

INTRODUCTION

I recently read about a couple that was sitting in their living room watching the news on television. President Bush was making an appearance as he has done many times since the events of September 11. After the President’s remarks, the wife turned to her husband and said, “Darling, I’m so glad George W. Bush is our president. I think he is doing a wonderful job.” The husband looked back at his wife with anger and said, “Will you please give it a rest, Tipper?”

I happen to think President Bush is a great leader, and I pray for him often. But as I mentioned last week, all the great men and women who have ever lived can’t come close to comparing with the greatness and the glory of Jesus of Nazareth. I call your attention to these words in Luke’s gospel:

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now One greater than Solomon is here. 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 One greater than Jonah is here.”

Last week we examined this same passage and talked about what Jesus meant when He claimed, “One greater than Solomon is here.” We saw that Jesus is greater in wisdom, building, sacrifice, wealth, and influence than Solomon. Today we are going to consider just what Jesus meant when He compared Himself to Jonah and specifically what He meant when He spoke of the *sign* of Jonah.

First, let’s consider:

I. THE STORY OF JONAH

Now, some of you are very familiar with the story of Jonah, and others of you may be a little fuzzy about the details. In order to understand what Jesus is saying here, it’s important to understand who Jonah was and what he did. From the time I was a child in Sunday School, I have loved the story of Jonah; it is a whale of a story! Some people simply pass it off as some ancient fish story—fishermen are prone to exaggeration. One fisherman returned from Lake Fork and bragged that he caught a bass so big it took a winch to get it into the boat and a crane to get it up on the dock. He claimed it was so big there weren’t scales large enough to weigh it but before he released it back into the lake he took a picture—and the picture weighed seven pounds! My barber has a plaque in his shop that reads, “The only time a fisherman tells the truth is when he calls another fisherman a liar.”

The story of Jonah is not some mythical fish story. In making reference to it, Jesus was actually endorsing Jonah as a real person and demonstrating the story of Jonah is true.

As we review the story of Jonah, there are some wonderful practical lessons we can learn.

1. You can run from God but you can't hide

The story of Jonah begins very simply: The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. (Jonah 1:1-3) The amazing thing about God's call is that Jonah was directed to go to people who were not Jews. Many have called Jonah the first missionary because even at this time we see God is interested in *all* people—not just the Jews. For each of us, God has a Nineveh, that is, a plan for our lives.

Jonah hopped on board a ship heading for Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Each of us has a Tarshish as well—it's what *we* want to do. God has a plan, a will for your life. You have a Nineveh and if you will love God and seek Him through His Word and prayer, He will show you what is your Nineveh. But too often, we aren't listening. We have our own plans, our own dreams and we head toward Tarshish. Some of you are running from God right now. He is calling you to be a Christian, or to be baptized, or to serve Him in some Christian vocation and you are like Jonah—you are a spiritual fugitive. Well, like Jonah, you need to know you can run from God, but you can't hide.

Jonah got on board a ship to sail to Tarshish and a terrible storm arose. Jonah suspected he was the cause of the storm, so he asked the sailors to throw him overboard; he was ready to die. As they tossed him over the side of the ship into the heaving waves, Jonah must have thought, "This is the end." But it wasn't. We read: "But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17) We talk about "Jonah and the whale" but the word literally means "sea creature." We don't know exactly what kind of creature it was. The Hebrew phrase for "God provided a great fish" literally means God "prepared" a fish. Perhaps it was a special fish God prepared just for this special porpoise! Maybe it was a specially designed creature that had wall-to-wall carp and Jonah slept on a foam blubber mattress. Don't get hung up on what kind of creature it was or you'll miss the point. Understand that God was in charge and you can run from God, but you can't hide! Here's the next lesson

2. Sometimes God uses adversity to get our attention

There was a storm and then there was a fish. Some of us are like Jonah. We are so hardheaded and stubborn God has to use adversity to get our attention. Now, the Bible makes it clear God is not the author of evil, but He can and will use troubling circumstances to get our attention. I seem to recall an old story about a man whose mule wouldn't respond to his commands, so he took a two-by-four and whacked the mule between the eyes. When someone complained about his method of punishing his mule, he replied, "Oh, I wasn't punishing him, I was just getting his attention." It worked for Jonah. Here he was in the messy, dark, damp, dangerous belly of some creature. Here's what he did: "From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord ..." (Jonah 2:1-2) When Jonah was standing on the dry ground with a blue sky above him, he didn't call on the Lord. But in his *distress*, he became a praying man. I've told you many times God meets us at the Point of Total Desperation. That's where Jonah was—and it may be where you are today.

