

MATTHEW 12: 38-42

INTRODUCTION

I was going to finish the series on the book of Jonah last time when I expounded chapter 4. But in preparation for that sermon I came to the conclusion that I have not sufficiently related the book of Jonah to the New Testament. So having thought about it even further I want to finish the series on Jonah by looking at this reference in Matthew's gospel concerning the prophet Jonah. Within the New Testament there are other references that refer to Jonah. There is a parallel passage to this one in Luke 11:29-32 and then in Matthew 16:1-4 Jonah is referred to and the context there is very similar to this one in asking for a sign.

The first thing that I want to say is that Jesus by referring to Jonah as a sign is simply giving verification to Jonah as a true historical person. I didn't deal with this much when we looked at the book of Jonah because I don't like wasting time on nonsense, but there are those who because they cannot accept Jonah was swallowed by a great fish think that Jonah is just a parable teaching us certain lessons. But the fact that Jesus mentions Jonah alongside the Queen of Sheba shows that Jesus obviously accepted Jonah as a real person and he accepted the fact that he was swallowed by a great fish (v 40) This for me is the only verification that is needed, the fact that Jesus believed it, should stop all argument about whether the story of Jonah is really true. But of course it won't because those who do not accept Jonah as a historical figure also have many problems believing that Jesus is who he claimed to be.

Now it is worthwhile setting this incident in its wider context. Just before this story we have Jesus healing a demon possessed man who was deaf and mute (v 22). The question that this raised in people's minds was could this be the Son of David (v 23)? But when the Pharisees heard about this incident they immediately equated the work of Jesus with Beelzebub (v 24). Jesus then shows these religious leaders how foolish their thinking was how could Satan drive out Satan and still stand (v 26)?

1. A REQUEST FOR A SIGN (v 38)

Now we come to this incident where the Pharisees and the teachers of the law asked Jesus to do a miraculous sign. Obviously the miracles that Jesus had been performing were not proof enough, for after all, they had equated their work with Satan. By asking for a sign they were probably asking for a sign from heaven and not a sign that was done on earth. They may have considered his miracles as signs on earth but there is evidence in the Inter-testamental period that the Jews were looking for a sign that they considered from heaven, a sign that appeared in the sky in order to proclaim that the Messiah had come. If this is the case then what they are asking Jesus for is some indisputable evidence that what Jesus does is done through the power of God. Of course in Chapter 16:1 the Pharisees this time with the Sadducees came to Jesus and asked him for a sign in order to test him. That may very well be the same situation here; it might be that they asked for a sign not because they really wanted to believe in Jesus as the Messiah but to confirm them in their unbelief. They may well have known that Jesus will not give them a sign on demand and therefore are simply looking to confirm their belief that he was not from God but from Satan himself.

2. JESUS' ANSWER (vs. 39-42)

Jesus cuts to the chase by his answer and sees the Pharisees and teachers of the law as just typical of that whole generation. Their request for a sign just shows what they are like. Jesus calls them a wicked or evil generation and an adulterous generation. They are wicked because they do not believe in Jesus and they are adulterous because they have parted company with God and are following their own religious beliefs. Therefore Jesus will not give them any sign except one. One that has already been given, that is the sign of Jonah. But how is Jonah a sign? Well Jesus goes on to explain that just as Jonah was three days and nights in the stomach of a huge fish so the 'Son of man' will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth (grave). Now let me just pause in order to clear up a difficulty that I had for many years with Jesus death and resurrection. Here is a clear reference to Jesus being in the grave three days and nights. Yet if we believe our traditional time scale we believe that Jesus was crucified on a Friday and rose from the dead on the Sunday.

Now even by my Maths that is only two days and nights, or at very least three days and only two nights. So how come the bible talks about three days and nights. The answer is found in how the Jews viewed days and nights. It was often used as a period of time rather than 24 hour periods. So the Friday, the Saturday and the Sunday are simply considered as three days and nights even though they were not three 24-hour periods.

