

The Sign of Jonah

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 June 2008

Preacher: Jonathan Smith

[0 : 00] confession to make this morning. It's something that I never would have admitted over the last five years on the construction sites that I worked at, but with such cultured and educated people, I feel like I can share this with you. You see, I have a great love for poetry. I love poetry. I love the way that poetry can communicate things with weight and significance in a way that mere prose cannot. And I don't so much like reading poetry, though I do. I like most of all to attempt at least to write it. And in the world of poetry, my favourite poet, I think the greatest poet that's ever lived, is William Cooper. William Cooper lived in the 18th century, and he was a friend and contemporary of John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace. He wrote some great hymns like, There is a fountain filled with blood, and God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. He was a great lover of the sovereignty of God, and he was a great and powerful weapon for the resurgence and reformation and revival of evangelicalism in England and Britain. He's known for a couple of things today. He's known for his poetry across the board in secular circles as well, and for his hymns. But he's also known for his ill mental health. He suffered all of his adult life with what they called at that time melancholy, what we would call severe depression. And he had bouts of this that were absolutely irrepressible.

He tried to take his life on two occasions, both times was thwarted, and you can read in his poetry an utter despair at times. On the one hand, he exalted the glory of God and worshipped Jesus as saviour in his poetry. And at the same time, he struggled with a sense of absolute despair. He struggled most of his life with an incessant, niggling feeling that perhaps he had committed at some time in his life, the unforgivable sin. He felt that at some point he may have blasphemed the Holy Spirit. And therefore, though God was willing to save every man that came to him, he alone was outside of God's grace. He wrote a poem, which I think is heart-wrenching, I don't mind saying. He wrote a poem called The Cast Away. It was one of the last poems he wrote, and he died with this kind of sentiment. He was on a boat earlier in his life, and as they were out on the sea, a storm came up and a fellow sailor was washed overboard. And he wrote a poem about that man that was washed overboard. But the point of the poem is in the last few lines where he explains that that man, compared to him, was fortunate. Because this man had been washed over the boat and been cast away. But Cooper felt that he had been cast away by God himself.

Listen to these last words. He says, No voice divine the storm allayed, no light propitious shone. When snatched from all effectual aid, we perished each alone. But I beneath a rougher sea, and whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

He never overcame this feeling of dread that God would not forgive him for this particular sin. And there are people today, and people who I have spoken to, who have come to me in despair and distress, that they may not be forgiven for the sins that they've committed.

Well, this passage this morning offers great hope, if that's you here this morning. I want to jump right into it now, but before we do, why don't we pray together, ask God for help. Bow with me.

[4 : 35] Dear Lord, thank you so much for this tough, meaty passage. I pray that you would move powerfully to open our eyes to see Jesus Christ, who died and was buried and rose again for our salvation.

I pray that we would see him with arms open, ready and willing to invite every wretched, evil sinner into the kingdom of God. If only we would repent.

Please be with us now, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Let's dive straight in. We're going to start at verse 22. The scene is set. Jesus has healed a blind, mute, demon-possessed man.

He was healed in a miraculous scene. But Matthew doesn't linger there. He moves on. He doesn't want us to concentrate on the miracle, though that's important.

He wants to show us what happened afterwards. So verse 23. Have your Bibles open with me so that we can see this together. Matthew 12, verse 23.

[5 : 43] All the crowds were amazed and said, Can this be the son of David? That's a great question to ask. They'd been following Jesus around.

They'd seen him do miracles. They were asking the obvious question to them. Can this be the son of David? Can this be the Messiah who God has promised will come and usher in the kingdom of God?

Can this be the promised Messiah? It's a great question to ask when we see Jesus performing miracles. But Matthew doesn't linger there either.

Jesus doesn't even answer the question. Matthew's interested in the response of the Pharisees. The response of the Pharisees should be, Yes, this is the Messiah.

It's incredible. He's just healed people. We've followed him around. We've checked him out. He's the Messiah. There's no doubt about it. This is God's son. This is God with us.

