

The Sign of Jonah

***Mathew 12:38-41; 16:1-4;
Mark 8:11,12 and Luke 11:16,29-32***

1. Introduction

On several occasions during his life on earth, the Lord Jesus referred to the story of Jonah. Each time this happens he is confronting the unbelief of his people. The Saviour declares the good news of redemption and renewal. In him the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Christ battles against Satan and his kingdom, and Jesus comes to deliver this earth from him. Slowly but surely the devil is forced to give up. Jesus forces him further and further into retreat. Jesus' preaching is emphasized by signs and wonders. He heals the sick. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. He even helps people who are demon-possessed out of their difficulties. Through him they become completely normal and regain control of themselves.

In this battle Satan mobilizes the unbelief of the Israelites to arrest the progress of Christ and his kingdom. Sometimes he uses the Pharisees with, or without, the Sadducees and sometimes he uses the "ordinary" people. They try to challenge Christ's position by asking for a sign. Usually Jesus then refers to Jonah. They receive no other sign from him except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

But what is meant by that? In what way was Jonah a sign for the Ninevites? And how can Jonah be a sign for those in Jesus' time? And what is the meaning of this sign for us?

This chapter is about these and similar questions. As starting point we will use the scriptures which speak of this sign. (Matthew 12:38-41; 16:14; Mark 8:11,12; Luke 11:16, 29-32).

2. Text notes

A repeated question

The Lord Jesus refers to the sign of Jonah on three different occasions which may be distinguished.

a. The first time (Matthew 12:38-41) it happens as a result of slander by the Pharisees amongst the assembled multitude (Matthew 12:24). The Pharisees were incited by scribes from Jerusalem (Mark 3:22; Matthew 12:38). The inducement was the reaction of the people to the healing of a possessed man, who was blind and dumb (Matthew 12:22). According to the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus drove evil spirits out by Beelzebub, prince of these spirits. In other words, Jesus is an ally of the devil. Therefore they ask Him to give them a sign. This discussion takes place in a house. (Mark 3:20).

b. The second time (Matthew 16:1-4; Mark 8:11,12), the reference to the sign of Jonah follows the feeding of the four thousand (Matthew 15:29-39; Mark 7:31-37).

Jesus leaves Decapolis immediately after the feeding takes place (Mark 7:31; 8:10), crossing the Sea of Galilee. Now the Pharisees, together with the Sadducees, come to Jesus, finding him on the west shore in the region of Magadan (Matthew 15:39). This time the request for a sign stands more on its own. There is no direct occasion for it because of any sort of reaction from the people.

c. The third time (Luke 11:16, 29-32) Jesus refers to the sign of Jonah is during his last major journey to Jerusalem. He stays beyond the Jordan. Now the demand for a sign comes from people in the multitude. It is in reaction to the driving out of an evil spirit from a possessed man who was also dumb.

The reason for the demand.

Why do the people ask Jesus for a sign? What is the purpose of it?

a. The first time (Matthew 12:38-41) we read how this question came forward after the healing of a possessed man who was also blind and dumb (v. 22). The multitudes are beside themselves. They are amazed. Their reaction is understandable because the healing happened to a man who was particularly heavily handicapped. All ways of reaching him were blocked. He was not only blind so that he could see nothing of Jesus, he was also in no state to speak or listen. Moreover, he was also possessed by an evil spirit. Such a person is inaccessible to anyone. But Jesus heals him. He makes himself accessible to him, so that all ways to Christ are re-opened. The thoughts of those present (there were many) go in one specific direction. Hesitatingly they ask if Jesus is perhaps the Son of David, the great King who would come. Hence the harsh interference by the Pharisees who immediately react to this line of thinking from the people, as though they have been stung by a wasp. They accuse the Saviour of being an ally of the devil. According to them, that would be why he can do such unimaginable things. The Lord Jesus shows them how contradictory their accusations are. In this way they also slander God's Spirit who works in him. He warns the Pharisees to give up this resistance to him.

Then follows the demand for a sign. On the basis of the translation in the RSV you could easily think the demand was a friendly and polite one. In reality it is a harsh demand: "we want to see a miraculous sign from you." There is no trace of politeness. The scribes and Pharisees do address Jesus as "Teacher," but they first want proof that he is justified to establish himself as teacher. He must legitimize himself. For them, the miracles he does are not enough. These can be explained in different ways. They ask for a sign that would serve as proof of legitimacy. By this it is clear that they ignore Jesus' warning. They do not want to accept him as the Son of David. They ignore the clear evidence through unbelief. They first dismiss him by calling him a servant of the devil and they immediately follow this with their demand. Jesus may be able to do great things that make a big impression, but they, the scribes from Jerusalem (cf. Mark 3:22), are there to protect the crowds. They must examine Jesus' credentials to attach their stamp of approval. Only then will he be accepted.

