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Matthew 12:38 - 12:42



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses a passage from Matthew 12 where scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus to perform a sign. He then shares the story of Jonah to highlight the spiritual receptiveness of Gentiles as compared to Jews. Gregg also clarifies the misconception around the timing of Jesus' resurrection, explaining that he rose on the third day, not after three full days. Overall, the talk provides a deeper understanding of biblical passages and their significance in the context of Christianity.

Transcript

Today I'm turning to Matthew chapter 12 and beginning my reading at verse 38. It says, Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. 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.

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

What's this all about? Now, part of it is not too hard to understand, the part about three days and three nights, because Jesus is obviously referring to the fact that he would die and rise from the dead three days later, although even this passage presents a little difficulty. Some have found great difficulty in it, because Jesus said that as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And if that means that Jesus would be buried and remain buried for three days and three nights, it raises questions as to how he could have been crucified on Good Friday and raised from the dead on Sunday morning.

There just aren't enough days and nights between Friday and Sunday morning to have him there for three days and three nights. We'll talk about that in this time, but we want to look at the whole passage, and there are some things that come earlier than that statement. It says, Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.

Now, why did they want to see a sign from him? They had just seen him earlier in the same chapter, it would appear, in the same context, the same day they had seen him cast a demon out of somebody in a tremendous way, so that a blind man was allowed to see, because the demon was cast out of him that had blinded him. And yet now they're asking for another sign. Now, it seems that these people just wanted to see signs for the sake of seeing signs.

This could be either due to a fascination with the sensational. Certainly, that exists in the hearts of many. Life, for them, is just one long string of stimulating, entertaining events, and the more sensational, the better.

If that is the case, then, of course, they were showing a very shallow set of concerns. They weren't so much concerned about moral issues as they were just concerned about seeing another show, another carnival trick, another dazzling demonstration of a miracle. Although, I suspect that that was not really what lay behind their statement.

It's not so much that they just love to see miracles. They wouldn't even have to ask him for that, because he did them all the time. All they'd have to do is stick around, and they'd see more.

The fact that they asked him to see a sign, I think, is not so much exhibiting a fascination with signs and wonders as it is expressing doubt, expressing a deficiency in their faith. I say that because their statement seems to imply, we will believe you if you show us a sign. But if you don't show us a sign, we obviously will not be able to accept your claims.

So that they are simply being unreasonable. They've just seen signs, but they're not convinced yet, they're saying. We want to see something much more convincing than that.

Now, Jesus said that a wicked and evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign. Now, he's referring to his own generation. In fact, he refers to his generation three more times in this chapter.

His generation, meaning the people living at the same time as he, and in particular, his Jewish contemporaries. Now, Paul thought that the Jewish people also tended to demand signs. As he points out in 1 Corinthians 1, it says that in verse 21 and 22, Paul said, For since in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe.

He says, For the Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. Now, Paul said, and Paul was himself a Jewish man, but he said in general, the Jews tend to seek for a sign. Now, again, I don't think that what Paul is saying is these people just love to be entertained.

I think what he's saying is the Jews tend to be skeptical unless they see something compelling, unless they see some kind of supernatural sign. And he said the Greeks tend to be skeptical unless they hear convincing arguments. The Greeks are demanding wisdom.

They want to be convinced. They want logic. The Jew is more interested in seeing a demonstration from God.

Now, in a sense, the Jew is more commendable than the Greek for this, because Paul himself later goes on to tell the Corinthians that when he came, he did not come with convincing words of men's wisdom, but with demonstration of the spirit and power. So, in a sense, the way that God led Paul to minister did not cater to the Greek fascination with wisdom and argument. But it catered to more the Jewish type concern to see a demonstration of the power of God.

The only complaint that Jesus has about it, I think, is this. It's not so much that they like to see the message validated by signs. God has nothing against validating his message with signs.

The closing verse in the Gospel of Mark says that the apostles went everywhere preaching the gospel, and it says, the Lord working with them, confirming the word with signs following. That was God's method. When the apostles went out to preach the gospel, God gladly confirmed the veracity of their word by demonstrating signs and wonders to confirm the word they were preaching.

We see this through the New Testament, and Paul even said in 2 Corinthians 12, 12, that supernatural signs and wonders were some of the marks of true apostleship. That is, that God would confirm the words of the apostles by giving them the ability to work signs and wonders. So, it is not that God is opposed to persons looking for confirmation in the form of signs and wonders, that the word is really from God.

But the problem is, if they have had adequate proof given to them, and they still are making excuses for their unbelief, saying, well, I think we need to see further signs than this. There are a lot of people like that today who are not Jewish, of course. What Paul said was true of the Jews, in some ways, is true of other people who are not Jews as well.

And that is, many times God has given a super abundant demonstration of his existence,

and of the truthfulness of the Bible and of the gospel. But many people will see it and say, well, I still won't believe it unless God just pulls the heavens open and shows himself. Well, I've heard people say that, but to my mind, I don't think they're being reasonable.

