

# Explore the Bible: What's the Sign?

February 4, 2016

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 21 focuses on Matthew 12:38-42.*

What are the three most important things someone should look for when reading or studying the Bible?

1. Context
2. Context
3. Context

I'm leading a study called "How to Read the Bible." We just finished our discussion of the Gospels. One piece of advice I gave the group about Gospel reading was to read—at a minimum—the section before and after the passage being studied. Ideally, read the chapter before and after, if possible.

This principle particularly is true in the passage we are studying this week. In fact, without the story "before the story," this passage makes almost no sense at all.

## **A false accusation**

Read Matthew 12:22-37. Notice this charge against Jesus in the passage: But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" (Matthew 12:24). This false accusation came when Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was also blind and mute. Key point: Jesus' ability to perform miracles pointed to his divinity.

Even more pointed, in this particular miracle, Jesus demonstrated power to

heal and power over spiritual forces. Obviously, the Pharisees saw that all “signs” were pointing to Jesus truly being the Son of God, and they hated him for it.

That’s the context.

### **Yet another sign?**

Now, some time may have passed between the previous story and our main text, but it doesn’t appear that way. “Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, ‘Teacher, we want so see a miraculous sign from you’” (Matthew 12:38). Several things are in play here.

First, Jesus had performed many miracles, many “signs” for the people, including in front of the Pharisees. This points to an insatiable desire to see Jesus perform miracles. Time and time again in the Gospels, we find Jesus refuses to be a “sideshow.” He didn’t perform miracles to impress. He performed miracles because of compassion and to reveal he was, indeed, the Messiah.

Second, Jesus had just performed a “double miracle!” What did he receive for it? False accusation. Why would he give the Pharisees another opportunity to lie about the goodness of God and his mighty power?

So, Jesus refuses to give them what they want. Instead, he rebukes them.

### **A common practice**

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” (Matthew 12:39). Here, Jesus returns the Pharisees previous accusation. The Pharisees, not Jesus, were the servants of Satan. Returning a charge was common practice in ancient Near Eastern courts. Though they were not in a court, Jesus uses the practice anyway. They just fell into “Jesus

court,” and condemnation was the judgment.

### **The greatest of “signs” was coming**

Instead, Jesus once again predicted the greatest miracle of all—his glorious resurrection. “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” (Matthew 12:40). Here is a comparison between Jonah and Jesus.

Many religious leaders of Israel disliked the story of Jonah. The prophet’s initial reaction to God’s call to Nineveh was disobedience. It took a miracle to get him to obey. In our Western worldview, we offer forgiveness to Jonah, are fascinated by the “whale” portion, and rejoice in the repentance of Nineveh. But the teachers of the law in Jesus’ day loathed the story. Here’s why. In the Old Testament, Nineveh was responsible for destroying the northern kingdom and therefore epitomized wickedness (See Nahum 2:8; 3:1; 3:7).

Compare this to Jonah 3:10: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” God loved sinful people. He had great compassion for them. This is the whole reason Jesus came to earth, to save sinners, even the worst of sinners. Jesus then went on to say the people on Nineveh stand in judgment of the Pharisees. Wow! I can just see their red, angry faces.

### **Tables turned**

So, while the Pharisees falsely accused Jesus, he rightly condemned the attitudes of the Pharisees. They didn’t want to believe Jesus was the Messiah, but it was not deniable. They didn’t want Jesus’ popularity to continue, but they couldn’t control it. They didn’t want Jesus’ message to go forward, but they couldn’t stop it. So, what is a Pharisee to do? Well,

break the ninth and tenth commandments, of course, by coveting and bearing false witness.

And here is the grand irony: Jesus died and rose again, the greatest signs of his divinity, to forgive the sins of those same Pharisees. God was looking them right in the face, right in the heart, and offering a pathway to salvation, but their hard hearts couldn't accept it. Indeed, they were the unconverted Nineveh.

**Application questions for your Bible study group:**

1. What "signs" are evident still today that Jesus is the Messiah?
2. What other differences and similarities exist between Jesus and Jonah? How does the story of Jonah point us to the person of Jesus?
3. Read Matthew 12:42. What similarities exist between Jesus and Solomon? How does the story of Solomon point us to the person of Jesus?