

Pray

Reading

This is the word of God.

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered [Jesus], saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 But [Jesus] answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 **For just 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.**

41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for **THEY repented at the preaching of Jonah**, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

(Matthew 12:38–41)

Intro

I remember back in the day, watching a TV series called Cosmos, and it was presented by an astronomer called Carl Sagan. He was a famous atheist in his day, and he popularized the saying "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence".

In other words, if someone like Jesus makes the extraordinary claim that He is the Son of God, Carl Sagan would say, you're going to need some pretty extraordinary evidence to back up a claim like that.

But it's not just atheists who would say something like that. As we just heard in this passage, very religious people make similar demands too.

And Jesus says to them, "The only sign you'll get is the sign of the prophet Jonah." So what exactly IS the sign of Jonah?

I've got three headings:

Firstly, The Signs We Demand

Secondly, The Sign God Provides

Thirdly, The Repentance God Commands

The Signs We Demand

In Matthew chapter 12, we have the scribes and the Pharisees talking to Jesus. These people were considered to be the religious elite, they were the leaders of the Jewish people. And they say that if Jesus WERE to perform a sign for them, then they would believe in Him.

The same thing happens again in Matthew chapter 16, this time with the Saduccees also making the same demand, AND then again in Matthew chapter 27, we have just about EVERYONE making the same demand, as Jesus is dying.

...those who passed by [the cross] derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, SAVE yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save

himself. He is the King of Israel [?]; let him come down NOW from the cross, and we will believe in him.

(Matthew 27:39b-42)

Now there's a great irony here, because the most religious people in the land are unconsciously making the same demands as Satan himself. Matthew chapter 4:

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread... If you ARE the Son of God, throw yourself down and the angels will rescue you..."

(Matthew 4:3, 6)

You say you're the Son of God, but extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

And really, we might even say to ourselves, well Jesus, why not? Why not do what these people are challenging

you to do, IF it means that they will put their trust in you and be saved.

The answer to that, sadly, is that there are some people who will NEVER be persuaded by anything, however great the evidence.

We know THAT because in Matthew chapter 12, the ones who still demand a remarkable sign have literally just been given a remarkable sign!

Matthew 12 verse 22:

22 ...a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to [Jesus], and [Jesus] healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. 23 And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

(Matthew 12:22–24)

See? No amount of extraordinary evidence is enough for them. Even if Jesus does exactly the kind of sign that they're demanding, they just say "It doesn't prove that he's the Son of God, it proves that he's the Son of Satan."

So it's a bit rich of them immediately after THAT sign, and their rejection of it, to say:

Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.
(Matthew 12:38)

Isn't that what He's just done? And you accused him of being demon possessed? So what could he possibly do that would convince you?

Remarkably, the same pattern plays out again in chapter 16. Just after Jesus has fed four thousand people with seven loaves and some small fish, they say: "Show us a sign from heaven."

Jesus has just recreated the same miracle that God Himself does for the Israelites in the wilderness when he fed them with manna from heaven, but that's not enough proof for them either.

And Jesus is scathing. Matthew 16:

[Jesus] answered THEM, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' 3 And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

(Matthew 16:2-3)

You look at the sky and you can read that correctly. But when you look at me, and see how I fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, and see the miracles which authenticate the fact that I am indeed the Messiah, for some reason you can't read THAT correctly?

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. But extraordinary evidence will never be enough for those who have a vested interest in NOT believing.

The religious elite of the time despise the fact that Jesus is drawing crowds away from THEM, they despise the fact that he routinely exposes them when they try to trick him, and most of all they despise the fact that he reveals their hypocrisy as people who look religious on the outside but are rotten on the inside. That's why he repeatedly calls them "evil and adulterous".

And that brings us to our second heading.

The Sign God Gives

Matthew chapter 12:

38 ... "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

39 But [Jesus] answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except *the sign of the prophet Jonah*. [What IS the sign of Jonah? Jesus elaborates in the next verse:] For just 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.

