

Hope Christian Church  
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Sermon Series: *Jesus Said What*  
Palm Sunday



## An Evil & Adulterous Generation Seeks for a Sign

**(Matthew 12:38-42 ESV)**

<sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> 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. <sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> 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."*

## Introduction

Many of you have asked if we had a good vacation. Yes, we did. I was refreshing, relaxing, and delightfully warm. The beach was gorgeous, but it's nice to be back home. We got to visit Alisa's 92 year old grandmother and look into her beautiful blue eyes and laugh with her on a day when her mind was mostly clear.

Thank you, Iain and Emanuel for preaching for me while I was away.

You should be prepared for fresh attacks on your faith during this coming week. Today is Palm Sunday, which kicks off the most sacred week on the calendar for Christians. We call it Holy Week. It's the anniversary of the final week of Jesus' life. The week ends with Jesus being crucified on the cross.

That hatred that demanded his death so long ago is still resident in the world today. You'll see it manifested as major news outlets and media release fresh assaults on Christianity with articles claiming that fundamental Christian truth claims are at best well-intentioned myths or at worst fanciful fiction. But don't be discouraged by the hostility. It's a mysterious part of the Father's plan to accomplish the salvation of lost souls.

And don't fail to see the signs resident within the battle. God gives signs to those who have eyes to see. God reveals himself to those who are humble enough to trust him. God will never abandon his children<sup>1</sup> and he uses even his enemies to accomplish his will.

If you are new to us, we've been spending our time together looking at some of the difficult and amazing things that Jesus taught and claimed. Some of the things he said are very hard to hear. Some are simply staggering. Others are breathtakingly sweet. We're in a sermon series called "Jesus said what!" In the passage before us this morning, there are four claims he says which arrest our attention.

1. First, he says, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.*" This is amazing.
2. Second, Jesus not only predicts his own death but even claims to know the duration of his death. He says he'll only be dead for three days.

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 13:5.

3. And third, he claims to know exactly what will happen at the final judgment—who will be raised up to be blessed and who will be raised up to be condemned.
4. Lastly, he claims to be greater than both Jonah and Solomon.

If all of these claims prove to be true, then this is wonderfully good news and is cause for great celebration.

I chose this passage because I want you to see that opposition to the kingdom of God is part of God's plan for his kingdom. I want you to possess a kind of spiritual endurance that will carry you through difficulties and trials that you most certainly face if you are courageous enough to preserve in the faith. I want you to persevere in your faith. I don't want your faith to fail when darkness seems to prevail.

Today is Palm Sunday. It is a day of celebration and victory. Jerusalem welcomed Jesus as messiah. They shouted and celebrated and sang and made way for him to enter his city and yet, by the end of the week he's nailed to a cross! What happened? How could this be?

The answer is that it was planned to be. The rejection of Jesus was part of God's plan to effect the salvation of his elect. If there was no death on the cross, there would be no hope of the resurrection. I want you to see that his suffering and death were necessary in order to effect our hope of certain salvation. Jesus knew he had to die from the very beginning of his ministry.

## We Wish to See a Sign From You

We pick up the story in the middle of an exchange between Jesus and some scribes and Pharisees. They make a demand of him.

### **Matthew 12:38-39 (ESV)**

*<sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." <sup>39</sup> 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."*

This is jarring. Is this true? Why does Jesus say this? What's wrong with seeking a sign? People seek signs all the time. Why is seeking a sign evil? God employs signs all of the time to direct, guide, and cultivate faith in his people. We find examples of this all over the Bible.

1. The first sign God ever gave humanity was a rainbow. The rainbow is a **sign** to remind us of God's promise that he will never again destroy the earth with a flood as he did during the days of Noah (Gn 9:12).

2. God granted Moses the ability to turn his staff into a snake and then back into a staff again as **sign** that he had been authorized by God to lead them out of Egypt (Ex 4:4-7).<sup>2</sup>
3. The annual observance of Passover is a **sign** intended to remind Israel that God is the one who delivered them out of the bondage of Egyptian slavery and they were delivered by the death of the first-born of all in Egypt (Ex 13:9).
4. God commanded Joshua to set up 12 stones beside the Jordan river as a **sign** for future generations to remember of God's power and provision because dried up the river (when it was flooded) so that the Israelites would be able to cross over into the Promised Land (Josh 4:6).
5. The sabbath was given as a **sign** of the covenant love that God has for his chosen people, to remind them that it is he who makes them holy, not self effort and it is God who gives them rest from all their labors (Ex 31:13; Ez 20:12, 20).
6. God gave Gideon the **sign** of the fleece in order to confirm to him that it was indeed Yahweh, that God of Israel, who was with him and commanding him to deliver Israel from their enemies (Jud 6:17).
7. God gave Hezekiah the **sign** of the regressing shadow (going backwards 10 degrees on the sun dial) in order to confirm to him that he would be healed of his sickness and recover (2 Kgs 20:8-11).

