

Illustrations of Immanuel: A Final Fish

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Matthew 16:1-4 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. 2 He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; 3 "and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. 4 "A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

As we approach Christmas, our feelings may vary depending on our preparations and experiences leading up to this moment. Whether we are excited, anxious, or relieved, our attitude as we come to Christmas is significant.

This message concludes our series on Illustrations of Immanuel, focusing on how we approach the manger and the significance of our attitude toward Christ. The passage from Matthew 16:1-4 presents individuals who come to Christ not with genuine faith, but with skepticism and self-interest. Their request for a sign is not rooted in a desire for truth, but to discredit Jesus.

The sign of the prophet Jonah serves as a reminder to approach Christ with repentance and confidence. Just as Jonah was delivered from the depths, Jesus overcame death, offering us the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

Why does Jesus rebuke this request for a sign? Is it sinful or evil to ask for a sign? Based only on this text you might think so. But there are many other places in scripture where God grants the request of a sign. Gideon asks God for a miraculous sign twice and God gives it. Mary asks how these things can be? And God gives her a sign. When the apostles are in the boat during the storm, Peter asks to walk on water, and it is granted.

What makes this request different? First, they were testing him. Second, they asked for a sign from heaven.

First, they were testing him.

The text says they were testing him. By that it means they were trying to trap him. They did not come seeking the truth. They did not come out of genuine curiosity whether he was the Christ. They came to find something they could use against him. No matter what Jesus did, no matter how he answered they planned to use it as proof that he was not the Christ. If he did not do a miracle they would claim he could not. If he did a miracle, they would twist it to look demonic.

These came seeking a sign, not seeking Jesus. When people come to Jesus genuinely asking for help or to be strengthened in faith, Jesus does not turn them away or rebuke them. When the father cries out, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief" Jesus's does not rebuke him but heals his child. Jesus does not reject, rebuke, or cast away those who struggle with doubt or sin.

Matthew 12:20 A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench,

We can be confident that when we come to Jesus struggling with doubts, anxieties, or sins, Jesus will answer us and strengthen us. He does this through his word. He does it daily through his word. But when these men come to him seeking a sign for the sole purpose of trying to trap him, that is a different matter. b

Second, they ask for a sign from heaven.

In asking for a sign from heaven they acknowledge that Jesus has done signs, but they claim those are not good enough. Rather than healing the sick they want him to call down fire from heaven. Their demand for a "sign from heaven" implies that previous miracles were insufficient. This attitude mirrors modern skepticism, where no evidence is ever deemed adequate.

The English here actually misses something from the Greek. The verb is a present active which implies an ongoing activity. A better translation would be "an evil and an adulterous generation is continually seeking a sign." No matter what sign is given to it, it is always seeking another one, because no sign is good enough for them.

Despite their attitude, Jesus offers one final sign—the sign of Jonah. This miracle, occurring in the depths of the sea, foreshadows Jesus' resurrection after three days. It is the ultimate sign affirming His identity as the Son of God and the assurance of eternal life for believers.

What was this sea creature? We have a picture of a whale up there, but we do not really know. It could have been a whale. It could have been some kind of giant shark. It could

have been a giant jellyfish. Jonah could have been stuck in a gelatinous blob like Dwight's stapler for three days. We just do not know.

Whatever animal it was does not really matter. This was a miracle worked by the power of God as an illustration that Jesus would rise from the dead. This resurrection of Jesus, this is the final sign. The final sign that our sins are forgiven, that we too will rise from the dead, that Jesus is who he claimed to be the Son of God.

This is the final illustration of Immanuel. Final not only because it is the last one in our list for advent this year, but because it is the ultimate and definitive sign, that this child lying in a manger is Christ the Lord. He is God made man, because no one else could walk into death and come out again three days later. It is the sign that proves eternal life is waiting for us. Because he lives, we too shall live.

How do we come to Christ and this final sign? We come not in the arrogance and pride of the pharisees. Instead, we come in repentance to the lord of life.

We come filled with sin.

As Jonah was thrown into depths of the sea, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the men on the boat. So also, Jesus went into the depths of death, not for his sake but for ours. He was born for this purpose so that he who is without sin could take the place of we who are filled with sin.

We come with worries and anxieties.

As Jonah was wrapped about by weeds and by his sin. So also, we often feel strangled by our sorrow, our worries. God was with Jonah in the depths of the sea, and he is with us too in the depths of despair.

Psalm 27:1 A Psalm of David. The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?

We come with doubts.

Jesus can handle doubts. If the Pharisees had come with doubts that would have been different, but they came with absolute confidence in their own righteousness and rightness. We come with doubts and Jesus points us to the sign of Jonah. As Jonah came out of belly of the sea alive after three days, so also Jesus walked out of death alive again after three days.

1 Corinthians 15:20-22 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

Jesus is risen from the dead and because he lives, we too shall be made alive.

We are called to approach Christ not with pride or doubt, but with repentance, faith, and humility. Like Jonah, who entered the depths for the sake of others, Jesus entered death for our salvation. We bring our sins, anxieties, and doubts to Him, trusting in His grace and forgiveness.