

**JON  
BENON**

**SIGN OF JONAH**

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## DEDICATION

Written in gratitude and love,  
for all who inspired this story—and you know who you are—  
and for the one who nurtured it to fruition.



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## VII

I will show wonders in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

*Acts 2:19*

“This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign,  
but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. . .”

*Luke 11:29*

“What strength do I have, that I should still hope?  
What prospects, that I should be patient?”

*Job 6:11*





## I

It started as a sick feeling deep in the pit of my stomach. It must be the seafood I ate last night, I thought. I'm not even sure what it all was, but I ate it with gusto because I was famished after the long day of meetings. Nausea like I had never experienced before. Moving in waves from my stomach up to my chest and then lodging in my throat, wanting to come out but not being able to and causing me to gag. The only momentary relief came when I lay down on my back on the bed, but then doing that made the chest pain even more acute and piercing. I have a high tolerance for pain, my mind told me, but my queasy stomach and piercingly painful chest were not comforted with that thought. If I could only throw up, perhaps there would be some relief. I grabbed the trash can and pulled it next to the bed. I leaned over and got a little relief when the gagging finally produced some results. My stomach was now somewhat better. At least the undulating nauseous waves were gone, but the chest pain still persisted with even greater intensity. Maybe a warm shower would help. It's at least worth a try.

The shower was soothing, and the penetrating chest pain was less severe, but it was still there. I felt more relaxed after the shower, but I sure didn't feel like going to the meeting I should have been getting ready for. I decided to call my colleagues and tell them I would be a little late since I wasn't feeling good. There was no answer in their rooms, so I left messages on their voice mail. Although the chest pain was less severe, its presence was always palpable. In the past I had been able to relieve chest pain by deep breathing. When I tried that this time, the pain became even more excruciating, and I had trouble breathing normally. In fact, I could only tolerate the pain by taking short quick breaths so that's what I did. Shortly, I found myself in the fetal position back on the bed, wishing I were not attending a professional meeting in a Seattle hotel 3,000 miles from home. In the fetal position lying on my right side I could stand the pain, and gradually my mind began to drift as I sank deeper and deeper into a less and less conscious state.

“The Old Testament is a prototype of the New,” declared the religion professor to his class of half-awake students, a few of whom were actually listening and taking notes. “As a prototype, the Old foreshadows the New figuratively. You may find this hard to grasp when you consider some of the extraordinary stories in the Old Testament and try to see how they could possibly—even figuratively—intimate the New. Of course, I don’t mean foreshadow in every detail, but I certainly do mean in a thematic sense. How, for example, might we see the story of Jonah as a prototype of a New Testament theme?” Silence. “Any ideas? I know it’s early, but surely one of you is awake enough to respond.”

“Dr. Jeffers, I’m sure you know what you’re teaching is important, but I don’t see that it really matters if the Old foreshadows the New. Aren’t you and other theologians just finding what you want to find in these stories so you’ll have something to talk about in religion class?”

Even some of the students who were half asleep perked up when they heard that comment, wondering how Dr. Jeffers would handle this impertinent comment from a student who everybody at a small liberal arts college in the south like Sudbury knew was only a sophomore. The silence that followed seemed longer than the one before the student had responded to the professor’s question.

“That’s not exactly what I’d hoped for, but I’m sure it’s an honest response that many of you would like to have made but didn’t have the courage to. For me to give a full answer would take the rest of the class today so I won’t attempt that, but I will simply say that in due course these kinds of issues will make sense to you, and you’ll see the light. In the meantime, I’ll assert my professorial prerogative and proclaim that it is important, and go on to pronounce that the Jonah story may be seen as a foreshadowing of the resurrection won through Christ’s sacrifice as recorded in the New Testament.”

The class breathed a collective sigh of relief as the professor went on with the lesson for the day. Now everyone was taking notes and paying attention to the lecture, but no one looked at the sophomore near the back of the room who had made the

comment, and all the students quickly left the lecture room when class was over, including the young sophomore who expected to be asked by Dr. Jeffers to remain after class but was not.

The fetal position may have helped bring some relief for a while, but I could still feel a sharp, incredibly powerful pain that would shoot through my chest at intervals, shocking me out of my dream state back into the reality of the hotel room, and the ever persistent throbbing pain in what I thought were my lungs. I must have caught pneumonia when I went out in the rain and wind yesterday without my hat, I speculated. I attempted to shift the fetal position to the left side, but the pain in that position was unbearable. Maybe another warm shower would help.

