

The Sign of Jonah: Three Days and Three Nights

By

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One of the most important prophecies of Jesus, one on which His whole ministry and credibility as the Messiah hangs, has also become one of the most controversial - the sign of the prophet Jonah. Many Christians have puzzled over the exact meaning of Jesus' words here and how they were fulfilled, and this 'sign' has become a favourite one that many Muslims use to try and discredit Jesus as being the Messiah.

In this article, I'm going to be fairly brief and concise in laying down what I believe is the truth in this matter, and this should be enough for those who are seeking truth. God willing, I hope to go into these things in more detail in a book I plan to write entitled *The Hidden Prophecies of the Seven Feasts* (though that may take some time), but for the meanwhile this article should be sufficient. I have researched this subject from a number of various resources, through books and online articles, which have helped me to arrive at the following conclusions through my own study.

The Prophet Jonah

Firstly, let's take a look at what happened to the prophet Jonah. Basically, Jonah chapter 1 tells us that Jonah was on the run from Yahweh, trying to avoid going to Nineveh with God's message. While on board a ship on the Mediterranean Sea, Jonah and the rest of the passengers and crew were caught in a violent storm that threatened to wreck the ship and kill them all. Jonah knew that this storm was from God so he volunteered to sacrifice himself by being thrown overboard so that the storm would subside and the crew would be saved. The crew tried to avoid doing this but the storm grew worse, so eventually they threw Jonah overboard into the raging sea - and as Jonah disappeared into the depths of the sea, the storm grew calm.

Then we are told what happened to Jonah in the following words.

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, **and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.**

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said:
"In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.

From the depths of the grave (*Heb. 'sheol'; the unseen*) I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.

You hurled me into the deep,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.

I said, 'I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.'

The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever (*lit. 'for the age'*).
But you brought my life up from the pit (Yet Thou wilt bring up my life
from ruin - CV),
O LORD my God.

"When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

"Those who cling to worthless idols
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

But I, with a song of thanksgiving,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the LORD."

And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

(Jonah 1:17 - 2:10 NIV)

So we are clearly told that Jonah was miraculously rescued through God sending 'a great fish' to swallow him, in which he spent **three days and three nights** in the belly of the fish, experiencing a place of darkness and death. There is no doubt that Jonah would've died otherwise, and as far as the outside world was concerned, Jonah was dead! **This was not a natural occurrence - this was a miracle!** Then after being presumed dead, Jonah later turns up at Nineveh as though alive from the dead!

Some believe that Jonah actually died and was raised to life again, but the straightforward reading of the text does not say that. It doesn't even imply it. In fact, Jonah did not need to actually die to fulfill the prophetic sign that would later relate to the Messiah. Remember: this was a sign, a type, a symbol of something greater. He only needed to be in a place of death, figuratively speaking, in which he was miraculously saved. It was the same with Isaac. Abraham did not have to actually kill his son Isaac to fulfill the type and shadow of Messiah's Sacrifice. As the writer to the Hebrews says,

"Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11:19 NIV)

Take special note of Jonah's prayer. The words of Jonah, quoted above, in his prayer to Yahweh from inside the great fish are also largely prophetic. They contain the key to understanding the true meaning of Jesus' words about the "sign of Jonah" as we shall see shortly.

The Sign of Jonah

Here is the main text that tells us about what Jesus had to say concerning the sign of Jonah.

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. **For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."

(Matthew 12:38-41 NIV; also Luke 11:29-30)

The blind, stubborn leaders of Israel had seen the miracles that Jesus was doing and they had just accused Him of doing these miracles by the power of Satan! Yet they had the nerve to ask Him "Show us a miraculous sign?!" Jesus' simple answer was "**...none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.**" This was the one miraculous sign that Israel was going to see which would ultimately verify who Jesus really was, beyond a shadow of a doubt. Yet notice very carefully what the sign of Jonah actually involves.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Now as far as I'm aware at present, this exact phrase of '3 days AND 3 nights' is only found in the book of Jonah and the gospel of Matthew, and First Samuel. It is a very specific phrase. There are many Christian teachers and scholars who say that this is an Aramaic or Hebrew idiom for something less than the full 72 hours. In other words, in relation to the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, it means a portion of 3 days and 2 nights. There is some truth in the fact that only a portion of a day is needed for it to count as 1 day, but this doesn't solve the problem of the 3 nights. There are a number of instances in Scripture where portions of days are seen as whole days. Here are two.

1. When Esther was going to approach the king to ask him to help her people, she told the local Jews to fast for her for three days, night and day. Then we are told that she later approached the king on the third day. (Esther 4:16-5:1).

2. When David and his men were chasing the Amalekites, they found an Egyptian slave who had not eaten for three days and three nights.