I think that God has demonstrated supernaturally already, in unmistakable terms for those who are willing to pay attention, through the resurrection of Jesus, for example, that the gospel is true. Now, it's interesting that in the story that Jesus told in Luke chapter 16 of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man who died, and he was Jewish, had five brothers who had not yet died. And he begged to have Lazarus sent back from the realm of the dead, to go back to the land of the living where he could appeal to this man's brothers, and convince them to turn to God so they wouldn't have to go to hell too.

And this rich man who had this concern for his brothers was told by Abraham in the story, that they have the law and the prophets. They don't need to have someone go back to them from the dead and tell them these things. And he said, no, Abraham's father, listen, they don't read the law and the prophets.

They don't believe the law and the prophets. But if somebody goes to them from the dead, then they'll listen. And the final statement in that whole parable is the retort of Abraham who said no, anyone who rejects the law and the prophets of Moses, and the writings of Moses, will not believe even if one rises from the dead.

Now, of course, we see that truly in the case where Jesus has risen from the dead, and there are people who do not believe. These are the same people who weren't interested in obeying God in the first place. They didn't listen to the word of God.

They were not really interested in surrendering to God. And therefore, even a sign like the resurrection of a man from the dead won't convince people who are not already disposed toward truth and toward concern for obeying God. Signs do not turn people around that much.

You know, Jesus raised another Lazarus from the dead, his friend Lazarus in John chapter 11. One would think that anyone who saw that demonstration would certainly become a believer in Christ. But the Jewish leaders, when they learned that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, rather than deciding that they had been wrong in persecuting Jesus and deciding to become followers of his as they justly should, after all, that was a tremendous sign that Jesus gave, taking a man who had been dead for four days and buried and raising him alive again.

But instead of becoming believers, the Jewish leaders, when they learned of this, decided they'd have to kill Lazarus too, because his life provided evidence for the truthfulness of Christ. And so we can see that these people could see a supernatural sign and still not

believe. When these Pharisees and chief priests or whoever came to Jesus, when these scribes came to him and said, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you, they are implying, we'd like to see a sign from you, and if you show us a sign, we will believe.

That's the implication. They're implying, you know, you say you are a teacher from God, and we'd like to believe you if that's true, but we want to see some divine demonstration so that we'll know that you're not just faking it. Now Jesus knew these people had seen enough.

If they were open-minded, they could believe based on what he'd shown them already. Furthermore, he knew that they were not sincere people. They already had the word of God, but they were rejecting it in favor of their traditions.

They were evil in their hearts. They were an evil and adulterous generation, and therefore they seek after a sign, not so much because they really want to see a sign, but because they want to say, I still haven't seen enough to convince me, and to use that as an excuse not to believe. And Jesus 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.

Now, what he's saying is God is not going to cater to this demand on the part of the unbeliever that God must give sign after sign after sign. God is going to do what he wants to do, and he will not act in response to the demands of the unbelievers. However, Jesus said, there will be a sign that God will give you, and that is what he called the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Now that in itself would be, you know, imperceptible as to what he meant, except he went on to explain. He said, For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, or the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. That's the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Now, what is that about? Jonah was a man, a prophet, who was sent to preach in a certain place, Nineveh. He didn't really want to do so. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which were the enemies of his people.

They were also pretty wicked and cruel people, and he did not very much want to go to their country. He did not want to face them, and more than that, he didn't want them to repent. He knew that if he did not preach to them, they would never hear that God was about to judge them, and therefore they would not be inclined to repent.

He hoped that God would judge them, and so he went the other way. He got on a boat to go the other direction, not to Nineveh. But God sent a storm that threatened to sink the boat.

Finally, through a series of events, Jonah was thrown overboard at his own request, and

he was in the water, and a great fish that God had prepared came and swallowed him up. And three days and three nights later, we're told, Jonah was vomited out on the beach and told again to go to Nineveh. He did this time, and when he preached there, he found that the Ninevites all repented.

They all turned to God, and of course, God spared them, which is the very thing he didn't want to happen in the first place. Now, Jesus makes two observations from this story. One is that God gave the Ninevites a sign.

The sign they had was this man who had come out of the belly of a fish. Now, it's not clear exactly how the Ninevites knew that Jonah had come out of the belly of a fish. It's possible that if he'd spent actually three days and three nights in the actual belly of a whale, that the digestive juices in the belly of the whale, the acids and so forth, could have caused his hair to fall out and caused his skin to be bleached and so forth, and he might have a very peculiar appearance.

Or it's not impossible to imagine that at the spot on the beach where he was vomited out of the whale, that there were observers there, that God gave this as a sign to them. Here's a man emerging from the belly of a whale. He's got a message from God.

You know, that'd be a peculiar thing to see, and that could be the thing that made them so impressed. There was a sign given to them, a man who came out of, as it were, a watery tomb out of the belly of a whale after being there for three days and three nights, and he had a message for them from God. And they repented.

That's the next point Jesus makes. Not only did God give a sign in the person of Jonah, but the people who saw the sign, the Ninevites, repented. That's what Jesus says in verse 41.

The men of Nineveh will rise in judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they, that is the people of Nineveh, repented at the preaching of Jonah, and indeed one greater than Jonah is here. The point he's making is that what Jesus is about to go through in dying and being buried for three days and coming out of the grave is going to be a greater sign than that which was given to the Ninevites. And Jesus himself is a greater man, a greater prophet, a greater messenger than Jonah was.