(Matthew 12:38b–40)

"Son of Man" is the way Jesus most commonly refers to himself. So Jesus seems to be saying that the sign of Jonah will be his own death, burial and resurrection.

Incidentally, I know sometimes people get tied up in knots over how you fit three days and three nights in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but the phrase "three days and three nights" in Jewish reckoning is inclusive, meaning that any part of a single day is counted as "a day and a night". So part of Friday is day one, Saturday is day two, and part of Sunday is counted as day three.

And Jesus connects his own death and resurrection with the apparent death and resurrection of Jonah. You see Jonah's message was accepted by the Ninevites because they saw that he had been raised from death by God. Therefore, Jesus says, you should accept my message because the same will happen to me.

Now you might say, hang on, was Jonah resurrected from death? Well as you may remember, Jonah had been thrown into the middle of the sea during a raging storm, and was then swallowed by a great fish.

If you had seen either of those two things happening, you would have said, it's game over for Jonah. People don't come back from that.

And actually the way Jonah himself describes the experience, it certainly sounds like he died. He says

5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped about my head

6 at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land

whose bars closed upon me forever; [sounds
pretty final right?]

yet you brought up my life from the pit,

O Lord my God.

(Jonah 2:5–6)

And when the Ninevites saw what had happened to Jonah - this resurrection from apparently certain death - it authenticated his message. They listened to him, and they repented, because God was clearly with him.

And Jesus is saying, I myself will be fully and finally authenticated and I am resurrected from death. That will be the Sign of Jonah to you.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. And Christ's resurrection IS extraordinary evidence.

You may say, well I wasn't there. I only have these ancient documents to go on. I didn't SEE the resurrection myself.

But what we DO see, all around us, even now, is the unmistakable aftermath of Jesus' resurrection. Even if you don't see the stone thrown in the lake, you can still see the ripples afterwards.

What do I mean? Among other things, I mean that churches began to arise and ripple outwards from Jerusalem, not long after Jesus death. For those churches to come into existence and then multiply required some kind of extraordinary cause, because the opposition against those churches was so incredibly fierce. They should by rights have been stamped out before they could even begin.

They didn't multiply because of military might or wars of conquest. Quite the reverse. These were small groups of weak and beleaguered people, led by an Apostle, Peter, who up to that point was famous for his cowardice in the face of opposition. It makes no sense.

We may not have seen the stone landing in the water, but the ripples are unmistakable. Not just the stunning proliferation of churches, but also:

the triumph of concepts which simply did not exist before, such as human rights, the PROTECTION of the weak rather than their ruthless extermination, the foundation of countless thousands of hospitals and charities, the foundation of the world's greatest universities, the foundation of modern science, the modern belief that all people regardless of sex or ethnicity ought to be accorded equal dignity and respect, the abolition of slavery, and so on.

Ironically, the atheists who speak freely against Christianity can only do so because Christianity has created free societies in which they can.

As the historian Tom Holland says in his book Dominion:

To live in a Western country is to live in a society saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions.

The existence of these things, and the widespread embrace of them, can only be adequately explained by the cataclysmic shock of a radically loving God entering the world, living a life that was faultlessly consistent with that claim, and then being authenticated by the accuracy of his prediction that on the third day after his death he would be physically resurrected.

That is the sign of Jonah, partly at least: resurrection from death.

So with that in mind, let me add something to Carl Sagan's famous statement. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Ok. But extraordinary evidence, like the resurrection and its aftermath, demands extraordinary *repentance*.

That's our third heading, the repentance God commands. I take that phrase from the Apostle Paul.

The Repentance God Commands

Now, I'm about to talk about repentance and judgement and I'm aware that neither of these things will make me the most popular guy in the room. I speak about them because Jesus did, and I believe he was the most loving man who ever lived.

And so if I did not talk about these things, it would not be evidence of my love, but rather it would be evidence that I don't really care about any of you.