The slave told them that he had become ill and his master had abandoned him three days earlier, that is, they found him on the third day (1 Samuel 30:11-13).

Now this incident is very interesting because it uses the exact phrase of 'three days and three nights' that we have in Jesus' statement. Now let's say that they found the slave sometime on a Sunday (the third day). This means that he was abandoned by his master sometime on the Friday, but we are not told whether this was before sunrise or not. In the East, particularly for the Jew, the day began at sundown, which, of course, included the night as well. It is possible that this slave had been abandoned in the early hours of Friday morning, before dawn, or possibly earlier, so this would count as his first night without food or water. Friday would've been the first day, followed by the second night. Saturday would've been the second day, followed by the third night. Then Sunday would've been the third day on which they found him.

Even though this is partially speculating, because we don't know exactly when the slave was abandoned, nevertheless, one thing is certain - only a portion of a day or night is needed for it to count as 1 day or night. We shall now see that this scenario is what undoubtedly occurred with Jesus.

The Heart of the Earth

Jesus said that He would be 'three days and three nights **in the heart of the earth**.' Now what did He mean by this? Most Christians would say that this is describing His death and entombment. Of course, it has to be said that His death and entombment has to be *included* in this phrase, but is it the full meaning? Jesus did not actually say '...in the tomb' or '...in death,' He said '...in the heart of the earth.'

Now in the Old Testament you will find that there is a very similar phrase that is used a number of times which is "in the midst of the earth." One such example is in Daniel.

"These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land (in the midst of the earth). Its height was enormous." (Daniel 4:10 NIV)

Now this tree that Nebuchadnezzar saw in a vision stood in the midst or centre or heart of the earth. It was not *under* the earth, or in the *depths* of the earth, but it was *surrounded* by the earth, or more correctly, by the kingdoms of men. The tree represented the king of Babylon being surrounded by the kingdoms of men as his subjects, that is, he ruled the whole world. He was in the midst or heart of the earth.

Now watch closely. I firmly believe that what Jesus meant when He said He would be 'three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' was this:

He would be betrayed into the hands of men to become the focus of their abuse and wickedness. He would become banished from His Father's presence for a time while He became the sacrificial sin offering for the sake of all mankind. He would enter a place of darkness and loneliness, even experiencing death itself - yet, after

three days and three nights, He would be rescued from ruin by rising from the dead on the third day. Salvation is truly from God.

Now if you will compare the prayer of Jonah, quoted earlier, with these words above, you will see the prophetic sign emerging. Here are some other texts that confirm this.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

(Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:45-46 NIV)

Jesus truly fulfilled the prophecy of the Suffering Servant.

"But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors."

(Isaiah 53:5-12 NIV)

This prophecy is describing the **whole of Jesus' ordeal** which lasted three days and three nights. It is not describing just His crucifixion, death and entombment alone - but the whole ordeal from the moment He was arrested in Gethsemane through to His resurrection on the third day.

(The following information is what I believe fits the Biblical and historical evidence the best. Some believe that Jesus died on the Wednesday or the Thursday to make certain details fit, but I don't believe that this is necessary. A Thursday is possible but highly unlikely).

Jesus' ordeal began on the night He was betrayed and arrested (Thursday night). In Jewish reckoning, this was also the beginning of Friday 14th Nisan or 3rd April 33 A.D. (Passover; also Preparation Day for the special 'High' Sabbath). This is when Jesus' blood began to flow via the beatings and mockings. His 'trial' before the Sanhedrin, Herod and Pilate took place all through that night and into the morning.

As the Passover Lamb, Jesus was crucified at the third hour (approx. 9:00 am) and died at the ninth hour (approx. 3:00 pm) on the Friday, and was buried before sundown. This was the first day and first night.

The following day was the special Sabbath, Saturday 15th Nisan (a normal Sabbath AND the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread). The Pharisees went to Pilate to get the tomb sealed 'til the third day' (Matthew 27:62-64). This was the second day and second night.

Then during the early hours of Sunday 16th Nisan, before dawn, Jesus rose from the dead. This was the Feast of Firstfruits. This was the third day and the third night.

Thus was fulfilled the sign of Jonah!

Here it is again.

Thursday night - The Betrayal; Drinking the Cup begins (First night)

Friday - Crucifixion, death and entombment (First day)

Friday night (Second night)

Saturday - Special Sabbath (Second day)

Saturday night (Third night)

Sunday morning - God raised Jesus from the dead (Third day)

So contrary to what many may be saying, the words of Jesus and the prophets were fulfilled exactly as God intended. We are commanded to believe it - for it is the Word of the living God. And we shall not be disappointed, for it is GOOD NEWS!

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