

When Jesus came, announcing the arrival of God's kingdom and calling for repentance, He confirmed and illustrated His message by miracles, especially exorcisms and healings. But because the religious leaders of God's people were wicked and spiritually adulterous, they refused to accept His message and claimed that He was doing miracles by the power of Satan. Even though Jesus responded by pointing out that this would be as ridiculous as the CFA cows trying to convince you to eat mor *beef*, the scribes and Pharisees pretended that they had made such a good point that now Jesus needed to prove that His ministry of healing people and casting out evil spirits wasn't a demonic plot. And so they ask for a *sign*, not simply another miracle, but confirmation that Jesus works for God and not the devil. Show us something only God could do!

By demanding this sign from Jesus, they aren't just trying to resolve an academic dispute or figure out which team Jesus plays for; what's at stake is the *response* that Jesus has called for. Because if Jesus *is* who He says He is, then the scribes and Pharisees need to *do* what He says to do, which is repent and believe the gospel! They're using this demand for a sign as an excuse not to repent and enter into God's kingdom. Unless we see this sign, they say, any repentance on our part would be premature and inappropriate.

At one level this sounds like wisdom: they are trying to be prudent and careful, asking for more evidence, making sure that they aren't following a trickster. But that's not what's really going on. At this point, in light of all that Jesus has said and done already, their demand for more evidence is *insulting*, and even *immoral*. This is not proper caution; this is hard-hearted spiritual blindness, made worse by the fact that they've dressed it up in wisdom's clothing.

Because of this, Jesus responds very harshly: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." This is one of only two unique places where the NT mentions Jonah, the other being Jesus' reference to "the *son* of Jonah" a few chapters later in Matthew 16, which you'll have to ask me about after the service.

What we see in *this* passage is how Jesus understands and applies Jonah. Because we have these verses, it's not enough to preach through the OT book by itself; we need to make sure that we are understanding Jonah the way that Jesus did. And it's a bit startling to see that Jesus uses what He calls "the sign of Jonah" as the *only sign* that will be given to establish the fact that His

ministry is divine and not demonic. If you want to know whether Jesus was sent by God or Satan, Jesus says, ask Jonah. That's remarkable.

It's remarkable, so we need to make sure we really understand what Jesus *means*. What is the sign of Jonah? The first thing to point out is that Jonah wasn't a miracle worker. Strange things happened *to* him, but Jonah didn't *do* any signs; He *was* the sign! And so the sign that Jesus gives is not something that He is going to do, but something that will be done to and through Him.

Pay attention to this, because this should encourage you in your own efforts to share the message of Jesus. Jesus doesn't change hearts by doing magic tricks on command in order to prove His message! In other words, you don't need to be a miracle-worker in order to share the gospel! I don't know about you, but that's good news for me! You don't need to heal the blind or cast out demons in order to be a witness for Jesus; you just need to speak the message you've been given and let God work through your life.

That's what Jesus says when they ask Him for proof: "Look at my life, and remember what happened with Jonah. If Jonah-things happen in my ministry, that's your sign." Now, not *everything* about Jonah maps onto Jesus. He's not saying, "Just like Jonah ran away from God, I ran away from God." No. He's referring to the Jonah story generally, not exhaustively, and in particular, He specifies three aspects that connect Jonah's ministry with His own: *first*, Jonah's three-day journey; *second*, Jonah's ministry of preaching to the nations; and *third*, the miraculous repentance of the Ninevites.

If these things happen in my ministry, Jesus says, then you skeptics and doubters will have absolutely no excuse for refusing to repent and believe, and in fact, the Ninevites will rise up and *condemn* you, because all they got was Jonah's preaching, and that was enough for them. You've had something far greater: Jesus' preaching, Jesus' miracles, and now this sign of confirmation.

The sign that Jesus gives works as a sign because it requires *God* to act in the future: Jonah clearly wasn't the active agent in saving Nineveh – he tried as hard as he could *not* to. The Pharisees are demanding a sign that only God could do, and so if Jonah's ministry starts to repeat itself in and through Jesus in the ways that Jesus mentioned, they will have been given an irrefutable sign from heaven, even though they should have already repented long before.

And of course, the life of Jesus fulfills the sign of Jonah: Jesus spends three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, His gospel is preached to the nations, and the result is a flood of conversions that results in mercy for the whole world.

Now, many people have been confused by the specifics of the sign: when the Bible talks about the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, it says that He was raised *on the third day*, and so we observe His death on Good Friday, and His resurrection on Sunday. But that reckoning would only make for two nights and only one full day, totaling around forty hours or so, not the seventy-two hours that we would expect from the phrase “three days and three nights”.

What that assumes, though, is a level of precision about the use of *day* and *night* that may not be intended by the author, sort of how we speak of the mathematical constant *pi* as 3.14, but any decent mathematician would be able to count out *pi* at least to the tenth place. Is 3.14 wrong? No, it's just not as precise as possible, and the same thing may apply to the phrase “three days and three nights”.