b. Matthew 16:1-4 and Mark 8:11-12 are also about the request for proof of legitimacy. The question comes from the circle of the Pharisees and Sadducees, two parties which normally live in tension with each other. The reason for the demand is now not a reaction from the people. It is more or less separate from what has

proceeded. The Pharisees and Sadducees remind Jesus of an issue which, according to them, he has not yet made clear to them. He acts with authority. But from whom does he have that authority? He does many miracles but are his deeds legitimized by God? The request for a sign seems to be a good way to test Jesus on this point. They wished for "a sign from heaven." God himself must give the sign. A sign like that of Elijah. Then fire came out of the heavens. Everybody could see that Elijah served God. Could they not also expect such a sign from the Messiah?

After the events of Matthew 12, the Pharisees and Sadducees bother Jesus with this question again. In this they demonstrate a consistent resistance to him. In unbelief they look past the heavenly signs already present.

c. We see the same happening in Luke 11. Jesus drove an evil spirit out of someone who was dumb (v.14). The crowds are amazed as they hear the dumb man speak. Once again the accusation that Jesus drives out evil spirits in the name of Beelzebub is heard (v.15). The difference with other occasions is that now it comes from the people themselves. The same is true of the demand for a sign from heaven. The rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees and Sadducees is now reflected in the reaction of the people. The crowds want to test Jesus too. He first has to prove his legitimacy to them. The resistance to Jesus in the appears to have spread considerably.

Angry and adulterous

In their demand for a sign, the unbelief of the people becomes evident. This is why the Saviour talks about an evil and adulterous generation (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; cf. Luke 11:29). If the people looked at the miracles Jesus had performed, they would have absolutely no reason to doubt. Their doubt is caused by a shortage of love for, and faithfulness to, God. The relationship between God and his people is often compared to a marriage. But a marriage relationship without love and faithfulness will always go wrong. When you assume that the love of your husband is uncertain, you make demands. He must first do this or that, before you can believe that his love exists. While you are busy making your demands, your marriage begins to break up. A marriage cannot exist on a foundation of suspicion. Certainly, suspicion of the Lord should have no place. If you look at Jesus in through the eyes of your love for God, you can have no doubts. You see it happening before your eyes. The blind regain their sight. The lame walk. Possessed people are released from the power of Satan. The love of God illumines everything (cf. Isaiah 29:18,19; 35:5,6; 61:1).

But the people of Jesus' time are evil and adulterous. They do not take the love of God seriously. They consider the possibility that they are being deceived! And this while all God's love in the form of Jesus Christ stands before them. Through him you look directly at the Heavenly Father's heart. All the love God's people need is given to them in Christ. However, the people of those times put Jesus at a distance. God must first show that he is serious about his love. "Evil and adulterous" is therefore a pointed assessment.

The sign is given

In Matthew 12:39 as well as in Matthew 16:4 and Luke 11:29, the sign of Jonah comes to the forefront in a specific way. Jesus says repeatedly that the people of his generation will receive no other sign than that of Jonah, the prophet. The people do therefore receive a sign, a real proof of legitimacy. But it is a very particular sign. It is

not instantly the proof they were expecting. It comes across as a riddle, but it will have to suffice.

In Mark 8:12 it looks like Jesus refuses to give a sign. However, the end of the verse can also be translated as an unfinished sentence: "Truly I say to you, if this generation received a sign..." Jesus "sighs deeply in his spirit". You can see how this demand for a sign affects him. It causes him much sorrow. The implication of his answer would then be "Woe to you if the sign comes! It will not be good. You people who have already seen me do so much will not gain from it. On the contrary, because of this sign the judgment on your unbelief will be heavier."

Thus, in all the texts mentioned, Jesus does respond to the question of his legitimacy even though it is so rudely demanded from him. What Jesus does not do is satisfy the unbelief of his generation. He distances himself from it. This is why they receive no sign other than that of Jonah, a sign which remains a mystery for unbelievers. It can only be understood as proof of legitimacy by faith.

The answer is not always the same

Jesus did not answer every question about proof of legitimacy by referring to the sign of Jonah. Shortly after his official appearance there is a similar request. Just prior to it, he had purged the temple. He drove sheep and oxen outside, and overturned the tables of the money changers. The Jews ask him (John 2:18) "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus gives a puzzling answer here too. "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." Going by their reaction, the Jews did not understand him. The disciples too, only understood what he meant, after Christ's resurrection (v.22).