[6 : 45] Should have been their response. They'd seen him perform the miracles. They'd heard his teaching. You notice that no one is denying that he is casting out demons, that he is doing miracles.

But their actual response, their tragic and damnable response, is laid out in verse 24. Verse 24. But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that this fellow casts out demons.

The Pharisees accused Jesus of being in league with the devil. They think that, Well, he's kind of in with the devil. He knows the secret handshakes.

He knows the passwords. That's how he's getting these demons to come out. Maybe the demons are just kind of feigning to be exercised. And really, this is Jesus' way, because he is in with the devil, of tricking us into following them both.

I don't know about you, but I get angry when I read these words. I believe that Jesus is the most glorious being in the universe.

[8 : 06] That he came and lived and died and was raised for our sins. And so when I hear someone saying, Oh, Jesus, he's the devil, I get angry.

There are a few words from the building site that I could use and I won't. Well, what does Jesus do in response?

What I want him to do is turn around and thump one of them in the face or command awaiting angels to smite them there on the spot, which he could have done. Instead, he responds with calm, ice-cool logic.

Verse 25 and 26. He knew what they were thinking and said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? He says, Listen, if I'm in league with the devil, why am I doing so much violence against the devil?

[9 : 18] Why am I giving the devil such a hard time if I'm really in cahoots with him? I'm a huge football fan and I mean real football like the original football.

I like AFL. It's good. I enjoy watching AFL, but I really get passionate about football. We call it soccer, which is an aberration. It's football. And last night, the European Championships began. Euro 2008 happens every four years. It's like the Olympics, only bigger. And this year, it's in Switzerland and Austria.

And the first game was started last night. It was Switzerland versus the Czech Republic. Czech Republic won 1-0. Now, what would have happened to that scoreline?

Would the Czech Republic still have won the game if they had to turn around and start kicking goals for the Swiss? Of course not. It's ridiculous to think that they would have done that.

[10 : 20] And that's the essence of Jesus' argument. If he is for the devil, why is he kicking goals against the devil? Why is he beating the devil to a pulp? Why is his kingdom advancing against Satan's kingdom?

It's ridiculous. It's preposterous. It's his first logical argument. Here's the second. Verse 27. If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by the lord of the flies, by the prince of demons, by whom do your exorcists cast them out?

He's calling them to account. He's calling them to be consistent. See, during those days, God-fearing Jews in the name of Yahweh, the only God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, those people were casting out demons from time to time.

And he's saying, listen, if my casting out demons means that I'm in league with demons, what about your guys? Why don't you accuse them of being in league with Satan?

You've got to be consistent. Of course, it's all ludicrous. And he showed them for who they truly are. The truth is that the Pharisees couldn't pin Jesus for being in league with Satan.

[11 : 42] It was ridiculous. So he shows them another alternative. Verse 28. But if by the spirit of God I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

Verse 29. And to paraphrase, Jesus has come to bind up the strong man, Satan's house, and to plunder it and to set free all those who Satan has bound up and enslaved and ensnared.

He's come to liberate those people just as he has done for this man at the start of the passage. As Jesus' kingdom advances, Satan's kingdom is plundered.

Satan might be a strong man, but Jesus is the strong man and he binds him up and takes his kingdom from him. The Pharisees can't logically call Jesus the devil but neither will they submit to him as God.

And so they make the fatal, fatal error of rejecting him rather than worshipping him. Friends, that's the same dilemma we have before us this morning, isn't it?

[13 : 02] We can either fall at the feet of Jesus and worship him as God. We can either see clearly from his miracles, from his teaching, from his death and resurrection that he is the one and only God, our saviour.

And we can worship him and give our lives to him. Or we can shut him up as a demon and call him the prince of demons.

They're the options that Jesus gives us this morning. Jesus has drawn the line in the sand. He is God. Satan is his enemy.

Now he gives the application for that. Verse 30, whoever is not with me is against me and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Friends, our generation is a generation of pluralism, of the widest, broadest possible religious tolerance.

