

The greatest person who ever lived

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from 1 Kings chapter 10, verse 1 to 13. When the Queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions.

Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan, with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold and precious stones, she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had in her mind.

Solomon answered all her questions. Nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the Queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed.

She said to the king, Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.

And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

[1 : 44] Hiram's ships brought gold from a far, and from there they brought great cargoes of all good and precious stones. The king used the gold to make supports for the temple of the Lord and for the royal palace, and to make harps and lyres for the musicians. So much gold has never been imported or seen since that day. King Solomon gave the Queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty. Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country.

Our reading this morning is from Luke chapter 11 verse 27 to 32. As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.

He replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. As the crowds increased, Jesus said, This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.

For as Jonah was assigned to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom.

And now something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

[3 : 27] And now something greater than Jonah is here. So, if you were to set out to write a list of the 100 most significant people who ever lived, I wonder who would make your top 10 or your top 5 people.

I'm sure it won't surprise you to learn that there have been countless attempts to do exactly that, to write these kinds of lists, with varyingly controversial results. Result. Whether these lists are compiled by one person sitting down and just kind of listing what they think, or some kind of complicated data analysis project with all kinds of weighting algorithms for historical longevity and so on.

The results seem to be largely similar, however these processes begin. Shakespeare gets fairly consistent top billing among the literary figures, but when it comes to scientists there's a little more debate with Newton and Einstein and Darwin as the figures kind of fighting for the top spot in different lists.

Politically, well you're more likely to see Napoleon ranked higher than British monarchs, or for that matter, than US presidents. But because we're talking about significance, about impact on the world, you'll also see Hitler rather higher on these lists than we would wish.

Then of course there are the religious figures. Michael Hart, he caused considerable controversy in 1978, when he ranked the prophet Muhammad in his number one spot of most influential people in history.

[5 : 10] It doesn't seem to have been widespread agreement with him on this. He justifies himself saying Muhammad is kind of a more significant figure as a standalone in his own right, whereas the development of Christianity owes just as much to Saul of Tarsus to the apostle Paul, as it does to Jesus of Nazareth.

But despite that claim, the vast majority of these kinds of lists do place Jesus Christ in the number one spot of the most influential, most significant people throughout history.

And I don't imagine you're surprised that I would agree with that assessment. And that is pretty much the claim that Jesus is making for himself in these verses in Luke's Gospel.

Specifically, he compares himself here to Solomon, and he compares himself to Jonah. And he says in both cases, something greater is here. Now, of course, most of the people on those top ten lists hadn't been born when Jesus said that, but he had no expectation of ever being surpassed, and nor has he been.

So let's take a look at why specifically he claims to be greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon. And then we'll turn and consider how we ought to respond to that greatness today.

[6 : 31] So first up, this comparison to Jonah. Now, this comparison kind of rises out of the situation that we're in here in these verses. We're still on the journey down to Jerusalem, but more specifically than that, the context for this goes back up to verse 16.

Maybe you remember from last week, Jesus drove out that demon that was causing the man to be unable to speak. And then there are three different responses from the crowd. Most of the crowd were amazed, but some of them said, By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.

And others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Now, Jesus responded to the first of those two accusations immediately. We were looking at that by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he's driving out demons.

We looked at that last week. And now here in verse 29, we turn to those who were asking for a sign from heaven. As the crowds increased, Jesus said, This is a wicked generation.

It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. Now, what we need to ask here is exactly what the crowd actually are asking for, and in what way Jesus believes they will receive the sign of Jonah.

[7 : 47] See, on at least some level, the crowd are receiving signs all the time. They've just seen a sign in the driving out of the evil spirit. And the miraculous healings that Luke records elsewhere in his gospel, these also are signs.

John's gospel, John writes his parallel account of Jesus' life, and his structure essentially is built on the premise that Jesus performed these miracles explicitly as signs.

So, for instance, chapter 2 of John's gospel, after Jesus turned water into wine, John records, What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

So then why are the crowd asking for signs if they've already had them? And why does Jesus say they won't get one if he keeps giving them to them? Well, I think those in the crowd who are asking for signs in this situation, ultimately they're doing that because they don't want to believe.

They don't want to accept the evidence of their own eyes. See, Jesus is quite willing to say that his actions support his message, that the things he does prove who he is.

[9 : 07] But some people refuse to accept that evidence. Some people demand more. Walter Liefeld, he says, The Gospels oppose an inordinate demand for extraordinary miracles beyond those that are needed for a witness to Jesus' authority.

So it's reasonable to expect that Jesus will offer some proof, but to keep demanding more and more and more is inordinate, is inappropriate. And sometimes today, sometimes people say, If only God would be clearer, then I'd believe.

If he would send an unambiguous message, if he would send writing in the sky or something like that. But history shows us, history shows us really the issue isn't a lack of evidence.