Jonah's legitimization

What does the sign of Jonah consist of? What does the Lord mean, when he points to Jonah? The meaning is that Jesus proves his legitimacy in the same way that Jonah had done so. But what proof of legitimacy did Jonah take to Nineveh? It cannot have been the judgment which he had to pronounce over Nineveh because then the sign would never have become reality. How could Jesus then have referred to that?

Moreover, Jonah's proof of legitimacy is not threatening in itself. Nor is it possible to conclude that from Matthew 16:1-4. The threatening aspect of it is when people reject the evidence in unbelief. Jesus shows in Matthew 16:1-4 that the demand for a sign reveals lack of understanding and lack of faith. His generation does not understand the state of affairs. They close their eyes to reality. By looking at the sky they could see what sort of weather it would be, why then can they not understand the meaning of the sign of the times? Jesus does many signs and miracles which are all proofs of the coming of God's Son. Even though he performs signs and wonders, people cannot see through their unbelief.

Jonah's declaration in Nineveh is not his proof of legitimacy either. That would conflict with what is stated in Luke 11:30. There Jesus says that "Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites." It is not his message which gives Jonah legitimacy, but he, as a person, is the proof that God has sent him. His legitimacy has to do with his appearance as prophet. This is why there is constant reference to Jonah, the

prophet. But the sign by which he proves his legitimacy is, evidently, himself.

G. A peculiar sign

How is Jonah himself, his own proof of legitimacy? Matthew 12:40 shows that it has to do with what he has experienced. After having been for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster he has been saved. If the people of Nineveh ask Jonah for his documents, he can point to that. He has experienced a miracle. God himself saw to it that he could go to Nineveh. That is his evidence that he is a prophet sent by the Lord. It underlines the truth of the message he must bring.

Still, it is certainly a peculiar proof of authority. Jonah has no witnesses. Nobody saw the miracle. Thus the strange thing is that only when you believe Jonah you accept it as proof. If you do not believe his message then the proof means nothing to you. The sign is invested with conclusive force only when you accept Jonah on his word. The nature of this proof of legitimacy is that it demands belief.

H. Unbelief meets a puzzling statement

The unbelieving generation demands proof of legitimacy from Christ. But such people receive no other sign than that of Jonah, the prophet. For them it is a puzzling sign, because of their unbelief. It is a "Jonah-proof." The sign that Jesus gives, has yet to happen. Just as Jonah passed through death to life, so it will happen to Christ (Matthew 12:40). Just as for Jonah, this is Jesus' heavenly seal of legitimacy. He proves he is the one sent by the Father by passing through death (Romans 1:4).

I. Belief and unbelief

Jesus' sign is then a "Jonah-proof." It requires faith to see the evidence of it. In this respect it adds nothing to the signs and miracles that Jesus has already done. He who believes has his faith strengthened by Jesus' legitimization. Nowhere else is God's love more clearly revealed than at Golgotha and Easter. Here we realize how the Father sent his Son to bear the awful punishment for us.

He who does not believe, however, does not know what to do with this sign. He views the crucifixion and resurrection differently. He does not see in this God's love and nearness. The sign proves nothing to him. This becomes evident when this sign is fulfilled. The leaders of Israel remember Jesus' words precisely (Matthew 27:63). They have let Christ be crucified. He is dead. But there is a risk on the third day. According to what he had said, he would rise on that day. When it actually happens, it means nothing to them because they had always rejected Christ in unbelief. They are not brought to repentance, not even when the soldiers report that an angel from heaven had opened Jesus' tomb. Although they now have received their sign from heaven, they prefer to make up a story (Matthew 28:11-15)!

J. Unbelief has consequences

Because of the unbelief of his generation Jesus addresses them with those threatening words (Matthew 12:41,42; Luke 11:31,32). He who does not believe that Jesus is sent by the Father, takes unimaginable risks. He will not see God's love even when the proof is given. The sign has no power to convince him. Heathens shall then become an example to Israel. When the judgment comes they will pronounce the judgment over God's people. The Ninevites, who knew much less about God, repented after the preaching of someone like Jonah. How is it possible that God's own children will not listen to God's Son? The Queen of the South came

from afar to hear the wisdom of Solomon; but who was Solomon compared to Christ! Moreover, the people of Israel do not need to travel half the world in order to speak with him. He comes to them in person. Even so they do not believe his words. In so doing they sign their own death warrant.

In light of this the exclamation of Jesus in Mark 8:12 is easier to understand. "I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to [this generation]." They do not see, even though it is right under their noses.

They are even made actively involved in Jesus' legitimization. They take him to the cross. But by this they prove their persistent unbelief. They proclaim God's judgment on themselves. Also this sign of Jesus brings division between people (Matthew 3:12).