Some of you are hurting and suffering in a variety of ways, and I don't know what the point of your pain is but God knows. Have you ever thought God wants to *use* your distress to cause you to seek Him? The sooner you seek Him and hear what He's trying to say, the sooner you can move on to the next stage of your journey.

3. God is willing to give us a second chance

Jonah failed on the first try, but that didn't make him a failure. God wasn't through with him. “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” (Jonah 3:1) I like that phrase “a second time.” I'm forever glad God is a God of the second, the third, and the fourth chances. I have blown it and failed God so many times but He hasn't given up on me. Some of you may think you have utterly failed God and He can't use you: think again.

I had a friend in my former church who worked for NASA designing the booster rockets for the Saturn Space program in Huntsville. He told me whenever one of those huge rockets blasted off, a perfect trajectory or flight path was programmed into the computer. But due to weather conditions or slight differential thrust forces, the original trajectory was never followed. When the rocket got the slightest bit off the original course, the computer calculated a new trajectory, and when it got slightly off that course, a new flight path was calculated. This would happen dozens of times to keep the rocket headed toward a window into space.

God's will for your life is like that. God has a perfect plan for your life but if you have gotten slightly off course, He doesn't just give up. He adjusts the plan and gives you a second chance, and a third chance so the trajectory of your life continues toward the ultimate goal He has for you—to conform your life to the image of Jesus Christ.

God is the God of the second chance, but that doesn't mean He gives you unlimited chances—He requires obedience at some point. My NASA friend said sometimes a rocket got so far off course they would have to “blow it up.” But that seldom happened, especially if the rocket responded to the computer's directions. Our job is to recognize that God *does* give us second chances and we must respond in obedience like Jonah did.

When Jonah said, “Yes, Lord,” God took over. The fish vomited Jonah up on dry land. I recall I always giggled in Sunday School when the teacher used that word but I guess a disobedient servant even makes a big fish sick to his stomach! I'm certain Jonah hit the beach running—straight for Nineveh. After three days inside a fish, he probably looked like a different man. Some suggest the gastric acid probably bleached his skin and hair an unusual color. He didn't let his appearance hinder him though. He went to the great, Gentile city of Nineveh and conducted the Greater Nineveh Evangelistic Crusade. Can you imagine the impact of his testimony? When Jonah preached God's message, we read the entire city *repented* in sackcloth and ashes. Wow! Wouldn't you think Jonah would be pleased? He wasn't though. In fact, in the last chapter of Jonah, we see a pouting prophet. Maybe Jonah really *wanted* God to destroy these heathen people. We don't know exactly why he was disappointed, but we can learn a lesson from it:

4. God can use you if you are obedient—even if you're imperfect

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "Oh, Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:1-3) Even though God used him, Jonah was so discouraged he was ready to die—again. He complained to the Lord because the entire city repented! We see here Jonah's motives weren't exactly pure. He did what he did because God *commanded* him to do it, not because he had compassion on those people. And God can use you, even if your life isn't exactly perfect.

The Apostle Paul once made reference to those who preach Christ with the wrong motive. He wrote, "What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice." (Philippians 1:18) Many of you remember Jim and Tammy Baker and the PTL Club. Much of their ministry was based on greed and misleading claims, but in spite of all their failures, God used even them to touch and change lives. If God can use Jim and Tammy Faye, and a pouting prophet, God can use you! I had a seminary professor who used to say, "God can strike a mighty lick with a crooked stick." Don't wait until you reach perfection before you start serving God: you'll never get there. Just start obeying Him!

That's the story of Jonah. Now, let's look at

II. THE SIGN OF JONAH

The people following Jesus were demanding some kind of sign or miracle to "prove" He was really the Messiah. Jesus always resisted outside requests to do miracles to simply prove His power. Satan suggested He turn stones to bread or jump off the temple. He refused. On the morning of the crucifixion, Herod demanded some kind of miracle. Jesus didn't even give him a reply. Jesus performed miracles to meet human needs, *not* as proof of His Deity. However, He did allow that one sign would be given to them—and it was the sign of Jonah. What was that? Was the sign of Jonah a fish? Actually, we don't have to wonder about it, because in the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus identifies the sign. The sign of Jonah is the resurrection of Jesus. It's important to note that **the Resurrection sets Jesus apart from all others**. In Matthew 12 Jesus makes the connection: "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." (Matthew 12:40) Again, it's worth noting Jesus considered Jonah to be a real historical character and the story of Jonah to be a true account. When the fish swallowed Jonah, it was a metaphor for someone being swallowed in the grave by death. And Jonah was as good as dead, if God hadn't delivered him by causing the fish to regurgitate him. It was as if Jonah was raised from the dead—but he later died, of course. One greater than Jonah is here because Jesus was raised from the dead and is alive forevermore!