Agnosticism is the default. We don't really know who God is and we don't really care. Jesus won't stand for that.

[14 : 22] He says, whoever is not with me is against me. You can either worship me or worship Satan.

They're the options. It's not as if there's Jesus and there's Satan and there's a fence to sit on in the meantime. It's Jesus and Satan and there's no fence at all. They're the options.

Man, I hope and pray that this morning you've come to worship Jesus and not shut him up as a devil.

Plead with you. If you're not already, worship Jesus. Jesus. And if you're not already, he has some amazing words for you.

There is hope here. Verse 31. Therefore, I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy.

[15 : 29] Stop there. Do you get that? Therefore, I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy.

Rapists, adulterers, embezzlers, wretched, wretched, wretched sinners, gossipers, child abusers, wife beaters.

every sin will be forgiven. Think on that.

Every sin will be forgiven. Every blasphemy will be forgiven. But there is one exception. every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the spirit will not be forgiven.

Murder will be forgiven. Rape will be forgiven. Ethnic cleansing will be forgiven. Even verse 32, speech against Jesus, the son of man, will be forgiven.

[17 : 04] forgiven. So what is this blasphemy of the spirit then? Firstly, we need to be really clear about this. It's clearly not the case that God will ever turn away someone who comes to him, begging him for forgiveness, who truly, truly, humbly falls before Jesus and asks him to be forgiven and reconciled.

That's the great truth of the gospel. See that in 1 Timothy 2, 3 to 5, this is good and pleases God, our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ. How about John 6, 37? Jesus says, all that the Father gives me will come to me.

Mark these words. And whoever comes to me, I will never drive out. I will never cast away. William Cooper had nothing to fear.

He wanted to be forgiven. Those who want to be forgiven will never be cast out. So it's clear, God's desire is for all people to be saved, not just nice church boys, not just people who have nice manners and have been coming to Holy Trinity for years or whatever.

[18 : 39] He doesn't care about that on the level of salvation. He wants wretches, people like me, evil to the core.

He wants them to come to him and throw themselves on his mercy. don't leave here today thinking that you cannot come to Jesus if you are willing to come to Jesus.

So, what makes the unforgivable sin unforgivable then? I want you to get this. I'm going to go over it a couple of times. This is really important. People who have blasphemed the Spirit are unforgivable because they have willingly and consciously attributed what is clearly the work of God to Satan.

I'm going to go over this a few times. People who have blasphemed the Spirit are unforgivable because they have willingly and consciously attributed what is clearly the work of God to Satan.

Remember Saul of Tarsus later known as Paul wrote half the New Testament. He was going around persecuting the church doing violence against God's church and when God appeared to him when Jesus appeared to him Jesus said to him why are you persecuting me?

[20 : 14] What was Saul's response? He didn't say get behind me Satan he didn't attribute that voice to the work of the devil no he humbly repented and believed the gospel the worst of sinners gets forgiven same goes for you friends if you're worried about whether you have committed the unforgivable sin my counsel would be that you haven't those who so distort a picture of God so as to see him as the devil will never lose a moment's sleep over whether they're forgiven those who see in Jesus Christ the work of Satan will never come to repentance if you're worried that you are unforgivable if you are despairing and begging

God to be saved he will save you he's promised to you may need to fall at his feet and repent I recommend that you do.

But he promises to forgive. Say it again. The point is that someone who has so distorted the picture of Jesus, who is glorious and sovereign and good and loving and lays down his life for miserable, evil sinners, people who distort that picture so much that they see Satan there instead of God's son, they will never come to repentance.

Never. And they'll never lose sleep over it, not for a minute. Saul was saved. He wasn't condemned for his previous sins against Jesus.

But there are those that are so toxic, so poisonous, so utterly evil, that when they see the Spirit's work, when they see the Spirit working powerfully in the world today, they attribute that work to the work of Satan, father of lies and the prince of demons.

[22 : 45] And so they willingly and consciously blaspheme the Spirit. I want to quote you something from D.A. Carson. He's a great Bible expositor. And I think he gets it right. So I want to read this for you so that we can get it together.