My old friend Rico Tice tells the story of when he was a young man playing rugby. He was also a pastor at the time. Now none of his rugby friends were Christian believers, so one of his rugby friends thought it would be hilarious to play a tape of Rico's preaching in the changing room after a match. And he happened to pick a sermon where Rico was talking about what Jesus said about judgement.

And rugby players being rugby players, they were all falling about laughing at how serious Rico sounded. But the guy who played the tape noticed there was one guy, one of Rico's best friends, who was just stony faced. And he said to this guy, "What's up? It's just Rico doing his thing, you know he's your friend, lighten up a bit." And this guy said, "No, Rico's not my friend. He can't be." And he said, "What do you mean, of course he's your friend!" And he said, "If Rico is my friend, and he really believes this stuff he's saying on the tape, why hasn't he warned me?"

So I take it that Jesus warns us about judgement not in spite of his love, but because of it. Because Paul, not long after Jesus' resurrection, said this:

30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 [why?] because he has fixed a day on which he WILL judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of THIS he

has given assurance to all [how?] *by raising him from the dead.*"

(Acts 17:30–31)

Did you follow the logic? Jesus' resurrection proves that Jesus is who he says he is, and therefore you will now be without excuse when Jesus comes to judge the world. So God commands you to repent while there is still time.

And I'm not merely talking to my non-Christian friends here. I'm also saying to Christians, you too must repent.

Because you can be a professing Christian, and yet still be a Pharisee who needs to repent. By which I mean you can become more concerned with looking like a Christian than actually being one.

The author Trevin Wax wrote about the time he lived in Romania, and one of the first Romanian words he encountered was "pocăit". Roughly translated, that word means "repenter."

Apparently, during the last century in Romania, "repenter" became a mocking label that was applied to evangelical believers, but Christians embraced the label because they knew that that was exactly what they ought to be. A repenter.

Just like Martin Luther said in the sixteenth century:
"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said,
"Repent" [Matthew 4:17], he willed the entire
life of believers to be one of repentance."

We are lifetime repenters of our pride, our covetousness, our envy, our sexual immorality, our treating things that are not God as if they WERE God. Lifetime repenters of trying to earn our salvation when Jesus in his kindness has already done everything necessary for believers to be saved.

If we've been given great evidence that Jesus Christ IS indeed Lord of all, then great repentance will be expected of us.

And our guilt as professing Christians, if we do NOT repent, will be far more incriminating than the unrepentance of those who have not been given the kind of evidence that we have.

That's what Jesus means when he says in Matthew 12:

41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of JONAH (!), and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.
(Matthew 12:41)

In other words, if even NINEVEH repented at the preaching of a mere man who walked out of the sea unscathed, what excuse do WE have, if we fail to repent at the preaching of the Son of God who walked out of the grave?

According to Jesus, the reason the Pharisees and religious leaders were so exceptionally guilty before God was because they had been so exceptionally privileged.

They'd been entrusted with what we call the Old Testament. They were the custodians of it, they were the teachers of it, they were the self-proclaimed correct interpreters of it.

And yet even with that mountain of evidence, all of which pointed toward the coming Messiah, now that He is standing there right in front of them, they refuse to repent and believe.

And the refusal to repent is even more unconscionable after the evidence of the resurrection has been provided.

So the resurrection is the Sign of Jonah. But I think there's more to the Sign of Jonah.

Just as Jonah took the gospel to the pagans in Nineveh, so now Jesus will take the gospel to thieves, to prostitutes, to tax collectors - and he does that as a sign against the Jewish people who have rejected their own Messiah.

Through his Son, God is saying to them, in effect: "Just as you have provoked ME to jealousy by going after other gods, so I will provoke YOU to jealousy by taking my grace to the Gentiles and the pagans instead."

And there's more to the Sign of Jonah even than that. I don't think it's just the sign of resurrection. It's not just the sign of taking the gospel away and re-directing it to the Gentiles.

The Sign Of Jonah is also preaching: specifically the preaching that they will be destroyed if they will not repent.

You'll remember, Jonah preached that if Nineveh did not repent, it would be destroyed within forty days. Well, similarly, Jesus preached that if Jerusalem did not repent, then JERUSALEM and its temple would be destroyed WITHIN FORTY YEARS. Within a generation.

