

The Lord Announces His Coming Death and Resurrection

Matthew 12:38-50

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.*

Background Notes

At this point in the Gospel of Matthew the nation of Israel was fast approaching the point of no return. The scribes and Pharisees, who should have been the spiritual leaders of the people, actually had the nerve to ask the Lord for a sign that He was the Messiah. Verse 38: *“Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.”* Think of all the wonderful miracles that they had seen and heard about, and yet they have the audacity to ask for a sign! Incredible unbelief!

The Lord said that only an evil and adulterous generation would seek for a sign. This was yet another indication that Israel was being set aside because they had rejected their King and His offer of the Kingdom. They were an evil and adulterous generation, an unfaithful nation. The Lord said that the only sign that would be given to them was “the sign of the prophet Jonah”-- His death and resurrection--but by then it would be too late for the nation to receive the Messiah. The people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, and the Queen of Sheba traveled a great distance to hear the wisdom that God had given to Solomon.

These Gentiles will stand up in the final judgment and show just cause for the condemnation of that unbelieving generation of Israel, because “something” greater (or, “a greater”) than Jonah (v41) and Solomon (v42) was here. The word “something” in both verses 41 and 42 is in the neuter gender. What was that “something”? It was the King and His offer of the Kingdom. The nation of Israel stood condemned and would temporarily be set aside in God’s program to make way for the Church, because the King and His offer of the Kingdom were rejected.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord pronounced His death and resurrection.

Verse 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.”*

The sign that the Lord would give to the unbelieving generation of Israel was His own death and resurrection. The Lord didn't begin to speak of His coming death and resurrection until after He and His offer of the Kingdom were rejected. Look ahead to Matthew 16:18-19, and notice that the Lord used the future tense: *“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you lose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* Then in verse 21 we read, *“From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.”*

So during the early part of our Lord's ministry, He didn't speak of His coming death and resurrection. His message was that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. However, after His offer of the Kingdom was refused and He was rejected as Israel's Messiah and King, then Jesus began to speak about His coming death and resurrection. Then He began to speak of the gospel that would go out to the whole world, and then He began to speak of His worldwide church that would be built. So, the Lord's coming death and resurrection would be a sign to unbelieving Israel that the Kingdom was being taken from them.

Now the big question that often comes up about the “sign of the prophet Jonah” is the phrase, “three days and three nights.” If our Lord was crucified on Good Friday, there are fewer than three days and three nights between His burial on Friday afternoon and His resurrection on Sunday morning. For some Christians this is such a problem that they move the crucifixion back to Thursday, and some even to Wednesday. This is not necessary. The phrase “three days and three nights” was a Hebrew idiom that could include any part of a day or night. So part of Friday/Saturday and part of Sunday would be called three days and three nights.

Furthermore, the phrase the “third day” is used numerous times in the Gospels as the day of our Lord's resurrection. We just read one of those passages in Matthew 16:21, *“...Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must...be killed, and be raised the third day.”* We know that He rose on the first day of the week, or Sunday. So if Sunday is the third day, what is the second day? Obviously the second day is Saturday. And if Saturday is the second day, what's the first day? Obviously Friday -- there is no such thing as a “day zero”! So we believe that the unbroken tradition of Good Friday as the

day of our Lord's crucifixion is correct. The main point here, however, is that the Lord predicted and pronounced His death and resurrection.

2. The Lord predicted future idolatry in Israel.

Verses 43-45: *"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. ⁴⁴ Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."*

The "man" in this passage represents Israel, and the "unclean spirit" represents the idolatry that formerly existed in the kingdom of Israel. The nation of Israel was temporarily cured of its idolatry when it went into captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. From the time of the Babylonian captivity right down to the present time there has not been idolatry within Judaism.

The man who had been healed of demon possession was like an "empty house." The "empty house" of Israel refused to allow their Messiah to enter the house – and so the unclean spirit of idolatry will return to Israel in the future. In fact, their "last state will be worse than the first," because the nation will worship the future anti-Christ of the Tribulation period. This will be idolatry in its fully developed form, represented here by the seven other spirits. The use of the number seven is symbolic of complete idolatry. This idolatry will take place during the Tribulation.

There is good news, however. We know from other Scriptures that during that coming Tribulation period, a significant portion of the Jewish people will turn to the Lord. They will receive the Messiah they once rejected! These faithful Jews will be the saved ones of Israel, spoken of in Romans 11:26 *"And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob...'"* The quote in this verse is from Isaiah.

Unfortunately, the unbelievers of Israel at the Tribulation time will worship the anti-Christ – the worst form of idolatry. The Lord predicted future idolatry in Israel.

3. The Lord proclaimed new family relationships.

Verses 46-50 - *"While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. ⁴⁷ Then one said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.' ⁴⁸ But He answered and said to the one who told Him, 'Who is My mother and who are My brothers?' ⁴⁹ And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."*

Why did Mary and the Lord's half-brothers want to speak to the Lord? The parallel account in Mark 3:21 says, *"But when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, "He is out of His mind."* Remember, at this point the Lord's half-brothers didn't believe in Him. *"For even His brothers did not believe in Him" (John 7:5).* They became believers later, however. In fact, James and Jude wrote the books of the New Testament that bear their names. These verses certainly prove that Mary was not a "perpetual virgin," or life-long virgin. Also, if she had occupied some special spiritual position, the Lord wouldn't have said, *"Who is My mother...?"* Mary had the wonderful privilege of being the mother of the Messiah, but she should not be worshiped.

What is the meaning of verses 49-50? *"And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers!"⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."* The Lord taught that becoming a Christian -- following Christ and becoming part of God's family -- is more important than blood relationships. Once again, with the Lord's use of the word "whoever," we see that the gospel will go out to everyone in the world. The Lord proclaimed new family relationships.

Practical Application

Watch for spiritual vacuums.

Do you see the spiritual application? Satan is looking for spiritual vacuums. When people are not in a vital relationship with the Lord, they're unfulfilled and they're not satisfied -- thus they're vulnerable to the enemy. We need to be aware of this in reference to our unsaved friends and colleagues. Watch for spiritual vacuums! These folks may seem to have their act together, and they may have their life swept and in order (v 44). But because God has made people with a spiritual capacity, they are empty and unfulfilled if they don't know the Lord. Satan knows this, and he tries to fill their spiritual vacuums with all kinds of substitutes. That's why the cults and false religions are so successful. We can rescue our unsaved friends and colleagues from terrible consequences. Watch for spiritual vacuums!