The shower did ease the intensity of the pain momentarily which now seemed to be spreading down my left arm through my sciatic nerve to the tip of my toes as I lay back on the bed, no longer in the fetal position but rather flat on my back with a pillow under my shoulders. This did bring a little relief, and I began to let go as my mind drifted ever so slowly, and the images flashed like a fast forward video until one image focused clearly in view, and I recognized it as a prodigious alligator. I heard voices, but I couldn't make out the conversation at first, or see any people. Suddenly the scene was eminently clear. I was on the edge of a large swamp, and two men were triumphantly but cautiously approaching the motionless gator with about half of its head blown off.

“Guess we don't have to worry about that one no more,” drawled the burly, fully-bearded man with the .12 gauge shotgun. “Been tryin' to nail that sucker for a long time. Months, I reckon. Look at the size of that mother. Must be at least four hundr'd pound. One of the biggest I ever saw, for sure.”

“If you sure it's dead, let's cut it open. That stomach looks pretty stuffed. Wonder what's in there? With that size, I'm sure it ain't been goin' hungry,” said the other slender man with the large hunting knife.

“It's dead alright. My trusty Remington never fails to do the job, and I gave him both barrels. Go 'head if you wanta rip

that gut. I just hope you have the stomach for it. No telling what you find in there.”

With considerable effort the two managed to turn the gator over on its back, exposing the bulging stomach, and the man with the well sharpened knife plunged it into the soft flesh and carved about a two feet long slice down the middle of the gut. With blood and water gushing out, the bulging flesh deflated like a balloon, emitting a hissing sound that caused both men to jump back. “Like a inner tube, ain’t it,” one exclaimed. “Stinks to high heaven too. Hope I don’t gag.”

The bearded man on one side of the carcass and the man with the knife on the other, they pulled back the sides of the creature and peered in, using the light from the flashlight the man who had shot the beast had taken out of his pocket to illuminate the cavity. Something in the bottom of the cavity glistened like silver from the flashlight beam. “Damn, what’s that?” asked the man with the light. “Reach in and git it.”

The other man stuck his hand in quickly and grabbed the silver object. “I’ll be damned . . . it’s a dog tag.”

“Son of a bitch. What’s the name on it?”

“Butch, looks like. Name’s worn down. Hard to read, see, but it sure looks like B-U-T-C-H.”

“Wouldn’t that be the name of Sam’s old huntin’ hound that disappeared about a year ago?”

“Yea, I believe you right. Guess we know where that hound went. Wonder how many other missing dogs went the same way? Let’s see if there’s more tags in there. Except this time you reach in and git it. I done my part on that score. I’ll hold the light for ya.”

“What a fearless bastard you are. OK, shine the light over here again, and I’ll see if there’s any more.”

Prying one side of the gator back, the former flashlight holder bent down and took his turn. “I don’t see no tags. Lot of stuff that looks like crap, but this is different.” He reached in and brought out a bone about a foot long.

“Front leg bone of a dog,” the other man said confidently. “Pretty much intact, too. Any more bones in there?”

“Yea, how ‘bout this one? Lots different from the other. Since you the expert, I reckon you know what it is too.”

“That ain’t no dog bone, I can tell you that. That looks human, maybe like a kid’s arm bone.”

“Holy shit, what you sayin’, man? You sure?”

“I may not be the brightest guy around, but I know enough to tell the difference between a dog bone and a human bone. Yea, I’m sure alright.”

The two men looked at each other, and both seemed to hit upon the same idea simultaneously. “Will,” they said in unison. “Will Jones.”

“What’s it been, ‘bout a year that kid’s been missing? But I can’t believe no gator, even one this big, could swallow a four year old.”

“O yea, O yea; it’s possible. ‘Course it wouldn’t have to swallow him intact. Look at them jaws and teeth, man.”

“You wanta pull out some’un else? I’m startin’ to git sick.”

“I’ll give it one more shot, and then let’s get the hell outa here.”

So far the two had been concentrating their probing on the part of the carcass near the head, but this time the explorer moved closer to the rear of the body of the gator, pried open the slit, reached in, and without looking brought out the first thing his hand touched. He dropped his prize quickly on the ground at their feet, and both men stared at the object and then at each other without uttering a word. Clearly visible at the end of the flashlight’s steady beam was a fully intact, chalky white human skull about the size one might expect for a young boy.

As the scene began to fade, I felt omniscient, slowly rising above the swamp until I was drifting over the whole area at a great height while I pondered what I had seen and heard. The Sudbury professor’s Jonah and the whale prototype and the image of the young boy in the stomach of the alligator juxtaposed themselves in my mind. Jonah was in the whale’s stomach for days, I thought, and the young boy must have been in the alligator’s for who knows how long? Jonah eventually emerged whole, but nothing of the young boy was left except a skull and perhaps an arm bone. If one were a prototype of resurrection, why wasn’t the other? Were the alligator and the boy prototypes? If so, prototypes of what? Certainly not resurrection. How could one know when something