

Sign of Jonah
Matthew 12:38-45
Hope City
10 March 2024

My name is David and I am one of the team here at Hope City. One new item we are trying is keeping notes in the app, as noted on the slide. Give it a try, if you think it will help you.

I saw the story about the conclusion of a murder trial in Glasgow two week ago where the truth finally was determined as to who killed a woman named Emma Caldwell and why it took almost 19 years. The details of the case make for hard reading and are unnecessary to my point. The key was that although the eventual convicted murder was interviewed early and often, the leading police and crown prosecution did not believe he had done it, but 4 Turkish men. They even told detectives under them that no case would be brought against him, so stop wasting time. This was true even after the case against the other men fell apart. Why such an injustice and blindness to a suspect?

Because if you are not open to a possibility/truth, you will shape any evidence to fit your predetermined conclusion.

Today's passage is about a group of leaders asking Jesus for a sign. Today I hope you can walk away understanding how the Bible refers to a sign, why the leaders were asking for one and how an open or closed mindedness impacts the response.

To do that, we need to examine what was asked for by the leaders and how Jesus responds.

Similar to the story in the news, we will find they have a stated agenda and are only gathering evidence for their case. They are trying to catch Jesus out in order to have him killed.

Abraham is going to read this for us today and it is found in the Blue Bible on page 978.

The sign of Jonah

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.'

³⁹ He answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment

with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

⁴³ 'When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴ Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.'

In the oldest parts of the Bible, signs are given to warn people, pronounce divine judgement and deliver people from oppression. Their purpose was to point Jews back to God and were intended to teach his people about him and to depend on him. Moses was an early prophet who led the people out of Egypt and asked God for signs to show the people that he was sent by Him. Another prophet, Elijah, asks God to send down fire in his competition with the Baal worships and He does.

The same was true in Jesus' time. For those looking for the prophesied messiah, they would be looking for signs, as well. That is why Jesus' miracles and teaching cause people to ask if he was a prophet. If true, then anything he did or taught would point people toward God and encourage them to depend on him. Everything we have read in Matthew's gospel, his teaching and miraculous works, point to Jesus as Messiah. But not everyone is convinced.

Motive behind the request for a sign –

Therefore, the Pharisees and Teachers of the law (Jewish leaders of that time) request for a sign would not seem out of place. So how do we know that were out to get Jesus? It seems like an innocent request and they even show some respect when they call him "teacher."

Matthew, earlier in this chapter describes Jesus being confronted by the leaders about his disciples collecting grain on the Sabbath and Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath, as part of his reply. Their response was:

Matt 12:14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

So, when they call him "teacher" and ask for a sign, this is not without an agenda. This is like to a policeman, a lawyer or perhaps an investigative journalist who is trying to determine the truth by asking questions that might catch us out in our words, get us to contradict ourselves or just muddle us. This might seem unfair, but the premise usually is that they do not believe the story we are telling or who we are claiming to be.

How many times have you been asked online or on the telephone to confirm your identity? Why do I usually walk away feeling interrogated and guilty, even though I know I am who I am!

But to some degree, I understand what the leaders are trying to do – if I give them the benefit of the doubt, they should be trying to protect the people from an imposter, someone who has come to deceive them and take them away from God, not closer. The irony is that they, themselves, end up being the ones who completely miss the signs.

Last week Tom described how he was accused of casting out demons through the power of Satan. If they can show him to be a servant of Satan, then he will be discredited and perhaps they have the grounds they need to have him condemned to death. Anything, really, that would allow them to NOT attribute the miracles he has performed to being God or the Messiah.

This is an important undercurrent to understand why Jesus responds in the way that he does. These are not seekers looking for a sign.

Another important point is to understand if it is OK to ask for a sign? I will address this in more detail later, but Jesus does not seem to be bothered by the request, so long as the motivation is right.

Harsh answer (v39a)

He calls them a wicked and adulterous generation (some versions say evil and perverse). Jesus' response shows he saw through the veiled attempt to trick him. So he offers a rather strange sign.

The Sign of Jonah (v39b-40)

We have to think back to what Jesus is talking about here. Jonah was an OT prophet who was instructed by God to travel to non-Jews in a city called Nineveh and preach. According to God, they were so evil that He was going to destroy them in 40 days. However, he is unwilling and sets sail the opposite direction. Big storm, sailors cast lots and Jonah is “sacrificed” i.e thrown in the sea, is swallowed by a big fish and then vomited 3 days later on the shore. After this experience, Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches – and the people repent and **(spoiler alert)** are saved, Jonah is not happy about His God being merciful, even though he prayed in the big fish “Salvation belongs to the Lord” Jonah 2:9b).

Perhaps you are wondering what kind of sign this is. Is it that Jonah's being thrown in the sea (represents almost certain death) then in the fish for 3 days/nights (tomb) and then being saved when he thrown up on the beach mirrors Jesus own coming death and resurrection? It is very tempting to go down this path with good justification. So, perhaps Jesus is saying the only sign they will get is Jesus death and resurrection (a future event at this point).

However, Jesus seems to be saying that the people of Nineveh will stand up in the future with this generation and condemn it. As amazing and great as Jonah being saved from a big fish was

– and it was enough for them to repent, something greater is here now and they are missing it.
v41

Queen of the South (v42)

Then Jesus refers to the Queen of the South (could be Queen of Sheba) and that she will also stand up with this generation and condemn it. Why? Because she came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon's wisdom and now someone/something greater than Solomon is in their presence. Another missed sign!