He says, Jesus says that those who perceive that his ministry is empowered by the Spirit and then for whatever reason, whether spite, jealousy or arrogance, ascribe it to Satan, have put themselves beyond the pale.

For them, there is no forgiveness. And that is the verdict of Jesus, who has authority to forgive sins. Well, in the next section, Jesus confirms that the Pharisees weren't just mucking around when they said what they said.

They weren't just playing with words. He spells it out, verse 33 to 37. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad.

For the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

[24 : 05] For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure.

I tell you, on the day of judgment, you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter. For by your words, you will be justified, and by your words, you'll be condemned.

Why are we condemned and justified by our words? Because out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. You prove how you feel about God in your heart by the way that you speak.

And when you attribute his work to the devil, will you condemn yourself? Let's move on to the final section of this passage.

Verse 38 and 39. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, Jesus, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them, an evil and adulterous generation asked for a sign, but none will be given to you except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[25 : 25] These people, these Pharisees, have just seen Jesus heal a mute and blind, demon-possessed man. And yet they want more signs.

They want more miracles. They won't be satisfied with what Jesus has given them. And you know, there are people like this today. They always want more evidence for God's existence.

They always want more, more, more. They'll never be satisfied. These people are the same. They want another miracle and another miracle.

They've followed Jesus forever now. Since the start, they've been popping up. And yet they'll never be satisfied with the miracles that he shows them.

So rather than giving them a miracle, Jesus gives them the sign of the prophet Jonah. Do you remember Jonah? It's more than a kid's story.

[26 : 24] So much more than a kid's story. I encourage you to read it today. It's really short. You'll hear more about it over the coming weeks. We're doing a sermon series on Jonah. And just so you know, the book of Jonah isn't about Jonah.

Jonah is an annoying, pugnacious, rebellious little man. The story of Jonah is about God. God's forgiveness.

God's holiness. God's willingness to forgive people who repent. So Jonah, he's a prophet. God comes to him. This is the very condensed edition of Jonah.

God comes to him. He says, there are people in Nineveh and the people in Nineveh were wretched people. I mean, they were like people from Tasmania. They were just wretched, wretched people.

You can read about them elsewhere in the Bible. They sacrifice their own children and they drink their enemy's blood and do all sorts of terrible things. So he says, Jonah, Jonah go and preach repentance to the Ninevites and Jonah doesn't want to do it because he knows that God is a forgiving God and if he go and preaches to the Ninevites, they'll repent and God will forgive them and he doesn't want those kind of people to be forgiven.

[27 : 42] So he says, no thanks, goes exactly the opposite direction. Jumps on a boat, God sends a storm, Jonah gets tossed over, God saves him by sending a fish to swallow him.

He's in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Where does the fish end up? Ironically enough, by coincidence maybe, in Nineveh. Spits him out on the shore.

Jonah says, I guess I better preach repentance. Goes into the city. Bang! Every single person in the city up to the king bows down and worships the God of the Bible.

Jesus uses this story, points to this sign of Jonah for two reasons I think. We'll go through them real quick and we'll finish. He'll use Jonah's experience as an opportunity to speak about his death and resurrection.

Secondly, he'll use the Gentile pagans in the story. Ninevites were Gentile pagans.

[28 : 54] The Queen of the South that's mentioned, Queen of Sheba, pagan. He'll use these examples of Gentile pagans as he often does to contrast their unlikely faithfulness in God with the Pharisees' willing unfaithfulness to God.

So firstly, he speaks of his death and resurrection. Verse 40, For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

I tell you what, I wasted so much time this week reading essays from people trying to explain Jesus' apparent mistake in this verse.

Have you picked it? He says, just like Jonah was in the belly of a fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the belly of the earth three days and three nights. But we know that at the most Jesus was in the tomb for two nights, so obviously he's wrong.

Jesus isn't really the Son of God. We should throw out the Bible, pile them up in the middle of the church and burn them because obviously it's all useless because of that contradiction. just so you know, that's not right.