In addition, people also assume that “the heart of the earth” refers to the tomb itself, which is quite possible, but not necessary. Many have argued that Jesus is actually referring to *Jerusalem* as “the heart of the earth,” defined in relation to *the ends of the earth*, which is where the Queen of the South comes from in v. 42. This could describe Jesus' time in the city of Jerusalem, including but not limited to His time in the grave.

But at the end of the day, determining exactly how Jesus' three-day journey of death and resurrection matches up with Jonah's three-day journey of death and resurrection is not the point. The point is, both Jesus and Jonah went through a three-day journey of death and resurrection! The sign of Jonah is being fulfilled in Jesus!

And what happened after that? Shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection, He inaugurated a preaching mission to the nations, and the resulting conversions have been nothing short of *miraculous*. It began at Pentecost, where Peter preaches to a crowd gathered from all nations, and three thousand people convert immediately, with thousands more following after.

If any Pharisees called to mind the promised sign of Jonah, this is what they would have seen: Jesus, going on a three-day journey into the heart of the earth, sending out preachers to the nations, resulting in *massive* repentance spreading God's mercy all over the world.

And at every point, something greater than Jonah is here: Jonah was swallowed by a *whale* and came right up to the point of death; Jesus is swallowed by *Sheol* itself; He truly dies and rises again. Jonah preached to one foreign city, Jesus sends His gospel to the ends of the earth. Jonah grumpily saw God's mercy extend to 120,000 Ninevites for one generation, God's mercy in Jesus has saved billions of people for all eternity.

For Jesus, the book of Jonah is a preview of what God would accomplish through His ministry. Jonah was a sign, Jesus is what that sign *signifies*. And as we saw last week, what happened to Jonah the *individual* happened to Israel as a *nation* in the Old Testament, and here in the New Testament we see a further fulfilment that involves the whole *world*.

And so for us, we should apply the sign of Jonah fulfilled in Jesus to these levels, as well. For you as an individual, you need to ask yourself what you think about Jesus: were His ministry and miracles *divine* or *demonic*? The sign of Jonah demands that you answer *divine*. And when you recognize that Jesus' ministry was divine, then what you need to do in response becomes clear: repent, and put your faith in Jesus.

And realize too that Jesus came to His own covenant people to call them to repentance first. If you are already a believer, the sign of Jonah still calls you to repentance! Jesus charges His own people with *adultery*, not that they were *strangers* to the covenant like the nations, but that they were *breaking* the covenant. If you are in covenant with God and yet still walking in sin, then you're committing spiritual adultery, and Jonah and Jesus are giving you a sign that you need to repent and return to God! When God sent Jonah to Nineveh, He not only wanted unbelievers to come to Him for the first time, He also wanted to make Israel jealous so that she would come back to her first love.

But the sign of Jonah was not just given for individuals; it was also given to cities and nations. Under the new covenant, the Church is God's holy nation, not any one geopolitical entity. So maybe the closer analogy is with congregations and denominations: just like Jonah "died" to

give life to Ninevah, just like Israel “died” to spread life to the Assyrian empire, just like Jesus died to give life to the world, there are churches and denominations that need to be swallowed up by a sort of “death” before God brings them up into new life, something like what happened to the Southern Baptist denomination a generation ago, for example, and in countless churches, whether it’s a painful split, the departure or retirement of a minister or other key leaders, or simply the need to re-center everything on Jesus after a period of drifting away. Sometimes our fear of death keeps us from seeing the sign of Jonah: death leads to resurrection, which leads to gospel preaching, which leads to repentance, which leads to mercy. Don’t run from a call to die!

The fulfilment of this sign in the death and resurrection of Jesus is what results in the Great Commission, the book of Acts, and in the continued mission of the Church today: because of Jesus’ three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, in which He atoned for the sins of the world, and was raised to life to preach the good news of mercy to all who repent and believe, we His disciples share in Jonah’s sign. We’re *saved* by the one who is greater than Jonah, and we *serve* the one who is greater than Jonah. As disciples of Jesus, our mission is the same as that of Jonah: we are called by God to take a warning of judgment and a message of mercy to all the world.

But as followers of Jesus, we have a better example than Jonah, for Jesus never once wavered from God’s difficult call. He came to preach God’s message even though it would cost Him His life. So in this, let us follow Jesus, not Jonah, as we take the gospel to our neighbors.

And as those who live on this side of the cross, we have a greater sign than the sign of Jonah; we have the sign of Jesus, which is what we will spend the next several week remembering again into Holy Week on our next Lord’s Day.

So hear and believe the sign of Jesus: in the face of unbelief and rebellion, our Lord spent three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, dying for our sins and being raised to life for our justification, so that the good news might be preached to the whole world that God has mercy for all who repent of their sins and put their trust in Jesus for salvation. Thanks be to God for the testimony of Jonah, and thanks be to God that something greater than Jonah is here, and His name is Jesus. May God bless the preaching of His Word,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*