3. Comments for today

1. The proclamation of the gospel still comes with the "Jonah sign." We too must make do with this sign (John 20:29); and we can! He who first takes a critical distance from the Lord will never get a picture of his love. He will complain about a life in which he cannot experience God (anymore). He who sincerely accepts the good news of Christ's redemption cannot get enough of it. All of creation and re-creation speaks of God's love for sinners.
2. Many people currently are bothered with the problem of "the eclipse of God." The description actually hides the real problem. A society full of people who do not want to know God, will gradually be transformed to think without God. People push God out of public life as well. That creates problems for the children of God in social relationships. Experiencing the presence of God becomes difficult for them. While it is good to realize the cause, it is also important to realize how vulnerable we ourselves are on this issue. It was God's own people who took their distance from Christ! If we put God at a distance, a loving relationship with him becomes impossible. How important then, is the strengthening of the inner man (Ephesians 3:16). Does a warm attachment with the things of the Lord, an intimate relationship with God (Psalm 25:14) exist in you? A relationship characterized by an overwhelming awe for him and a reverent listening to God's good commandments (Psalm 25:4,5,8,9,10,12,14)? Do you know and acknowledge your sins and do you have real sorrow for them (Psalm 25:7,11,18)? Do you let yourself be taken along the way the Lord wants to lead you?
3. You do not need to let yourself be discouraged. Not even when society turns cold and the Lord is excluded from it. Not even when your own life has grown cold. Because God seeks you daily with his love. He does, however, ask you to believe in this promise. In order for us to have faith, he extends the means (Canons of Dort I,16; III/IV, 17). Here too, it is true that faith comes before the experience. How often do you not even recognize that God lets you experience his nearness! It is through faith that the experience of God's nearness blossoms.

4. Summary

Jesus proves his legitimacy in confrontation with his unbelieving generation. He responds to their request for a sign, no matter how improper the request is. But he

does not accept their unbelief, nor does he cater to it. On the contrary, by giving them the sign of Jonah, he turns the critical demand from his unbelieving generation completely back on them. It is not a question of whether or not Jesus proves his legitimacy. It is all about the unbelief of those who ask the question. The one who believes sees the evidence that Jesus gives fulfilled, and he is confirmed in the faith. The one who does not believe, does not see the proof either.

Paul reminds people of this desire of the Jews for signs in 1 Corinthians 1:22. "Jews demand miraculous signs..." That is how you recognize them. They keep asking for proof of legitimacy. They hide their unbelief behind those questions. Because a crucified Christ is an offence to the Jews, just as it is folly to the Greeks (v 23).

When Paul declares the gospel to the Greeks in Athens, he also gives them this "Jonah sign." Christ's proof of legitimacy lies in the fact that God brought him through death to life (Acts 17:31). By far, the most of his audience finds this ridiculous. For them this is no proof. Only those who come to faith find this convincing.

5. Tips for study

1. Try to get a good understanding of what the Lord's covenant relationship with us means. While doing this, look at how you live your side of the relationship with God. Think also about the connection with the request for a sign by Jesus' unbelieving contemporaries.
2. Make clear why the Lord Jesus stamped this generation as evil and adulterous.
3. Try to form a clear picture of the different circumstances in which Jesus spoke about the sign of Jonah.
4. Using Biblical information, try to establish another sign that requires you to have faith in order to see the conclusive evidence. Think, for example, of Isaiah 7:9, 10-16.

6. Discussion Aid

1. The circumstances in which Jesus gave the sign of Jonah were always different. Can you compare and contrast the words which Jesus spoke about this sign irrespective of the circumstances? Why or why not?
2. Why does Jesus refer to himself as the "Son of Man" (Matthew 12:40; Luke 11:30)?
3. What does it mean in Matthew 16:4 that the Lord only repeats what he has said before (Matthew 12:39)?
4. Is it true that the signs and miracles of Jesus can only be explained in one way? Do they show enough evidence in light of the Old Testament prophecies?
5. The Lord Jesus said that he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Did this also happen? How then?

6. How can you best describe the essence of the sign of Jonah? Is there also a connection with Hebrews 11:1? If yes, in what way?
7. What has the sign of Jonah to do with the relationship between the Lord and us? How can this relationship with the Lord be strengthened? Which conclusions must you draw for the raising of your children in the covenant with God?
8. Is God's love to be seen in the whole of creation? (cf. section 3.1) Where can you see it or where can you not?
9. Is it right that faith comes before experience (cf. section 3.3)? Is that not a cold shower precisely when your life has become cold?
10. What similarity is there between the sign of Jonah and, for example, the call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) or a miracle from the Lord Jesus (e.g. Mark 2:1-12)? And what differences can be pointed out?

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