When Jesus spoke these words He knew that in just a matter of a few months that He would be nailed to a cross and would suffer and die. He also knew that He would be buried and after three

days would walk out of the grave. This wasn't the only time He predicted His resurrection. John records that Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." (John 2:19)

Before you can relate to God you must deal with this issue of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus predicted He would come back from the grave. The four gospel writers report Jesus *did* come back from the dead, and Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:6 that over five hundred people were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. The entire message and validity of our Christian faith rises and falls on the Jesus' resurrection. At the same time, of all the great people who have ever lived, including Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius and Moses, Jesus is the *only* one who claimed He would rise from the dead.

We often quote John 3:16 that says "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whoever believes on him should not perish but have everlasting life." We quote that verse, but we don't really know what the word "believe" is talking about. What do you have to believe? Believe that God exists? You can believe that and go to hell. Believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and performed miracles and died on the cross? You can believe that to be historically true, and still be lost. According to Romans 10:9, the key point of belief is the resurrection of Jesus. That verse says, "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you will be saved." It doesn't say, "Believe in your heart that He was born of a virgin, or walked on water, or fed 5,000, or taught the Sermon on the Mount. The one thing that sets Jesus apart as being divine is His resurrection.

I want you to stop and intellectually consider this point. Either Jesus *was* raised from the dead or He *wasn't*. I believe it for two simple reasons. First, I believe it because of the testimony of those who saw Him alive. Was it a hoax they concocted? If it was a hoax, how did the followers of Jesus benefit from it? If someone is devious enough to formulate a hoax, there must be some selfish, ulterior motive. This first generation of Christians who claimed to have seen Jesus alive were tortured and killed for their message. If it had been a hoax, don't you think at least one of them would have "cracked under torture?" If it was some hoax, surely one of them would have recanted and said, "We made it up! Untie me from this stake and don't light that fire!" But the record is clear that not one of them changed their story unto death.

But there's another reason I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I believe Jesus is alive because I spoke with Him just a few minutes ago. He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart. You ask my how I know He lives. He lives within my heart!

Jesus said the one sign to verify everything else He did and said would be the sign of Jonah: the Resurrection. Have you understood that sign yet?

It's sad we often only celebrate the Resurrection on Easter. It is the one most glorious event in the history of the world. Robert Lowery wrote a beautiful poem that has been put to music but we usually only dust it off once a year:

Death cannot keep his prey, Jesus my Savior!
He tore the bars away, Jesus, my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o’er His foes.
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
And He lives forever with His saints to reign,
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!
Robert Lowery

Let’s sum it all up by briefly noticing:

III. THE SUBSTANCE OF JESUS’ MESSAGE

What was Jesus teaching in stating that He was greater than both Solomon and Jonah? Here are three important lessons:

1. Your relationship with God should be based on faith—not signs

When His audience demanded a sign, Jesus observed they were a “wicked generation.” If that was true 2,000 years ago, what do you think Jesus would say about this generation in America? We live in such a skeptical age people are demanding proof or some sign in order to believe. There will be almost 4,000 people in our services today, but how many do you think would crowd into this building if I suddenly started performing a lot of supernatural tricks? What would happen if at this moment I could levitate above this congregation and do a couple of slow flips and rolls as I’m speaking to you? Some of you would start looking for the wires but since this is on television and because people like to talk, word would spread all over this community that Pastor David can fly, and if you want to see it come to church next Sunday. What kind of crowd do you think we’d have? It would be hard to get a seat. But that’s not the kind of followers Jesus is looking for. Our relationship with God must be based on faith. The writer of Hebrews tells us: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see ... and without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Hebrews 11:1, 6) Now don’t get me wrong. I happen to believe supernatural miracles still occur but we shouldn’t be running around looking for one to prop up our faith. As I’ve said before, miracles do not produce faith—faith produces miracles. Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins and that God raised Him from the dead? That’s the faith that God is looking for.

You may object, “But I didn’t see Jesus alive after the crucifixion with my own eyes.” A man by the name of Thomas, one of the twelve disciples made the same objection. On the evening of the day of the resurrection, the disciples of Jesus were hiding in an upper room behind closed, locked doors when suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst. Now, if you just buried a friend three days earlier and that friend showed up at your house, what would you think? You’d say, “It’s a ghost!” That’s exactly what the disciples feared, but Jesus corrected their misunderstanding. He said, “Touch me, does a ghost have flesh and bones?” Then to prove He was real, He asked for something to eat. After awhile, Jesus left and Thomas showed up. When they told Him Jesus was alive, he was skeptical. He said, “Unless I see it with my own eyes, I won’t believe it. Unless I can put my fingers in the nail prints in His hands and insert my fist into the wound in His side, I won’t believe it!” That’s why he has the nickname, “Doubting Thomas.”

