

Something greater than 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: 07 April 2019

Preacher: Brian Parker

[0 : 00] The passage we're going to be looking at this evening is from Matthew chapter 12.

Just a short reading this evening. From Matthew chapter 12. And we're going to break in at verse 38.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered saying, teacher, we want to see a sign from you. But he answered and said to them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign. And no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish. So will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it. Because they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

[1 : 09] And indeed greater than Jonah is here. And we'll end our reading there. We'll come back and consider that reading just after we sing this next piece.

Why doesn't God show himself more clearly? This is an issue that troubles both believers and non-believers.

For believers, especially those but not always exclusively new believers, the struggle to believe is real. Doubting thoughts can come in different forms.

Why has God called me to do with my life? Why do tragedies happen? Why can sometimes God feel so distant?

Even sometimes in our prayer life, we desire that God would come by his spirit. And show himself more clearly to unsafe friends or to family members. And for unbelievers, it can be a huge stumbling block to make that step of faith.

[2 : 16] If I'd become a Christian, if God would just show himself to me. If God is all-powerful, why doesn't he come and show it? If Jesus is alive, then I must see the signs and wonders that we read of in the Bible.

And yet, this isn't a new issue. Even when Jesus himself was walking the earth, people still wanted him to show who he was.

In our passage this evening, we have the scribes and Pharisees asking Jesus for a sign or for a miracle. Now, to add some context, Jesus has already done plenty of miracles by this stage in his ministry.

In this chapter alone, for instance, he heals a man with a weathered hand in verses 9 to 14. And he carried out an exorcism and healed a demon-possessed man in verses 22 to 37.

So why then are these men looking for another sign when they've just witnessed these miracles? Their problem was not necessarily a lack of evidence as to who Jesus was, his identity as the Son of God.

[3 : 24] But rather, there was a lack of will on their part to respond. The request wasn't genuine. It wasn't sincere. This wasn't the only occasion that they'd approached Jesus like this.

If we read in chapter 16, in verse 1, it tells us that the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to test him. And they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. Jesus also challenges them on this issue in John chapter 4 when he says, It's also worth noticing here that the word here used for sign can be used to describe a cosmic sign from heaven.

Though these men had seen earthly miracles that Jesus had performed, perhaps they wanted him to really prove that he was the Son of God and do something astronomical. However, throughout the Gospels, we can see that Jesus never performed miracles in order to please others.

Even the devil himself couldn't tempt Jesus to turn the stones into bread during his time in the wilderness in Matthew 4. Ultimately, they were looking for a sign that they could use against Jesus.

Bearing in mind that these were the same men who were plotting to kill him. But Jesus here sees straight through them and he rebukes them. What does he say in verse 39?

[4 : 50] He says, But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it. It sounds pretty strong, but it's important to note that adultery here is referring to a spiritual adultery.

And by that we mean an unfaithfulness to God. Jesus never rebuked anyone who was seeking healing out of a genuine need. But he knows that his opponents here have malicious motives. The motive of a motif of spiritual adultery is a common one throughout Scripture. James warns against it when he says, You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. In fact, we see that the whole book of Hosea is a lesson on spiritual adultery.

Where God uses the life of the prophet to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness to him. These men were asking for a sign in order to disguise their inner motives of our heart.

[6 : 04] Jesus here instead points to their own Scripture and tells them that the only sign that they will see will be the sign of the prophet Jonah. And I suppose if you're looking for a title for this message, it would be something greater than Jonah.

As this is the second of three such sayings that Jesus makes in this chapter. In verse 6, he tells us that something greater than the temple is here. And in verse 42, he says that someone greater than Solomon is here.

So then, in what ways is Jesus greater than Jonah? Let me suggest three for us this evening. Firstly, that he brought a greater message than Jonah.

Secondly, that he was a greater messenger than Jonah. And thirdly, that he performed a greater miracle than Jonah. So firstly, Jesus came with a greater message.

Well, what was Jonah's message? It was incredibly brief and to the point. And in fact, it only takes eight words. Jonah walks into the middle of this great city and he declares, Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown.

[7 : 17] And it's very definitely a message of judgment with no mention of hope at all. The Ninevites were a desperately wicked people and God's patience had ran out on them.

His judgment was about to fall on them. And what was their response to this? Well, I think it's one of the most shocking things of the book of Jonah and there are many. It would be easy to imagine them treating this message of a smelly foreign prophet with contempt and scorn.

Who was he to turn up in their city and pronounce judgment on it? And yet chapter 3 of Jonah tells us that they believed God and they repented of their sins.

Everyone from the king right the way down. And incredibly, verse 10 of chapter 3 of Jonah tells us that when God saw what they did, how they had turned from their evil ways, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them.

And he did not do it. So Jonah's message was a message of judgment. What about Jesus? And why was it greater? Jesus' message was a message of love.

[8 : 30] Matthew 5, he says, I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. It's a message of forgiveness.

Matthew 6 says, For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But ultimately, it was a message of salvation.

Luke 19 says, For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Jonah's message was specifically for that time and for that place. And yet Jesus came for the salvation of mankind.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

However, the irony is that while the message of Jonah was met with universal acceptance, it can be seen here through the attitude of the scribes and the Pharisees that Jesus' message wasn't.

[9 : 39] So Jesus preached a greater message than Jonah. And then secondly, he was a greater messenger. Firstly, let's look at Jonah. What do we know about him?

