

JONAH, JESUS, & ME

Here's Your Sign! Jonah – God's Unmistakable Sign

A Journey through Jonah: Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy

Texts: Luke 11:14-36; Matthew 12:38-45; 16:1-12

Luke 11:14–36 Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke and the people marveled.¹⁵ But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,"¹⁶ while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.¹⁷ But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls.¹⁸ And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul.¹⁹ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.²⁰ But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.²¹ When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe;²² but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil.²³ Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.²⁴ "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.'²⁵ And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order.²⁶ Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first."²⁷ As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!"²⁸ But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"²⁹ When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, **"This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."**³⁰ For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.³¹ The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.³² 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.³³ "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light.³⁴ Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness.³⁵ Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness.³⁶ If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light."

Matthew 12:38–45 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."³⁹ But he 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.⁴² The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.⁴³ "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.⁴⁴ Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order.⁴⁵ Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself."

than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

Matthew 16:1-4 *And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He 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. ⁴ **An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.**" So he left them and departed.*

Introduction:

For ten weeks now we have journeyed through the 48 verses comprising the four chapters of the book of Jonah. We have observed that the brevity of the book does not stand in the way of the powerful spiritual impact Jonah intends for his story to have on our own. And we are not the only ones to have experienced the power of Jonah's story.

Almost 8 centuries after Jonah lived, another prophet stood in the midst of God's chosen people and reminded them of what God had done for Jonah, through Jonah, and ultimately in Jonah. That prophet was Jesus, and he used the powerful story of Jonah on three different occasions in his preaching and teaching ministry (Matthew 12:38-45; Matthew 16:1-4; and Luke 11:14-36).

The setting would have been similar to our own in that Jesus used the story of Jonah in his preaching and teaching ministry to confront his listeners with a very difficult truth, and to compel them to respond to that truth of with glad obedience.

In other words, Jesus confronted His hearers with powerful, convicting spiritual truth just as God had confronted Jonah with powerful spiritual truth in his day. And just as Jonah was deeply offended at the particular truth God wanted him to embrace, in the very same way many of Jesus' hearers found His message deeply offensive to their sensibilities.

And if we are honest, at times we find ourselves in the same position – confronted by a powerful spiritual truth from God's Word that is difficult for us to embrace. I think we should stop and remind ourselves that the truth God wanted

Jonah to embrace about His sovereign mercy was not difficult to understand. Jonah understood what God was up to completely (4:1-3). Jonah's problem was not that he misunderstood God's truth – it was that he was scandalized by the implications of what God wanted him to do with that truth (4:1 – it greatly displeased Jonah).

God's sovereign decision to extend His mercy to people Jonah despised was beyond Jonah's willingness to embrace – and his unwillingness to embrace God's sovereign will resulted in his disobedience to God's Word – a disobedience that led him on a long, downward journey away from God's appointed place, God's chosen people, God's call on his life, and even from fellowship and communion with the God Jonah had faithfully served for his entire life and ministry.

That is what happens whenever we come up against a difficult truth in God's Word that we refuse to embrace. Our resistance to that truth will soon lead us to disregard God's will and eventually to disobey God's Word. And, if we are not careful to repent, we will eventually find ourselves running next to Jonah on his journey away from God, our own ministry, and even from His people.

And if we have learned nothing else from Jonah's story, we have learned that God relentlessly pursues His struggling servants in order to show them mercy! But to get us to His mercy, God has to expose and overcome our sinful arrogance, our spiritual self-righteousness, and our stubborn self-centered pride!

And for that work to truly happen, we are going to need someone greater than Jonah to speak into our story this morning. We need Jesus to do what only He can do in us and for us so that, at the end of His merciful work in us, He can work through us to extend His grace to others, advance His kingdom around us, and exalt His matchless name before all creation!

Perhaps the best way to let Jesus speak into our lives is to listen carefully, humbly, and receptively to a difficult conversation he is having with a group of religious leaders and their followers in Luke 11 (a conversation repeated earlier in Matthew 12:38-45).

And in order to understand how Jesus uses the story of Jonah to make a powerful spiritual point designed to expose the heart of his hearers, we need to understand the context – and the best place to see the larger context is in Matthew’s account (12).