It isn't an absence of proof. Because once upon a time, once God himself became a human being and lived on earth and did amazing, miraculous things and people still refused to believe him.

Ultimately, he died. And then three days later, rose again and still people did not believe what he'd been saying. Still they refused to accept him as the promised Messiah, as the Son of God himself. [10:29] It's hard to think, isn't it? What could be a more compelling sign than rising from the dead? Yet for many people, that just wasn't enough.

Why? Because they didn't want to believe. They'd already made up their minds in spite of any evidence. And that death and resurrection, that definitive sign, if you like, that seems to be at least part of what Jesus has in mind here when he talks about the sign of Jonah.

Matthew records more of Jesus' words than Luke does, saying, 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.

Now, this is the most dramatic moment in the story of Jonah, isn't it? This is the miraculous rescue from drowning. Jonah lives in the belly of the whale for three days. This is why the story of Jonah makes it into collections of Bible stories for children.

And this, I'm sure, is what first comes to mind when we talk about Jonah today. And that's true for us, and it would have been true for the crowd listening to Jesus as well. This is the exciting part of the story.

[11:51] But there is another dimension to Jonah as well that maybe is in Luke's mind a more significant one because he doesn't include that bit about the three days in the fish as a specific part of what he records.

And if you glance down to verse 32, we read there, I seem to have lost verse 32, never mind. Verse 32, we read there that the men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. See, Jonah wasn't just saved from drowning by God, sending the whale to save him.

That wasn't just because, just for no particular reason. It wasn't just a demonstration of God's power, of his authority over the beasts of the sea. It wasn't just an expression of love towards Jonah.

No, Jonah was saved because he was God's prophet, because he'd been given a specific task by God. Jonah was instructed to go and to preach in the city of Nineveh, to go and to proclaim 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

[13:06] And the amazing thing is, the people of Nineveh believed Jonah. They repented, they fasted, they mourned, and they longed for God to relent.

And he did. And Jesus says of himself, something greater than Jonah is here. Jonah was saved from death by three days in the belly of a fish.

Jesus would actually die, and then three days later, rise again. The sign is more impressive.

The sign of Jesus is more impressive than the sign of Jonah. And the preaching is fuller and more powerful too.

Jonah went to Nineveh and he preached a warning of judgment. 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. Jesus proclaims not only the warning of coming judgment, but proclaims also that the kingdom of God has come now.

[14:07] He proclaims also an offer of salvation. He proclaims good news to the poor. It is better, fuller, richer, more impactful.

It's better preaching. So no wonder then that as this generation in Jesus' day shows that they do not want to listen, that they are not interested in repentance, shows that they will not grasp the offer of salvation, no matter what Jesus says.

As they show that, no wonder, he says, the men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. Jesus says to that generation, you have a better sign than the Ninevites had and you refuse to listen.

Now, sandwiched in between these verses about Jonah and the Ninevites, we have another comparison. And this time, the characters are the Queen of the South and King Solomon.

Now, this, I'm sure, is not as well-known a story as Jonah. I'm 99% sure it is not in any of the dozen different children's Bible story collections dotted around our house.

[15:21] But again, Jesus is going back to the history of his people for a point of comparison. He's referring back to one of the greatest kings, to King Solomon himself.

And he's referring to an incident that would have been very familiar to his audience, even though it is perhaps less familiar to us. And this is what Esther read for us earlier from 1 Kings 10.

There's another version of the same incident in 2 Chronicles 9, by the way. So, back when Solomon was first crowned king, in chapter 3 of the book of 1 Kings, there God told Solomon to ask for whatever he wished.

And Solomon asked for a discerning mind, an ability to distinguish between right and wrong, in order that he might govern well and rule justly.

And so, God granted him great wisdom. Granted him wisdom to such an extent that the wisdom of Solomon remains a phrase to this day. And it was that wisdom which in chapter 10 of 1 Kings, the wisdom attracted the queen of Sheba to come and listen to him.

[16:32] Here in Luke's gospel, she's called the queen of the south, but it's two ways of referring to the same person. She's a queen in southern Arabia, the modern Yemen. And she journeyed a significant distance.

She expended a considerable amount of her wealth. Did you hear the list there in 1 Kings? She came to hear what Solomon had to say. She came to marvel at his wisdom.

As Jesus puts it here in Luke, she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom. So what? Well, when the queen of Sheba heard rumors of someone with great wisdom, this woman was willing to go to great lengths to listen to him.

She was willing to put her money behind this project. She was willing to invest her time into it.

Clearly, she believed it was worth it, though this was a costly decision that she made.

And she was right. Wisdom from God is worth making an effort to hear. And again, says Jesus, something greater than Solomon is here.

[17:41] Solomon, in all his wisdom, doesn't hold a candle to the wisdom of Jesus. Here, walking in their midst is the embodiment of the wisdom of God himself.