On the next Sunday night, Jesus showed up and Thomas was there. Jesus offered His hands to Thomas, "Here, Thomas, check it out. Put your fingers in these nail holes in my hand. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas didn't do that however, he simply fell on his knees and confessed, "My Lord, and my God!"

Then Jesus said something to Thomas about us here today. That's right, Jesus said something about those of us gathered in Tyler, Texas in 2001. It's recorded in John 20:29, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." That's us!

2. We can only approach God in repentance

Jesus clearly pointed out the men of Nineveh *repented* at the preaching of Jonah. God was prepared to destroy the entire city, but because everyone repented, they were "saved" from God's wrath and judgement. The only way you can escape God's judgement against sin is to repent. The Bible says, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." (Acts 3:19)

The word "repent" means "a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior." It literally means to "turn around." It's like a column of marching soldiers that turns and starts going in the opposite direction when the drill sergeant hollers, "About face!" Before you can approach God you must change your mind about your sin. Instead of justifying or denying your sinful condition you must admit you are a sinner and that you can never be good enough to earn God's acceptance. Then you must be willing to turn away from your sinful behavior. It means your life takes on a new direction. Instead of running after sin, you start running from it!

3. Our generation is more accountable because we have more truth

Jesus said the men of Nineveh would rise up at the judgement and condemn this generation. Why? Because all they had was the preaching of a prophet who had been pickled in the belly of a fish—and the generation of Jesus' time had God in the flesh there with them. They had so much more light than the Ninevites, yet they were rejecting Jesus.

The same can be said of our generation in 2001. We have more truth than Jonah's generation, and we even have more truth than Jesus' generation. We have millions of Bibles, thousands of churches, and hundreds of radio and television programs communicating the gospel. I don't understand how *anyone* could reject Jesus today. Remember, Jesus said it would be more tolerable in the day of judgement for Sodom and Gomorrah than for the people of Capernaum. Jesus visited Capernaum, but not Sodom. One greater than Solomon is here today. One greater than Jonah is here today. If you reject Jesus Christ, you will be held much more accountable because you had access to so much more truth!

CONCLUSION

When we visited China, we took a translator with us, Tony Wong. As we were on one of the flights in China, Tony sat next to a Chinese businesswoman. I could tell he was talking with her

about the Lord, but of course, since I couldn't understand Mandarin, I couldn't follow the conversation. I noticed they prayed together and the lady had tears in her eyes when she left the aircraft. As we were waiting for our luggage Tony told me she was a successful, educated woman had never heard the story about Jesus. She had never heard about His birth, His life, His death, or His resurrection. When Tony told her the simple story, she was anxious to place her faith in Jesus. She had often searched for the answer to what happens to a person after they die. Tony told me over 90% of the people in China have never had the gospel explained to them.

Living in America that's hard for us to comprehend, isn't it? Sometimes people ask, “What about those people who have never heard the gospel? What's going to happen to them?” Well, Jesus made it clear that it's our job to take the good news to them. But there is a much more pressing question today than, “What about those who have never heard?” It is this: “What about those of you who have heard and heard and heard the gospel over and over again—and yet you still reject Jesus?” You will be held much more accountable!

Solomon can't save you; Jonah can't save you; Mohammed can't save you; Jerry Springer can't save you. But Jesus can make your life have purpose and meaning. The wonderful thing about eternal life is that it starts the moment you trust Christ, but then it continues forever. It's like the little boy who went to the pet store to pick out a puppy. He looked down into a box and there were seven or eight puppies, but only one was wagging his tail. The little boy said, “I want the one with the happy ending!” When you choose to follow Jesus, you choose the life with the happy ending!

OUTLINE

I. THE STORY OF JONAH:

1. You can run from God but you can't hide
2. Sometimes God uses adversity to get our attention
3. God is willing to give us a second chance
4. God can use you if you are obedient—even if you're imperfect

II. THE SIGN OF JONAH:

The resurrection sets Jesus apart from all others

"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." *Matthew 12:40*

III. THE SUBSTANCE OF JESUS' MESSAGE:

1. Your relationship with God should be based on faith—not signs

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see ... and without faith it is impossible to please God." *Hebrews 11:1, 6*

2. We can only approach God in repentance

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." *Acts 3:19*

3. Our generation is more accountable because we have more truth



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes