

# Matthew 12:38-42

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-12/matthew-1238-42/>

*Matthew narrates the fourth confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees attempt to entrap Jesus by asking for a sign proving that He is the Messiah. Jesus not only dodges their trap, He cryptically tells them that the sign He will give them will be His resurrection. But He knows that even this will not be enough for them, and condemns the obstinance of their unbelief.*

The parallel Gospel accounts of this teaching are Matthew 16:1-4, Mark 8:11-12, and Luke 11:29-32.

After Jesus tells *the Pharisees* that their hearts are evil, *the scribes and Pharisees* respond with yet another challenge to *Him*. This is the fourth and final challenge by *the Pharisees* in this chapter. In the organization of his gospel narrative, Matthew has used this chapter to reveal them as the primary earthly opposition to Christ and His ministry.

They called Jesus, *Teacher*. And while this is certainly a more respectable title than “Beelzebul” (Matthew 12:24), there is possibly a sarcastic and subtle belittlement in their choice of words. The Greek word that is translated, *Teacher* is “Didaskalos.” It is a generic term for one who instructs others. In a general sense *the scribes and Pharisees* were also teachers (“Didaskaloi”). On one hand it might appear that they were including Jesus in their own social class or group, instead of looking down on *Him*. If they had been sincere, this might have been considered a positive development and elevation of their respect for Jesus than they had previously shown *Him*.

But *they* were not sincere. We know this because Jesus responds to *them* as *an evil and adulterous generation*. *They* were likely either being rudely sarcastic trying to amateurize Jesus as a wanna-be “didaskalos” instead of a professional rabbi, or perhaps *they* were adopting a new strategy to defeat *Him*.

*The scribes and Pharisees* said to Jesus, *we want to see a sign from You*. They were demanding that Jesus prove to *them* that *He* was the Messiah. There is a rich dramatic irony in their request. Jesus had already proved that *He* was the Messiah through His teachings and use of the scriptures, but also through His powerful miracles. In fact, *He* had just healed the man with a withered hand in their own synagogue (Matthew 12:9-14). If this was not enough of *a sign* for *the scribes and Pharisees* to repent and follow Jesus as their Messiah, it’s difficult to imagine what would convince *them*.

Their request was an “Either/Or” trap designed to establish control over Jesus. If Jesus cooperated with *them* and agreed to prove Himself on their terms, *He* would legitimize their authority over *Him*. But if Jesus refused to *give them a sign*, His failure to pass their test would be used against *Him* as powerful evidence that *He* was not the Messiah. Either way *He* answered,

*the scribes and Pharisees* would win. As always, Jesus swatted aside their framing and replaced it with His own.

But Jesus knew the treachery in their hearts (John 2:24-25). *He answered and said to them, An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign.* Jesus understood how *they* were trying to destroy or manipulate *Him*. He called *them* out for what *they* were: *evil*. He called *them* an *adulterous generation*. Jesus was charging *them* with spiritual adultery. Instead of being faithful to God, this *generation* of Jewish religious leaders had forsaken God to pursue the approval of other kingdoms (physical and spiritual) like so many Jewish generations before *them* (Jeremiah 3:8-10; Ezekiel 16:27-30; Hosea 4:11-12). Jesus also *said* that even as *they* were being spiritually *adulterous*, *they* still *craved* and feverishly sought after *a sign* from God. This was a bizarre testament to the fact they still recognized that they belonged to God and wished to be in a harmonious relationship with Him even as they were rejecting His great love.

After calling out *the scribes and Pharisees'* spiritual adultery, Jesus gave *them* His answer. It cleverly avoided both Either/Or and did not fit into their trap. He did not legitimize their authority by going along with their test and giving them a sign. But neither did He completely refuse them either. He rejected their framing and replaced it with His own. Instead, *He said "and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet.* In effect His answer was "I won't give you a sign proving Myself now, but one day I will." He did not tell them "yes" or "no," but "wait." And "wait" could not be easily used against Him.