- Jesus has been going throughout the cities and villages in the region of Galilee (the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali -Matt. 4:12-16) announcing the arrival of the long awaited Kingdom of God and calling men to repentance (Matthew 4:17). Jesus validated his authoritative word by powerful miracles designed to display His power to rescue people from the bondage of Satan’s kingdom (4:23-25; 9:35-38).
- All were astonished by His mighty, miraculous works. Many heard His authoritative word and were amazed at His teaching because He spoke with authority and not as the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 7:28-29).
- What a wonderful moment in the story of redemptive history – God’s appointed Messiah had appeared among them. He was declaring God’s gracious word to them authoritatively. And, He was validating both His message and His mission by doing wonderful, gracious, miraculous works in their midst! But not everyone was happy – the religious leaders of the day had been particularly hard hit by His reminder that God was looking for people who practiced true righteousness, who loved mercy, and who walked humbly before Him and before others.
- He looked right past their fastidious and burdensome requirements they had added to God’s commands and exposed their pride and their desire for honor and exaltation in the eyes of men (sitting in the best seats in the synagogue and receiving honorable titles and exalted respect from people on the street when they passed by). Jesus looked past their outward displays of righteousness into the inner recesses of their hearts and exposed them as men who loved the wrong things for the wrong reasons. And they were furious at the thought of this carpenter-turned-rabbi would call them (of all people) to repentance.
- However, they were at a loss to explain either the power of his piercing words or his miraculous works. And finally, after a particularly powerful display of His miraculous power in the healing of a demon possessed man, the

people began asking if Jesus was truly the Son of David (messiah), these religious leaders began to spread among the people that the true secret behind Jesus power was not the Spirit of God, but rather Beelzebul, the Prince of Demons (another name for Satan – Matt. 12:24: Luke 11:15).

- Earlier in the chapter, Jesus had incensed the Pharisees when He entered into their synagogue and healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8-15). When they saw this undeniable miracle of God’s mercy – instead of rejoicing at God’s mercy, they determined to find a way to destroy Jesus (Matt. 12:14).
- Jesus turned to Isaiah to explain how and why He did the miracles he did in their midst – He did the miracles by the power of God’s Spirit upon him (12:18); He preached the messages he preached because God had commissioned him to announce true justice (12:18, 21); and he did the miracles he did to demonstrate and extend God’s gracious mercy to weak and needy people (12:20-21).
- So when the Pharisees announced that Satan was really the power and authority behind Jesus’ words and works, they were not just speaking against Jesus, they were blaspheming the Holy Spirit of God – a sin worthy of death according to the Law of Moses (Matt. 30-32).
- And so Jesus rebukes them and calls them to humble themselves and repent before God (Matthew 12:33-37).
- After this stern rebuke, some of the Pharisees (religious leaders) and Scribes (experts in the Law of Moses) approached him and demanded a sign from Him. At which point Jesus responds by saying the only sign that will be given them is the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:39-40; Luke 11:29).

So, with this background in mind, how are we to understand Jesus’ words about Jonah? More importantly, how should we receive and respond to these words? And to answer these questions properly, we need to make sure we understand

three important spiritual realities Jesus is communicating to us through this text.

I. Jonah – Mercy Resisted. (*Here’s Your Sign: Matthew 12:1-45*)

A big question we need to ask ourselves this morning is this – of all the OT prophets Jesus could have selected, why did He pick Jonah?

Jesus was having this discussion in the northern region of Israel around the Sea of Galilee where he spent most of his ministry and did all but two of his miracles. This region of Israel was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” because, over Israel’s long history, many Gentiles had come to dwell in this part of Israel (Sepphoris, Tiberius, Caesarea Philippi, the ten cities of the Decapolis).

Jonah was a well-known Old Testament prophet who came from Gath-Hepher which was Nazareth in Jesus’ day. In addition to being from the very region where Jesus grew up and did His miracles, Jonah had been sent with a message of God’s marvelous mercy to one of the most wicked gentile nations of His day – the Assyrians!

And there is one additional factor to recall – when God called Jonah to take the message of His mercy to Gentile sinners in Nineveh, Jonah was greatly offended at God’s Word and angered by God’s will.

Jesus points these Pharisees to Jonah to confront them with three important spiritual realities:

A. Like Jonah, they were willful sinners in desperate need of mercy.

- In telling us his story, Jonah reminded us that of all the people in the book who needed mercy (sailors and Ninevites), Jonah most needed God’s mercy.
- And that is the point Jesus wants us to grasp – before we can experience and truly receive the mercy of God, we need to come to the place where we admit our need of that mercy! We need to do what Jonah needed to do – we need to take a long hard look at our own life and ask ourselves whether the

dry barrenness we feel is due to our own desperate need of God's gracious mercy!!