He shows he knows the intricacies of God's plan. He shows he knows what's inside people's hearts. He knows their inmost thoughts. So again, again, the queen of the south will rise to bring a charge against the people of that generation because she listened to Solomon and they don't listen to the one greater than he.

She and the Ninevites, they will bring their accusations against that generation and I suggest they will bring their accusations against this generation too. Folks, Jesus may not be walking among us right now, casting out evil spirits and healing disease.

We might not be able to go and sit on a hillside and hear him speak to us. But his wisdom is available to us. The records of his mighty deeds, the signs, are accessible to us.

We can know the message that he proclaimed. We can know his immense wisdom because we can read it for ourselves and because we can hear it proclaimed in churches across the country and across the world even right now from the comfort of our own sofas.

[19:02] So folks, if repentance was an appropriate response to Jonah's preaching, it's an even more appropriate response to Jesus' preaching and it's still an appropriate response to the preaching of his message today.

If it was sensible to go to great lengths to hear the wisdom of Solomon, it was even more sensible to go to greater lengths to seek the wisdom of Jesus. And it's still sensible to seek that wisdom today, to invest our time in going, in coming to hear what Jesus says.

So Jesus claims to be greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon. I said we'd finish this morning by considering the appropriate response to this. And we've done a bit of that, but at this point I want to take you back up to verse 27 where our reading began this morning.

Maybe you remember we read those verses last week as well, these last couple of verses here, verses 27 and 28. That was the end of last week's reading and the start of this week's.

We didn't really spend any time thinking about them last week, so I thought we would now, because, just as with Jonah and with Solomon, what Jesus does here in these two verses is he calls the crowd to respond correctly.

[20:21] As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you. He replied, blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.

Now, the woman in these verses, she responds really positively to Jesus, doesn't she? This is a pretty impressive thing that she claims. We could summarize her thinking as, this man is so great

that even his mother must be happy to be the mother of such a son.

Possibly a slightly more negative angle, I guess. Possibly she's thinking almost, if only I could have had such a son. Maybe it is that her son is a poor by comparison.

But at least I don't think Jesus' reply is a rebuke of this woman per se. But what I think he is saying is that she does not go far enough. It isn't enough to be impressed by Jesus.

And certainly if she's envious of his mother, then he's correcting that. But what matters when it comes to Jesus is not to be physically close to him. It's not to be related to him by blood.

[21 : 35] It's not even to be able to hear him speak and follow him around, an immense privilege though that was. No, when it comes to Jesus, what matters is that you hear the word of God and obey it.

And the word of God, as far as Luke's concerned, is synonymous with Jesus' teaching. Jesus' teaching is the word of God. So if you like what Jesus is doing here in verse 28, he's contrasting a family relationship with him against a spiritual relationship with him and saying that the latter is better by far.

Now folks, folks, that's good news for you and me, isn't it? Because none of us are Jesus' mother or brothers, but we can, we can hear the word of God and obey it.

See, I think we're sometimes inclined to think, we're inclined to think, wouldn't it have been wonderful to have seen Jesus walking around Jerusalem? Wouldn't it have been great to be there sitting on the grass hearing him preach the Sermon on the Mount live in person?

To have encountered him in the flesh would, we suppose, have had an enormous impact upon us. We want a religion that we can touch and taste and see a tangible and material Christianity.

[23 : 00] And what we have is a religion of faith, of listening. And when we're tempted to wish that we had those things, that we had been alive back then or that God would do them again today, when we're tempted to wish for those things, we need to remind ourselves that seeing is not always believing.

It isn't now and it wasn't then. people saw what Jesus did and refused to believe who he claimed to be. They clung instead to their own sins.

Folks, even one of the twelve people closest to him was disinclined to believe in him to such an extent that he'd betrayed him to his death.

It is not seeing Jesus and walking around after him and hearing what he says that makes the difference. No, blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.

So what we need isn't a blood relationship to Jesus. What we need is to hear the word of God and obey it. What we need is not endless signs and wonders but rather to follow in the footsteps of the Ninevites and repent lest we stand condemned because we ignored the one greater than Jonah.

[24 : 19] What we need is not to kind of look inside for wisdom but instead to look to the one whose wisdom surpassed even Solomon's whose renown caused a queen to come from the ends of the earth.

Hear the word of God and obey it. Why? Well folks, because it is the greatest person who ever lived who calls you to do so.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, help us to heed the warning of this passage.

Help us to recognize that danger that we might stand condemned on the last day because we refuse to heed the signs, to consider the wisdom that though we see and know one greater than Jonah or Solomon that yet we are less attentive than were those men and women of old.

Lord Jesus, give us attentive ears. Give us reflective hearts as we consider your word alone wisdom and an inclination to invest the time to pay the cost of seeking out your wisdom.

[25 : 45] Amen.