Now having cleared that up, let's move on. This answer of Jesus' must have been quite obscure for those who heard him say this, for although we know that it clearly is referring to Jesus' death and resurrection, his hearers would not know that. They probably should have known it because there are just a few hints in the Old Testament that the Messiah would rise from the dead (Psalm 16). However it will not be long before these words are powerfully demonstrated as Jesus is taken, crucified and after three days he rises from the dead. At that stage all who heard these words and subsequently all who read these words will know that Jesus is the Messiah and therefore should turn to Jesus as their Saviour. But do they? No! Even the term 'Son of Man' is a clear Messianic term, a term that goes back to the book of Daniel 7:13 which is a prophecy looking forward to the coming Messiah.

Jesus goes on to say that come the judgement day the men of Nineveh will stand up and condemn Jesus' generation. They heard him make this prediction, they will witness his death and resurrection, and they will know that he is claiming that he is the Son of man and therefore God's Messiah, yet they will still not believe. Why will the Ninevites condemn them? Because they heard Jonah's ministry and repented, yet this generation that had one greater than Jonah in their midst failed to repent. It's the same with the Queen of the South (queen of Sheba 1 Kings 10:1-13).

She will rise at the judgment and condemn Jesus' generation because she was willing to travel from what the Jews considered to be the ends of the earth in order that she may listen to King Solomon's wisdom but Jesus' generation had one with greater wisdom than Solomon in their midst and yet they will not listen to his wisdom.

You see Jesus is contrasting here; he takes two situations where Gentiles came to seek God and compares them with the Jews who should have come to know God

but have actually rejected God by rejecting his Son. Let's just consider this contrast further for a minute. Let's compare these Pharisees and teachers of the Law with the Ninevites in Jonah's day.

The people of Jonah's day had Jonah a prophet of God to preach to them. However the Pharisee's and Teacher's of the law had Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah preach to them (4:7; 7:28-30). Jonah's generation had poor Jonah as their prophet, he was sinful foolish and rebellious towards God (Jonah 1:3; 4:1-3, 9b). But Jesus' generation had the sinless Son of God one full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, one full of compassion for the lost. Jonah's message was primarily one of judgment 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. However I did say that implied in the message of judgement was a call to repentance.

But Jesus' generation had the message of Jesus, which was a message of much fuller light, a message of pardon, of salvation full and free (Matthew 9:2, 11:28-30; Luke 19:10 and John 7:37). Jonah's message had no miracles or other authenticating signs to confirm it, but the message of Jesus was constantly being confirmed by miracles Matthew 11:5; Luke 4:14-21; John 13:37). Jonah's message was addressed to pagan and Gentile Nineveh; they had none of the privileges and advantages that the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had enjoyed. Jesus' generation had enjoyed ever so many spiritual privileges and advantages yet they did not repent.

Yet who was it that repented? The Ninevites. Less enlightened people obeyed a less enlightened preacher, whereas the more enlightened people refused to obey the preaching of the Light of the world. So the great lesson that we need to learn is that no other sign will be given to us except those that are recorded for us in Holy Scripture. Jonah points us to Christ and to his death and resurrection and in doing so it ought to lead us to Christ for salvation. But does it? No! Instead what do we find, people arguing over whether Jonah is really a true historical figure or just a mythical story to illustrate a point. We have greater light today than even the people of Jesus generation for we have the full story of Jesus and the story of the development of His church. We have the completed bible. Yet how do we respond?

We fail to repent and people of Nineveh will stand up and condemn our generation. You see with greater light comes great privilege and greater responsibility. This generation in Britain today have no excuse for not repenting, we have his word, and we have the prophecies of the Old Testament predicting the coming of Jesus. We can read about his miracles, and read his teaching. We can read the apostles call to faith and repentance. We can even read about the end of the age, His second coming and judgement.

We know about heaven and hell and can read the repeated warnings to flee to the Lord Jesus for salvation. But does this generation turn to him? Nineveh turned to God through the feeble prophet Jonah, the Queen of Sheba travelled miles to listen to Solomon's wisdom, yet here is this generation in Jesus day who had the eternal Son of God in their midst and yet they failed to listen to his wisdom and repent. What about us? We are even more privileged, having all that God wants to say to us translated into our own language. Do we listen to his wisdom today? Do we repent and turn to him?

May God help us to do so?