹ Some might suggest that Jesus was not in fact in the grave three days and three nights since he was crucified on Friday and rose on Sunday Morning. However, the Eastern and Jewish way of counting days is far less literal than how we in the West would approach it. The Jews saw part of a day as counting for the whole.

The only way for sin – this treasonous rebellion against God – to be atoned for was through death. Therefore, the Old Testament is filled with the bloody sacrifice of thousands of animals to temporarily pay the penalty for sin.

And yet God, in his infinite love and wisdom, sent his own Son who took upon himself the form of a man to be the final and ultimate sacrifice for sin. Jesus Christ was born as a baby, grew into a man, lived a sinless life, and was executed on a cross. That's what was happening on earth. But it was all part of God's plan to make forgiveness possible. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). God was making a way so He could be both just (not simply letting sin go unpunished) and the justifier (able to forgive).

Jesus' death made forgiveness possible and his resurrection signaled to the entire creation that the grip of sin and death had been broken. The path for permanent and eternal reconciliation between God and humans was now possible. The resurrection of Jesus signaled that death and sin had been defeated. It opened wide the promise that we find in Romans 10:9 – "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The resurrection signaled that a new day had come.

2. The resurrection served as validation for Jesus as the Son of God

Now you need to know that the concept of the resurrection was not a new idea for the Jews in Jesus' day. It was fairly normal to believe in the resurrection of the dead. In fact, at Lazarus' tomb Jesus talked about resurrection and Martha said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24). When you mentioned the word "resurrection," most people would have thought a coming day at the end of the ages when God would give his people new bodies, judge and recreate the world.

So people expected the resurrection. However, no one – not even Jesus' disciples – ever thought that Jesus would experience this **before** everyone else. Other people in history had avoided death (Enoch and Elijah), but no one had died and permanently come back to life with a new body.

Therefore, when Jesus is resurrected and when it is seen that he has a new, recreated body it says something. It says that Jesus is not like any other normal human being. The resurrection of Jesus is God's way of saying, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased." The empty tomb declares that he truly is the Son of God.

3. The resurrection secures a power for living that is a present reality

The defeat of sin, the overthrow of death, and the recreation of the physical body of Jesus all have immediate, spiritual implications for those who have put their trust in Christ as their Lord

and savior. Over and over, the New Testament points to the resurrection as a spiritual turning point that is full of power and practical meaning.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4).

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Rom 8:11).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:4-7).

So there is a real sense in which the resurrection is not just a historical event. It is an event with enormous practical implications regarding how a follower of Jesus lives his or her life every day.

4. The resurrection seals the future of those who trust in Christ

The cross was meant to be a fearful tool used by Rome in order to intimidate. Its torturous elements intentionally communicated, "Don't you dare challenge us." And Jesus' crucifixion was a tragedy for the disciples. It meant that they had chosen to follow the wrong person. Rome and lying religious rulers were, in the end, more powerful.

But the resurrection of Jesus changed all of that! Jesus' resurrection means that he is untouchable. Abuse him, torture him, mock him, and kill him...but he'll be back. It is the stuff of horror movies if you are on the wrong side of the cross. But it is the stuff of incredible hope if this is your Savior.

Now the beautiful hope here is that the resurrection of Jesus is described as the first-fruits (1 Corinthians 15:20) of what is to come. And that means everything that God did for Christ, he will do for his followers. You certainly do not know what it is like to face the kind of abuse, torture, mockery, and pain that he endured. But you can still take comfort in the fact that there is no abuse, no injustice, no mockery, no pain, no suffering, no loss, and nothing connected to the effects of sin in our world that God will not one day make right. The future hope for the believer is that the same God who resurrected his Son from the grave will resurrect those who belong to his Son.

But with that hope also comes a warning to every human being: Death is not the final verdict. The resurrection of the dead means that every person ever born will be raised and stand before the creator God. And only those who know Jesus as their Savior, only those who have placed their faith in him stand forgiven, cleansed, and renewed.

So the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate sign because it demonstrates the ultimate reign of God over the universe. Jesus tells the religious rulers that there will be no other sign other than this one because there is no greater sign!

This is what separates Christianity from all other faiths. The Muslim hopes in paradise if he does enough to earn Allah's favor, the Hindu hopes that participating with karma that he will return to earth to pursue a higher spiritual level, the Buddhist hopes that he will lose his identity in the great, nameless, and formless Beyond.² Christianity is so different.

Christianity places its hope on one person, trusting not in what we do, but in what he did. Everything that Christianity is, it is through Jesus. Reconciliation with God only comes through him. And so when God raised him from the dead, a clear and definitive statement was made to the universe about who is real and who is really in charge. Peter said it this way – "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him, this Jesus who you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

There is no greater sign than this one. There is no better proof than an empty grave. There is no more compelling reason to turn to Christ than the powerful sign called the resurrection.

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² N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2008), 7