Jesus's answer to *them*, *the sign of Jonah the prophet*, was also a prophetic riddle that could not easily be deciphered. *Jonah* was God's *prophet* sent to Israel's enemy: the city of *Nineveh*. He was to warn them that *they* were in divine peril because of their wickedness (Jonah 1:1-2; Jonah 3:4). Astonishingly, the city of *Nineveh repented* (Jonah 3:5). And because of their repentance, God did not destroy them (Jonah 3:10). In mentioning *Jonah*, Jesus brings to mind Nineveh's example for *the scribes and Pharisees* to follow. But more to the point, Jesus says that *the only sign that He will give to them will be the "sign of Jonah."* This *sign will be* the clearest proof that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus went on to explain what *He* meant by *the sign of Jonah*. Before *Jonah* went to *Nineveh*, he tried to run from God's plan by boarding a ship headed in the opposite direction (Jonah 1:3). As he tried to escape, a great storm arose and *Jonah* knew that he was the cause of the storm (Jonah 1:4). He told the sailors to throw him overboard to calm the storm (Jonah 1:12). They did and the storm was calmed (Jonah 1:15). But instead of drowning, God sent a great fish to swallow *Jonah*, where he was kept alive for *three days and three nights* in its *belly* (Jonah 1:17). After *the three days and three nights*, *the sea monster* spit *Jonah* out onto dry land (Jonah 2:10). And this time, *Jonah* obeyed God and went to prophesy to *the men of Nineveh* (Jonah 3:3). *The scribes and Pharisees* would have been familiar with this spectacular story of *Jonah*.

Jesus explained that *just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man* (Jesus's term for Himself and Messianic reference from Daniel 7:13-14) *be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.* These *Pharisees* would have understood Jesus's Messianic reference, but it is unlikely that *they* would have understood at this time what *He* meant by *spending three days and nights in the heart of the earth*. Jesus was cryptically

telling *them* that *the sign* that *He* would give to *them* proving that *He* was the Messiah was His resurrection from the dead, which lasted for a period of *three days*. Jesus's resurrection is *the sign of Jonah*. In essence, Jesus told *them*, "You will know that I am the Messiah when I rise from the dead!" But *they* would not have understood what *He* meant by this statement, until after this remarkable event took place.

This is the second time Jesus has alluded to His own death as Messiah (Matthew 10:38), and it is the first time *He* foretold His resurrection.

Jesus contrasts the repentance and wonder from outsiders when they merely heard prophetic warnings or reports of God's splendor against the considerable obstinance and folly that *this generation* is showing (and will continue to show) even as they witness the greater wonders of God occurring among *them*. Jesus uses *the men of Nineveh* and *the Queen of the South* as exemplars.

Jesus says *at the day of judgment*, that *the men of Nineveh will stand up with this* unfaithful and unbelieving *generation and condemn it*. The reason *they will condemn it* is *because the men of Nineveh repented* merely at Jonah's preaching, when *behold*, Jesus, *the Son of God* who is *something greater than Jonah is here* to preach and work many wonders among you. And you, the present *generation* are not repenting. Jesus's rebuke is that even wicked Gentiles who were God's enemy *repented* when God sent them a mere prophet, but *behold you* religious leaders who know the law and are God's chosen people are not willing to accept God's Messiah (and God Himself) when *He* comes to *you*. Shame on *you*!

Jesus gives a similar rebuke with a different example. *At the day of judgment*, that *the Queen of the South will rise up with this* unfaithful and unbelieving *generation and condemn it*. *The Queen of the South* appears to be a reference for the wealthy *Queen of Sheba* who visited King *Solomon* when she heard reports of his famous *wisdom* (I Kings 10:1-13). Sheba was located far away to *the South* either in Africa (modern day Ethiopia) or the southern area of Arabia (modern day Yemen). It was practically *at the ends of the earth* from Israel. This Gentile woman *will condemn* this present *generation* of Jewish men for their foolishness. *She* traveled *from the ends of the earth to seek the wisdom* of the mortal King *Solomon* in order to learn from him. But *behold something greater*—the Messiah, God Himself, the source and fountain of all *wisdom—is here* among *you* and *you* are foolishly ignoring what *He* has to teach *you*. Shame on *you*!

By referring to these two examples of Gentile responsiveness to the testimony of God, Jesus might also be prophesying of the blessing that will come to the Gentiles through the rejection of the Jews (Romans 11).

### **Biblical Text**

**Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up with**

**this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.**