

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 12 (PART 5)

Matthew 12:40 - “Three days and three nights”

This is a direct quote from Jonah 1:17. Here’s the ESV Study Bible note on this phrase:

“Three days and three nights in Jewish reckoning is inclusive, meaning no more than three days or the combination of any part of three separate days.”

A few times in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures the phrase is used “# days and # nights”. Here are some examples:

Noah’s Flood - Genesis 7:4, 12 - "For after seven more days, I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out from the face of the land every living thing that I have made."...12 The rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights.

Moses on Mount Horeb - Exodus 24:18 & 34:28 - Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights...**34:28** So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Elijah after epic battle on Mt Carmel being fed by angels - 1 Kings 19:8 - So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Job and his friends after tragedy - Job 2:13 - Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

Jonah being swallowed by great fish - Jonah 1:17 - And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

In the New Testament the phrase and this sort of language (*days and nights*) only appears in the Gospel of Matthew. The first is from 12:40, referencing the Jonah record and the other relating to Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the wilderness:

Matthew 4:2 - And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

Remember, Matthew’s audience is assumed to be primarily Jewish and many of the literary characteristics of Matthew’s writing are comparable to common Jewish literature and language.

Here’s the rest of the ESV Study Bible quote:

“Jesus was raised "in three days" although he was buried Friday afternoon and resurrected Sunday morning (i.e., part of Friday is day one, all of Saturday is day two, and part of Sunday is day three). (ESV Study Bible, Matthew 12:40).”

The other New Testament writers use “on the third day” relating to Jesus’ resurrection day (including Matthew himself - cp. Mt 16:21; 17:23 and 20:19). Thus he can die on Friday (1), be in the grave Saturday (2) and be raised again early Sunday morning, the *third* day.

Here is one more Biblical example which brings together all of this language in one passage.

Esther 4:16-5:1 - "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for **three days, night or day**. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." 17 So Mordecai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.

Esther 5:1 Now it came about **on the third day** that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance to the palace.

If “three days night or day” means a complete 24 hour cycle of fasting, Esther would have entered the king’s court on the fourth day. But the Hebraic way of explaining the counting of days is not the same as our modern phrasing.

Matthew 12:43-45 - Spiritual Housecleaning

Jesus teaches us something about the spiritual realm here in an interestingly timed example. He says that when an evil or unclean spirit leaves a person, it is searching for a place to reside so it may “rest”.

It speaks to the foolishness of a person who is delivered from spiritual oppression, thinking that the removal of evil is all that is required to be holy. In fact, if the heart and life of a person is not filled with God’s spirit, the forces of evil will recognize that the place they once resided remains empty and return. But perhaps even more troubling is that the spirits will recognize that their former home is not only vacant but able to house some of their friends.

The Pharisees seemed to have worked hard to avoid evil and not sin - but that isn’t the same as living holy. Consider what Paul wrote:

Romans 12:1-2 - Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

We don’t just work to not conform to this world, we must be transformed by allowing God’s spirit to change our minds and make them new.

The goal isn’t just to put things in our lives “in order” and have them look nice at first glance - the goal is to fill our lives with God, his word, his spirit, his power!

Matthew 12:46-50 - Spiritual Family

v. 46 – “*mother and brothers*” - scholars look at this statement by Matthew as a possible indication that Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father may have died at this point.

I think some read this passage as if Jesus hears his mom wants to speak with him and he just ignores her and continues teaching. Perhaps. But what is more likely knowing the heart and holiness of Jesus is that he uses this moment of his family asking for him to make a point to his disciples. It’s a teachable moment.

Jesus isn’t encouraging his disciples to abandon or neglect their biological families. He is using the cultural norm of family-centeredness to contrast that which should be preeminent - his followers' devotion to him and his teachings. In addition, a new familial community takes shape amongst those who follow Jesus which will transcend the normal social and economic connections.

This entire chapter has pointed us in a repeated direction - towards Jesus. Jesus knows and expresses the heart of God. Jesus is greater than their traditions and interpretations. He’s greater than the temple, and Jonah and Solomon. He’s proving that he’s the awaited Messiah and at the same time confounding and surprising their expectations. He’s filled with and demonstrating the power of God and yet will ultimately have his death and resurrection be the sign that he is the great prophet. And he’s declaring to anyone who will hear what really matters in the end and rebuking in the strongest terms those who are rejecting his message. What really matters in the end isn’t keeping sabbath just right, getting a large platform or even being a good son or sibling - it’s about listening to and obeying the words he is speaking.