Like Francis was introducing us to Nehemiah this morning, Jonah seems to be one of these people who just appears at a given time in a certain place, and we know very little of their background.

But we can say that, first of all, he was human. Jonah 1 and 1 tells us that he was the son of Amtita. And with that humanity, he was sinful.

In his case, he was disobedient to the command of God. God spoke to him and told him, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call it against it. For the evil has come up, their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose and rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He was given a direct mission and message from God, and yet he chose to go against it.

[10:42] And we know that he was a prophet. He was a messenger from God. 2 Kings 14 tells us that he, that's King Jeroboam, restored the border of Israel from Labo Hamath, as far as the Sea of Haraba, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, son of Atita, the prophet.

So that was Jonah, but by comparison, who was Jesus? Or Jonah, Jonah, sorry, was merely human. Jesus is divine.

1 John 5 tells us, and we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true and that we are in him who is true.

In his Son, Jesus Christ, he is the true God and eternal life. Where Jonah was disobedient to God's call, Jesus was obedient.

Paul, writing in his letter to the Philippians, says, though he, as Jesus, was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death, on a cross.

[12:09] Jesus was aware of the plan of salvation all along, and while we see the struggle, something of the struggle he went through, particularly in Gethsemane, he remained obedient. And where Jonah was merely a prophet, Jesus himself was the Savior, the promised Messiah.

Peter wrote concerning Jesus, he bore, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed. Scripture tells us that he was the only one who qualified to be that Savior. Jesus himself declared, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. The hymn writer helps understand this reason as to why he was the only one. And when he penned, there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.

He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. Jesus lived a sinful life and therefore was the only one qualified to be the Savior. So Jesus brought a greater message.

[13:19] He himself was a greater messenger. And lastly, he performed the greater miracle. Now when Jesus is talking here about the sign of Jonah, he is making reference in particular to the events in Jonah 2.

After being thrown into the sea by the crew of the ship during the storm, God provided a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

And after which we read in chapter 2 verse 10, the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out onto the dry land. Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Matthew 12 match exactly with this account and therefore they add authenticity to the original.

Now with the benefit of the complete scriptures, we are able to identify that Jesus is referring here to his own death and resurrection. It's worth noting in passing that the three days and three nights that Jesus refers to in verse 40 in the Jewish reckoning were inclusive.

It implies to no more than three days or the combination of any part of three separate days. Jesus being buried on the Friday afternoon and rose again on the Sunday morning.

[14:40] Jesus' death and resurrection would be the ultimate validation of his identity and his mission. This would be far greater than any sign from the heavens that the scribes and Pharisees were potentially seeking.

Not only did Jesus understand that this would be a greater sign but he knew that this would meet the greater need of mankind, salvation from sin and death.

Jesus knew that miraculous signs are not the answer to the depravity of the human heart. Luke's account tells us that Jesus did indeed die. Chapter 23 tells us that Jesus calling out with a loud voice said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

And having said this he breathed his last. And that he was buried. Verse 53 of the same chapter says that then he, that's Joseph of Arimathea, took it down as Jesus' body and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid it in a tomb cut in stone.

Scriptures also tell us that he rose again. The apostle Paul writing in his letter to the Corinthians said Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

[16 : 01] And herein lies the greater miracle. Such was the significance of the resurrection of Jesus that the whole Christian faith stands or falls on it.

Paul goes on to say in that same chapter in Corinthians that if Christ had not been raised your faith is futile and you're still in your sins. The words that Jesus used here to describe the age that he was living in at that time and evil and adulterous generation could very easily be used to describe the age that we live in today.

Even in the land that we live in, a land that is once known as the land of the book, a land that has known great times of spiritual blessing and revival as Francis was alluding to this morning, is now largely committing the same spiritual adultery that Jesus speaks of here.

In a world we're supposedly seeing as believing, many people today are still looking for some sort of sign from God to prove that he is real and that he is able to reveal his power more clearly.

However, as we have seen, that Jesus has already given the greatest sign through his death and his resurrection. Paul in 2 Thessalonians says, the coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

[17 : 35] Why do people chase these signs and wonders? Well, Paul says it simply because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved. And worryingly, Jesus' words described in Pharisees in verse 41 are also true of unsaved today.

He says, the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. If the Ninevites felt convicted and repented of their wrongdoings having heard an eight-word message of judgment from a prophet who hated them, how much worse will it be for the Pharisees and indeed for those today who do not repent, given that they have heard a message of love, of hope and forgiveness.

God has entrusted each of us with that responsibility to carry that message of hope and of love and of forgiveness to these people, these people that we're seeking to reach, these people that we're even thinking about there this evening in our prayers.

And as well he has given us the Holy Spirit to take our words and apply it to the hearts and lives of those we are seeking to reach. However, while we've been given the responsibility to share the message, we remember that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of those whom Paul, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, whose minds have been blinded by the God of this world, those who are still seeking visible signs of God's power.

Maybe, however, you feel that recently God has been somewhat distant in your own life and your desire is that God would make himself more real to you.

[19 : 25] Maybe you've been having doubts about God and his care for you. Throughout Scripture, in fact, right from the Garden of Eden, we can see that Satan has made it one of his greatest weapons to take God's word and to twist them to try and convince us that God is somehow holding out on us.

Have confidence that God has already given his greatest sign through Jesus, this greatest indication that he loves us and that he has proved, provided a way through Jesus' death, through the sign of Jonah, that we can enter into a relationship with him and know him better in this life and that we have a hope for eternity.

Amen. Amen.