[30 : 10] Just so you know. How often we come to the Bible in our pride and try and pick it apart with all our academic weight.

By the way, there's at least three good reasons why Jesus is right. We don't need to go into that. We miss his point, his clear and obvious point that little children can pick up and yet we miss sometimes.

The point is he's talking about his death, his burial, his resurrection. He knows from the start before the foundations of the world and from the start of his ministry that he's been on the road to the cross.

Just as Jonah was used to bring the Ninevites to forgiveness to be saved, Jesus will die.

He'll be buried in the ground and he'll be raised so that all men everywhere can come to repentance and faith. We'll move on.

[31 : 25] What about the pagans in this story? He's going to use them as well. He's going to use them to condemn the religious elite. Verse 41, the people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah and see something greater than Jonah is here, namely Jesus.

The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon and see something greater than Solomon is here, namely Jesus.

The Ninevites were terrible, terrible sinners, the worst of sinners and yet in the Hebrew it's a three-word sermon I think or a five-word sermon.

It's not a Billy Graham crusade that Jonah walks into town with. He walks in and says repent. God's angry, you need to repent and they repent to a man.

Jesus says those pagans, those Gentiles, they repented when Jonah came and yet the son of man, the Messiah, has come and you and your arrogance and pride have rejected him.

[32 : 49] Can you see the contrast? What about the Queen of Sheba, the Queen of the South? She travelled for miles to hear the wisdom of Solomon, to hear the word of God, this pagan queen and yet the religious elite, those who have the very words of God, reject Jesus' words and call him the devil.

I wonder what your response is this morning to Jesus' words. I know many of you glory in Jesus Christ.

I know many of you are quick to humble yourself at his feet and ask for forgiveness and to repent and turn away from your sin and that's because Jesus has broken through your pride and you have repented and you have asked for his forgiveness and you're seeking to walk in his way and that is just the greatest thing.

I know that some of you were like I was, that in my pride and arrogance I discredited the word of God and in rejecting Jesus I condemned him as being in league with the devil.

I would implore you this morning to see Jesus working miracles to see Jesus teaching about God's kingdom to see the kingdom of God advancing throughout the world today a billion Christians are falling at Jesus' feet and worshipping him because of what he's done in their lives.

[34 : 51] I would implore you to see that and not reject him but to come to him whose arms are wide open ready to embrace you.

those who eagerly come to Jesus and humbly repent and plead with him to be forgiven will be forgiven.

Friends, Jesus is the king of glory who rules over the prince of demons. There's no match there. It's not like dualism.

It's not like a 50-50 fight. Jesus is king Jesus over all the earth. He is the creator and he thumps Satan in the face with every demon that he casts out with every life that is regenerated with every conversion to Christ and his kingdom is advancing even as I speak.

He's the eternal judge who both pardons and condemns He is willing to pardon but he will condemn if you don't come to him in faith.

[36 : 07] He's the living word who commands us to repent and be saved. The words to the Ninevites are the same words to us today. God is angry at sinners who ignore him.

He is a jealous God and he will condemn you but he's willing to save you. come to him.

He's the willing sacrifice who died and was buried and was raised again for our salvation. Just as Jonah was in the heart or the belly of the fish for three days and three nights so Jesus was dead and buried and then rose again to prove that he is God and he is mighty to save.

I'd like to finish by praying for us now. Let's bow our heads together. Lord Jesus it is a terrible thing to think that we might be beyond your forgiveness so I pray now that every one of us would come to you humbly repenting for our waywardness for ignoring you for worshipping other things other people other created things rather than the creator.

Every one of us has wandered away from you at some point I pray that you would bring us in like the prodigal son that we would see the prodigal son coming home and the father rejoicing I pray that we would see you as that father with arms open running to meet us on the way Lord lead us to repentance lead us to faith help us to embrace your grace and to glory in it this morning.

[38 : 06] Jesus we love you so much we thank you for all that you've done and all that you're going to do for Jesus sake Amen