Who is this generation?

I think we need to pause and reflect on who this generation is, as it will have some impact on the closing verses of the response Jesus offers. Jesus is directly addressing the leaders and some of the Pharisees who have asked him for the sign. As leaders, they are representative of their generation and the people. It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Jesus is called the entire nation of Israel wicked and adulterous. They have been unfaithful to the God who has saved them from Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness and gave them a promised land. Yet, they failed and finally were cast out of the land they were promised. The Jews cast out of the city by the Romans.

But Jesus seems to be referring to the unbelieving attitude of these leaders, their refusal to accept the signs he has already given and Matthew has recounted. This attitude, represented by these Pharisees and teachers, is what the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South will stand up and condemn.

Jesus is not saying every Pharisee and teacher is resistant to his message. Only those who do not accept him as Messiah (a clear example is Nicodemus who comes to ask Jesus questions and then helps bury Jesus after his crucifixion).

This evil generation is the one that has seen greater miracles and signs than the sign of Jonah or the wisdom of Solomon presented to them. Yet, they reject it, refuse to believe it, are trying to discredit and destroy it (meaning Jesus). That is evil, wicked and adulterous and leads us to the conclusion of the teaching.

Restless impure Spirit

In some ways, verses 34-45 don't seem to fit here. Is Jesus referring back to the man who had the demon cast out of him earlier in the chapter? Is this meant to be teaching on demonology? Is Jesus saying an entire generation is/was possessed by a demon? Actually, none of the above.

The teaching team was helpful to me in unpacking this and we wanted you to be clear this is not a theology of demons, or what happens to them when cast out, etc.

Comparison to a future judgement that will be worse

It does appear that Jesus is comparing the current state of this generation and a future that will be much worse for them if they do not repent and believe. One wonders how does the house

become swept clean and if this is referring to the nation Israel, the leaders, etc. That is why I wanted to clarify who the generation is. If we take this passage to mean those opposed, not open to the message of Jesus as Messiah, then there is a coming judgement in which we will all be in attendance. For those who rejected Jesus, it will be much worse than their current state.

Some commentators seem to think that Jesus' description of "swept clean" refers to those who keep religious rules, but are empty. They imply that Jesus is looking toward the indwelling Spirit and discipleship – the repentance and wisdom Jonah and the Queen of the South represent. It is hard to find evidence of this, but it lines up with what I believe is taught in other parts of scripture.

Jesus uses this story as a metaphor. Clean, unoccupied houses don't stay that way. Do you have empty cupboards in your house? Have you tried to simplify and declutter? Not easy, is it. They will be filled with something.

So, I believe this story is not about the details: how did the house come to be unoccupied, who's house is it, where is this arid land or where did the other 7 demons come from, etc. One theologian named John Nolland said about this story: "Precision is not intended; warning is"

Closure

Let's return to the news story. It was bad enough that a young woman had her life taken away 19 years ago. But in the intervening 19 years, the murderer went on to assault others and was convicted of 21 other serious attacks that could have been prevented had justice been done in the first instance. The leaders who were supposed to be protecting the people, ended up seeing more hurt due to their closed minds and hearts.

The final state was worse than the first.

Jesus says this is what comes from asking for a sign without an open heart, for refusing to believe the obvious evidence in front of you. We can be blinded by our own agenda or unbelief and the end result will be much worse than the initial state.

Applications – but what about us?

I will offer three mindsets or heart postures and ask that you consider where you are?

A believer seeking assurance

Perhaps you are a believer, but are needing some encouragement (a sign) to point you back to God and to continue to rely on him. Although this passage does not specifically teach about this, it might be an obvious question. Should I ask for a sign? In the previous chapter, John the Baptist, when in prison, sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is the Messiah or should he wait for another (Matt 11:1-6). Thomas, even after the resurrection, said "unless I see the nail marks and put my finger where the nails were and in his side, I will not believe. (John 20:25).

Jesus is not calling those who are seeking a sign from God an evil and adulterous generation for whom it will be worse. He understands and points to his miracles in the case of John the Baptist and his resurrection as proof of who is to seekers. He wants you to stay with Him and depend on Him.

A professed non-believer who is open-

Examine your heart to see if you are truly open to Jesus being not only saviour of the world, but possibly your saviour? Alistair Moffat, Scottish writer and historian self-identifies with this category. In his book Islands of the Evening, he walks in the paths of the early believers of Scotland on the Isle of Iona, even he states:

“The agonies suffered by Jesus were in themselves proof of his divinity, as was his willingness to endure them. As I walked around the sunlight precincts of the abbey, amongst the chattering, selfie-taking visitors, I thought about the uncomfortable fact that this beautiful place was founded on that blood-drenched story.”

As we approach this Easter season, I encourage you to examine the crucifixion and resurrection as the ultimate Sign Jesus offers that points us to God.

Closed minded critic or opponent of Jesus

I am afraid Jesus does not offer much hope for you in this passage. A sign can also be a warning or a pronouncement of divine judgement:

Ignore Jesus and our end state will be worse than your current state.

I can only plead that it is not too late – open your mind and heart to Jesus. The one sign that no one else has imitated or recreated is Jesus death and resurrection. Repentance (people of Nineveh) and acknowledgement of wisdom (Queen of the South) are testimonies before but condemnation at the end of the age.

Ellyn will now lead us in a time of personal reflection on how Jesus has shown himself to you and how open you are to believe it.

Main point:

Ignoring signs with a closed heart ultimately leads to a worse condition.