Ninevah of course repented, and was spared. But Jerusalem did not. And in AD 70, within 40 years of Jesus' prediction, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

The Pharisees asked for a sign, and the sign was given to them. The Sign of Jonah came to terrible fruition.

Well, what should we conclude from that?

We should conclude that when Jesus speaks about coming judgement, he is not playing games. He is telling the truth.

In Matthew Chapter 25, a similar warning comes to us. Jesus says:

31 When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from

the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left... 41 Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

(Matthew 25:31–33, 41, 46)

Jesus accurately predicted the judgement of Jerusalem in AD 70 if THEY did not repent. So we should take with the utmost seriousness His prediction of judgement on US if WE do not repent.

We ourselves, this morning, have been given the sign of **Jonah**. In other words, like Jonah coming to the Ninevites, Jesus has come to us and warned us to repent while there is still time.

What does it mean to repent? Often it's described as a U-turn. It's to turn away from our sin, and turn toward God.

That's true. But sometimes that can make us think about repentance as if it's a car manoeuvre: it's an outward, mechanical, emotionless thing. A sheer act of will.

But Jesus is clear that true repentance is a u-turn of the heart. We come to see the ugliness of our sin, and the beauty of Christ.

Lee and I have been told as parents that you want to encourage your kids not simply to "do" the right thing, but LOVE the right thing. We don't want them simply to DO the good, we want them to LOVE the good. And that is the kind of heart that Christ wants for us too.

Repentance that truly LOVES the good, and despises our own sin.

You may say, but I just don't feel that way about my sin. I live with it, I tolerate it, from day to day, because frankly, you have to make life liveable. I know it's not good to disobey God, but sometimes it's just easier that way.

This may sound strange, but when we feel like that about our sin, we ought to pray that God would break our hearts.

Because God tells us that he will turn to those who are brokenhearted at their sin. Psalm 34 say, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." We should pray that prayer as a matter of urgency. In his book *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis wrote about those who demand a sign from God. He says this:

I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realise what it will be like when He does.

When that happens, it is *the end of the world*.

When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. [...And] what is the good of saying you are on His side THEN, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something

else - something it never entered your head to conceive - comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left?

For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.

It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up.

That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realised it before or not.

Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last for ever.

Repent and come to Christ while there is still time. Maybe you're repenting for the first time, or maybe for the thousandth time, but come to Him.

Jesus is full of kindness. He's full of grace. He's full of patience with those who know they need him. He tells us that he is gentle and lowly in heart.

If you feel bruised and damaged by the world, he will not turn you away. If you know that you yourself have bruised and damaged OTHERS, he will not turn you away.

He rushes to meet those who know that they're sinners in need of salvation.

If that's you, be assured that He came to take the coming judgement on your behalf, so that it will never fall on you. He came to suffer and die in your place.

And he gives his life not just for your forgiveness, but also for your fullness and flourishing.

He says come to me, all you who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Repent and believe in him while there is time.

Let's pray.

Father, we repent.

We repent of remaking you in our own image, rather than seeking to be conformed to YOUR image.

We repent of our attempts to justify ourselves before you... and we ask Him to help us rest in Christ's work on our behalf.

We repent of our hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

We repent of caring more about what other people think, than what You think.

We repent of cordoning off areas of our life from your command.

We repent of seeking a life of comfort, rather than a life of taking up our cross.

We repent of all the good things we have failed to do, and we ask you to open our eyes to the opportunities for us to shine your light in a dark world.

We repent of taking pride in our own repentance. Because we know that salvation is an act of your sovereign grace from first to last. And we have done nothing to deserve it.

We repent and trust in Christ, and gladly so, knowing that repentance and trust in Him is the way to joy and freedom in this life, and in the life to come.

Amen.

Lord's Supper

Notices

- Prayer team will be here
- Do stick around and welcome someone you don't recognise

The Benediction

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace,

Now and forever. Amen.