These Old Testament examples were signs serve different purposes. Some signs remind us of some wonderful act God has done in the past, while others are intended to give assurance that God will do something wonderful in the future. Some signs point backward to a specific event, while others point forward to an event yet to occur.

## Signs that Point to an Anointed Person

Still other signs point to God's choice of a **particular chosen person**. This was the kind of sign for which the Pharisees were seeking. They were seeking a sign that confirmed that Jesus was God's messiah. This is exactly the same thing John the Baptist was seeking. John wanted to know if Jesus was God's messiah so he sent his disciples to talk to Jesus.

### Matthew 11:2-6 (ESV)

*<sup>2</sup> Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

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<sup>2</sup> He also gave the power to make his hand leprous and then clean again along with the ability to turn water into blood.

John wanted to know if Jesus was “*the one who is to come*,” that is, he wanted to know if Jesus was God’s messiah. Jesus told them about all the deeds that he was doing. Jesus merely pointed them to the signs. Jesus’ miraculous deeds are signs pointing to his true identity as God’s chosen messiah.

In addition to these, there are other signs also. For example, the virgin birth of Jesus was a *sign* that he was God’s chosen messiah (Is 7:14). And so is the way in which Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is a sign.

(Matthew 21:4-5 ESV)

<sup>4</sup> *This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,*

<sup>5</sup> *“Say to the daughter of Zion,  
‘Behold, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’*

Jesus chose to ride on a donkey because it was a sign that he is God’s messiah and king (Mt 21:1-5). Jesus did this as a sign. He did this on purpose. He did not accidentally enter Jerusalem on a donkey. He chose to ride a donkey because it was one of the many sign pointing to the identity of messiah. This is the only time (recorded in Scripture) that Jesus ever rode on a donkey. Jesus did this to fulfill prophecy and create another sign pointing to his identity—God’s chosen messiah.

## Why Is Sign-Seeking Evil?

What, then, is evil about seeking a sign? If God uses signs frequently, then why does Jesus tell the Pharisees that they were evil for seeking a sign from him? Sign-seeking is evil when that’s all you seek. *It’s evil to seek only the sign while willfully ignoring the truth to which the sign points.*

The context (Matt 12:9-24) will help us understand this. The scribes and Pharisees had more than enough “signs” to understand who Jesus is. They were choosing to ignore the signs they had already seen and they were denying the truth to which those signs were undeniably pointing. Immediately prior to making their demand Jesus had given them two signs.

1. **Healing Man’s Withered Hand** (12:9-14) — Jesus entered the synagogue and in the presence of the whole congregation and had healed a man with a withered hand. The response of the Pharisees to this *sign* was not to believe Jesus is God’s messiah nor to even rejoice that a sick man had been healed, but rather to go “*out and conspire how to destroy*” Jesus.<sup>3</sup>
2. **Casting Out a Demon: Restoring Sight & Speech** (12:22-24) — Then right after leaving the synagogue, Jesus met a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute.

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<sup>3</sup> When the crowds saw the reality of Jesus’ power, many who were sick “followed him and he healed them all” (Mt 12:15).

Jesus healed this man completely and released him from the hold of the demon so that he could both see and speak. You would think that this sign would be enough to convince the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus was God's chosen messiah, but no, it wasn't. Rather than praise God that such amazing power had been given to the children of man, the Pharisees loudly proclaimed, *"He casts out demons by the power of Beelzubul, the prince of demons."*

It is *after* seeing these two amazing signs, not to mention all that had come before, that the scribes and Pharisees come saying, *"Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."* Jesus responds by saying, *"An evil and adulterous generation seek for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."*

### Sign Seeking is Evil When Motivated by Empty Curiosity or Active Hostility

There are at least two evil motivations behind this kind of sign-seeking. The first is empty curiosity and the second is active hostility. It is clear the scribes and Pharisees are not seeking for a sign because they lack sufficient evidence in order to put their trust in him. There was plenty of evidence before them and they willfully rejected that evidence, i.e. they rejected the signs that Jesus had already done right before their eyes.

So, this kind of sign-seeking is evil either because it is motivated by empty curiosity or active hostility because they desired to use the sign to condemn Jesus. They either wanted to see Jesus do another cool healing trick or they are filled with active hostility in hoping he will do something for which they could condemn him.

### The Empty Curiosity of King Herod

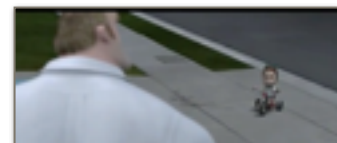
Herod is an example of empty curiosity. After Jesus had been questioned by Pilate, when he learned that Jesus was a Galilean, Pilate sent him to Herod.