And yet the Jews of Jesus' time are unimpressed. They do not convert. They do not repent.

Whereas the Ninevites, when they saw Jonah, they did repent when they heard his message. So the point here is that these Gentiles, whom, remember, the Jews tended to look down very much on Gentiles as a lesser breed without the law, well, these Gentiles were more spiritual receptive than the Jews, because the Gentiles repented when Jonah preached, but Jesus, who was greater than Jonah, was preaching to the Jews, and they

weren't repenting. So God gave the people of Nineveh and the people of Israel a sign.

The people of Nineveh had a sign of a man who was three days, three nights in the belly of a whale and came out and preached to them. The people of Israel were going to have a sign similar to that, a man who was three days and three nights in the tomb, or as Jesus puts it, in the heart of the earth, who would then come forth and demonstrate that his message was from God that way too. The difference is Jonah's audience listened and repented.

Jesus' audience, his own countrymen, in general did not, with the exception of a remnant who did believe, and they were his disciples, of course. Now, the biggest difficulty with this passage that it presents for Christians is that Jesus said that he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Well, if Jesus was crucified on Friday, as is traditionally believed to be so, then he was Friday night in the tomb and Saturday night in the tomb, but if he rose from the dead on Sunday morning, then he was not in the tomb Sunday night, and therefore he was only two nights in the tomb.

He was not three nights in the tomb. Furthermore, he wasn't exactly three days in the tomb either. If he was buried late afternoon Friday and arose very early in the morning Sunday, he wasn't really in the tomb very much more than one full day, and a little tiny bit on Friday and a little tiny bit on Sunday.

Saturday would be the only full day that he was in the tomb, and only two nights. So it seems to not jibe with the idea that Jesus died and was buried on Friday and rose Sunday, to say he was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Now one of the ways that many Christians feel this is to be resolved is to basically say that Jesus didn't die on Friday, that he died on Thursday, and if he did die on Thursday, then of course Thursday night, Friday night, and Saturday night would make three nights, and Thursday afternoon plus the entirety of Friday and Saturday would make the three days, and then he would rise before dawn on Sunday, so that Jesus would be the better part of three days and all of three nights in the tomb, and that would satisfy the language of this passage.

That has pleased and satisfied many who look at it, but it gives me some problems, and that is this, there's only one place in the Bible that says he would be in the tomb three days and three nights, and that's this passage. On several other places, Jesus said that he would rise on the third day, and even after it was all over, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus rose on the third day. Now if someone literally rises on the third day, he can't have been in the tomb three days and three nights, because if he's three days and three nights in the tomb and then he rises, that's the fourth day, after the third day and the third night makes the fourth day, and so if Jesus was literally three days and three nights in the tomb, then his resurrection was on the fourth day after the third day and the third night.

You see the problem that that causes. Now as I said, there's at least three times that Jesus said he would rise the third day, and Paul tells us that Jesus rose the third day. Only once do we read three days and three nights, and that's in this particular place where Jesus is likening himself to Jonah.

I'm going to suggest that Jesus was using a common idiom well known among the Jews to whom he spoke. The Jews, in their common way of speaking, would refer to a portion of a day, no matter how small that portion, as if it was a day and a night. Now don't fault me for this, it's they that did it, but it is known to be the case.

There are many documents that have been found in Israel, archaeologists have found some that confirm the fact that the Jews would speak of a portion of any day as if it was a day and a night. I don't know why they did this, but they are known to have done it. And if Jesus died on Friday, then he was in the tomb part of Friday.

If he rose on Sunday, he was in the tomb part of Sunday, and then of course the entirety of Saturday. If Jesus was using the common Jewish idiom, referring to any part of a day as a day and a night, then the fact that he was in the tomb parts of three days could be spoken of, according to that idiom, as he was three days and three nights in the tomb. Now we'd say that's misleading, but it is an idiom.

And in all cultures, including our own, we use idiomatic expressions that are not exactly precisely accurate. If I say I have a frog in my throat, you understand what I mean, because you're in my culture, but it's not precisely accurate. There isn't really an amphibian in my neck.

And so it is in every culture, there are idiomatic ways of speaking. As I understand it, Jesus was simply using that idiom. And then we can have him literally rising on the third day.

You see, if he was crucified on Friday, that's the first day he was dead. Saturday was the second day, and Sunday was the third day. If he was actually crucified on Thursday and rose Sunday, it would seem that he rose on the fourth day.

So we do have that bit of a problem that many people have wrestled with. And some have solved it, as I said, by saying that Jesus died on Thursday. And I cannot say with certainty they're wrong, but it seems to me when the Bible says that he rose on the third day, it suggests that he was really only parts of three days and three nights in the tomb.

And his statement that he'd be three days and three nights in the tomb is really an idiom of the Jews that they would have understood properly. And in fact, they did, because in Matthew chapter 27, they said we need to seal the tomb until the third day, even though they heard him use this idiom. So that's how they understood it.

I'm not sure how you might understand it, but we'll seek more understanding next time.