#### **Luke 23:8 (ESV)**

*<sup>8</sup> When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.*

Herod is not interested in who Jesus truly is. He is filled with empty curiosity. He simply wants to be entertained. He yearns only for cool special effects. He cares nothing for the plot of the story, he's only interested in the movie so long as it's filled with action!

He's like the little tricycle kid in the movie, *The Incredibles* who's waiting around to see something amazing.



Herod wants to see Jesus do some amazing trick, and Jesus shows him nothing. Jesus reveals nothing of himself to Herod. He doesn't even say one word to Herod (Lk 23:9). The sign-seeking of Herod is an empty curiosity which Jesus says is evil.

## The Active Hostility of the Pharisees

The Pharisees are the example of the second way this is evil. They're filled with active hostility. They are "conspiring how to destroy him" (12:14). They are "seeking a sign" in order to use it against Jesus. They are looking for any way to condemn him. It is pure evil to seek a demonstration of righteousness in order to use it as a means murdering the instrument of that righteousness. This is exactly what they are doing.

The result of is the same for both, they see no sign. They do not get that for which they were seeking. *God does not reveal more of himself to those who ignore what he's already revealed.* If we are not faithful with what we have already been given, then we should not expect him to entrust more to us. If we reject the truth that is clear, then why should we expect God to reveal deeper truths that are less clear. If you want to know God more deeply, then obey what you already know, and then as you continue in obedience, then he'll reveal more of himself to you.

## The Sign of Jonah

Jesus does say that one sign will be given to them. The sign of Jonah.

### Matthew 12:39-40 (ESV)

<sup>39</sup> "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. <sup>40</sup> 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."

Jesus is here predicting his own death. When Jesus uses the term "Son of Man," he's referring to himself. This phrase is his favorite self-designation. He uses it 29 times in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>4</sup> So when he is talking about the "Son of Man" being three days in the "heart of the earth," he's talking about himself being three days in the tomb.

This is an amazing declaration because this is very near the beginning of his public ministry. This takes place not long after he's chosen the Twelve Disciples (see Mt 10:1-4). This means that from the earliest stages of his public ministry, Jesus knew that his death was required in order to fulfill God's will for him. Jesus goes to a people he knows in advance will reject him. *Jesus knows and publicly states that his own future death will be a sign to Israel that he is*

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<sup>4</sup> Mt 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41; 16:13, 27, 28; 17:9, 12, 22; 19:28; 20:18, 28; 24:27, 29, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64.

*God's chosen messiah, but only to those who have eyes to see.* He publicly declares this fact, not just to his friends, but even to his enemies.

## Three Days in the Heart of the Earth

Jesus is even so bold as to predict how long he will be dead. What kind of person would claim to know the length his death? Imagine the report on Jerusalem News Network (JNN),

"Itinerant rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, claims his death will be a sign to the whole nation of Israel since he said he will be dead for only three days."

I can hear someone saying, "*Jesus said what?*" The key verse is verse 40.

### Matthew 12:40 (ESV)

<sup>40</sup> *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."*

Many people stumble over this verse because of the apparent contradiction in the number of nights that Jesus was in the tomb. The traditional understanding of the timing of the crucifixion is that Jesus was crucified mid-morning on Friday and then buried just before sundown that same day. He was resurrected early Sunday morning before sunrise. Therefore he was dead part of Friday, all of Saturday, and part of Sunday. "According to Jewish idiom, the phrase 'three days' does not necessarily mean a period of seventy-two hours. It can mean merely one whole day plus parts of two others."<sup>5</sup> Since the Jewish reckoning of time is inclusive this would be counted as Jesus being dead three days, since he was dead part of two days and all of a third.

However, this can only account for Jesus being in the tomb for two nights not three.<sup>6</sup> How are we to understand the fact that Jesus says here that he would be in the tomb "three days and three nights?" The answer is simple. The phrase, "three days and three nights," is "a Jewish idiom appropriate to a period covering only two nights."<sup>7</sup> The same phrase is used two other places in Scripture<sup>8</sup> and in both instances only two nights are included.

This might seem strange but the same words can have different meanings depending upon the culture. It's no stranger than the difference in understanding of some phrases that exist between that English spoken in the U.S. and of that spoken in the U.K. For example, if I say, "meet me at church next Monday," the Brits in room will show up tomorrow (since today is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>6</sup> There are some scholars who believe that Jesus was actually crucified on Thursday morning and raised Sunday morning. This solves the problem of "three nights" but raises the problem of Jesus being raised on the fourth day, not the third. See James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 221.

<sup>7</sup> R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, ed. Leon Morris, Vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 217.

<sup>8</sup> See 1 Sam 30:12-13; Est 4:16; 5:1.



Sunday) while everyone who grew up in the U.S. will show up a week from tomorrow. Tomorrow is the next Monday from today so this makes sense to the Brits. However we in the U.S. have a different understanding of what that phrase means. The phrase “three days and three nights” meant something slightly different in a first-century Jewish culture than it does to a 21st century American culture. There is no actual contradiction here.

Besides this, it is abundantly clear, both from the Old Testament and from the New, that messiah would rise “on the third day.”<sup>9</sup> If Jesus meant that he would be in the tomb three literal nights, then he would of necessity have to rise on the day after the third night, which would be the fourth day. Scripture nowhere says that messiah would be raised on the fourth day, but about a dozen times Jesus did say that he would rise “on the third day.” So this phrase should be understood “as a Jewish idiom that denotes a period covering only two nights.”<sup>10</sup> Remember an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the actual words that form the expression.

## The Final Judgment

The final two verses include two more staggering claims which Jesus made on this occasion.

### **Matthew 12:41-42 (ESV)**

*<sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> 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.”*

Jesus claims to know who stand at the final judgment and who will fall. Jesus claimed to know that the men of Nineveh and the queen of the South (i.e. the queen of Sheba, 1 Kg 10:1-29) would rise up at the last judgment and condemn those listening to Jesus who failed to believe and receive his preaching. If you’re sitting there listening to Jesus, this would make your ears tingle.

Imagine having lunch with your best friend one afternoon and he says, “Yep, that lady right there is a believer and she will be raised up to eternal life at the judgment. She’s a believer. But that guy sitting with her is not. He will be condemned at the final judgment.” What would you think if you heard someone say that? This is what Jesus is saying.

Jesus believes Jonah was an actual historical person. He was a real Israelite whom God called to preach but decided to run from God in disobedience. His disobedience almost got him

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<sup>9</sup> Hos 6:2; Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:63; Lk 9:22; 18:33; 24:7; 24:46; Jn 2:19; Acts 10:40; 1 Cor 15:4.

<sup>10</sup> R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 81.

killed and landed him a long weekend in belly of a fish. From the depths of the sea he cried out to God for mercy. God then graciously caused the big fish to swim to location to which he had previously called Jonah and spit him out on the beach of Nineveh. Jonah preached what God told him to preach and his preaching resulted in a city-wide revival. People throughout the whole city repented of their sins and Jesus here says those people were saved. God forgave their sins and saved their souls. Because they believed and received the preaching of Jonah, those people will be raised up to eternal life at the final judgment. And they will condemn the stiff-necked, rebellious crowd who were standing there looking the Son of God in the face—watching him heal blind eyes that had never seen the light of day, and causing to speak men who had never uttered a word, and watching him cast out demons and free people from bondage to Satan, and watching him heal arthritic hands rights before their eyes—seeing all these miraculous signs he was doing and yet still refusing to believe those signs while having the audacity to demand to see more. Jesus looked these pious Jews in the face and said to them, “Gentiles and women will rise up at the final judgment and condemn you to hell.”

## Jesus Is Greater Than Jonah & Solomon

Why, because a prophet greater than Jonah was standing there before them preaching to them. Why, because a king wiser than Solomon was standing there before them demonstrating his power and his royalty to them and they weren't submitting to him. They were rejecting One greater than a great prophet. They were plotting the destruction of One greater than the greatest king in the entire history of Israel and wiser than the wisest sage of Israel. They were rejecting the only begotten Son of the one true and living God. They were rejecting Jesus, the greatest person who ever walked this earth. This was evil.

## Conclusion

But none of us here today have to be guilty of the eternal mistake this generation made. None of us here today need be condemned with this faithless generation. I have good news. You can learn from the mistakes of these stubborn Pharisees. You can see the signs they failed to see. You can listen to these words of Jesus and believe and receive them. You can choose to receive Jesus of Nazareth as God's only chosen messiah-king. You can believe that these miracles, these signs are intended to capture your attention and cause you to look beyond the sign to the Savior to whom they point, a suffering savior whom secured your salvation by spilling his own blood! **This is good news.** His death was part of God's wonderfully miraculous plan to save lost people. **This is news meant to be shared.**

Just as Jonah was “cast into the heart of the seas” (Jon 2:3), so Jesus would be cast into “the heart of the earth.” Just as Jonah was entombed in the belly of the great fish, so Jesus would be entombed in the belly of the rock. Just as Jonah was three days paying for his own sins, so

Jesus would be three days paying for our sins.<sup>11</sup> Just as Jonah was delivered from the dark belly of the great fish, so Jesus was delivered from the dank tomb in order to deliver us from the dark prison of our own sins and into the beauty of God's bright light.

When you look at Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem on a donkey that day, who do you see? A dusty rabbi from nowhere or a gentle king destined to deliver you from sin? Who do you see? Just a great teacher? Or do you see God's only chosen messiah about to accomplish the salvation of your soul?

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<sup>11</sup>Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1675.