B. Like Jonah, they were spiritual leaders who should have understood God's plan revealed in God's Word.

- Jonah reminded us that when he heard God's call, instead of responding in obedience, He intentionally ran from God and opposed His plan on "moral" and "theological" grounds.
- Morally, how could God extend mercy to people as thoroughly wicked as the Ninevites? Theologically, how could God extend mercy and spare the pagan nation that He would one day use to judge His covenant people? Wasn't mercy supposed to be for Israel? Wasn't grace supposed to be for His servants?
- And these two issues are precisely the ones the Pharisees and Scribes struggled to accept. How could God extend mercy to the outcasts and the most wicked people of their day and at the same time fail to honor and exalt them for their outer righteousness? Theologically, how could Jesus break the laws Moses had commanded and which they had so fastidiously kept? How could Jesus pick grain to eat on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-7) or even worse, heal a man's withered hand on the Sabbath (Matt 12:8-16)!!!!?
- Jesus looked into their heart and exposed a fundamental lack of compassion (Matthew 12:7). In other words, these Pharisees and Scribes were so busy keeping the legalities of the Law that they missed entirely the heart of God – a heart of compassionate mercy.
- And their arrogant, self-willed, unmerciful heart led them to oppose not just the intent of the Law of Moses, but the very Word sent by God standing before them!!
- And again, that is the point Jesus wants to make sure we don't miss! As we take an honest look at our heart – is it like God's? Or are we more concerned about our theological soundness as we defend the moral high ground of our own position that we fail to see how far off we are from being filled with the mercy and compassion that flows freely and unrestrained from God's heart?

C. Like Jonah, they were resisting God's will, disobeying God's Word, and rejecting God's sovereign mercy.

- While they were teaching theology and defending orthodoxy, these teachers were guilty of violating the more foundational and essential components of God's Law – about doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly before God and men (Micah 6:8).
- They insisted on paying the tithe on the most minute possessions such as spices. They insisted in fastidiously washing the outer body to avoid ritual purity. They lived to be honored and elevated as teachers of the Law – to sit in the seats of honor and to be called “rabbi – teacher.” But . . . when Jesus looked into their heart here is how He described what He saw:

Luke 11:39–5: *And the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you. ⁴² “**Woe to you Pharisees!** For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ⁴³ **Woe to you Pharisees!** For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴ **Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.” ⁴⁵ One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” ⁴⁶ And he said, “**Woe to you lawyers also!** For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. ⁴⁷ **Woe to you!** For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸ So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹ Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ ⁵⁰ that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. ⁵² **Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”*****

- Like Jonah, they professed to care about justice but did not do justly. They professed to long for God's mercy but they did not love mercy enough to grant it to their enemies. Nor did they live in humility before men.
- And if we are honest, that is often the case with our own lives! We talk about the importance of righteousness, but we do not act righteously. We are all about mercy as long as God does it on our terms and in conformity to our own theological positions. And while we profess humility with our lips, our lives are marked by the brittleness of a self-righteous, self-willed

spirit instead of the unbounded joy that comes when we have received undeserved mercy ourselves!

- And so when these religious self-willed, mercy denying religious leaders came to Jesus to demand a “sign” because they were offended at His rebuke – Jesus gave them the one sign they could not deny – the sign of an earlier religious leader just like them named Jonah!
- Jesus in essence said, *“You want a sign? After all the mighty miracles I have done in your midst you still demand a sign?!?! Here is the only sign you are going to get – Jonah!”*

II. Jesus – Mercy Extended (*I am Your Sign: Luke 11:14-36*)

- So, if Jonah is the only sign Jesus was willing to give the religious leaders of His day – how did that sign work?
- Signs are supposed to point to some powerful spiritual reality or reveal some profound spiritual truth. So what did Jesus intend to reveal or to point out by means of the “sign of Jonah?”

A. *The Identification of the Sign (Luke 11:29-30)*

- Jesus clearly states that there will be no more signs given to these spiritual leaders who have demanded a sign from heaven in order to test him (11:15).
- The idea here is they were demanding a miraculous sign of such magnitude that it could not be denied. They wanted God to do for Jesus the kind of thing Moses did when he performed the miraculous plagues before Pharaoh; or the parting of the Red Sea, or the bringing of bread from heaven or water from the rock.
- Jesus looks at their request and reminds them that he has already been casting out demons by the “finger of God” just as Moses did his miracles before Pharaoh by the “finger of God” (Exodus 8:19).

- Jesus knew they were “testing him” just like Satan attempted to “test him” by suggesting that he cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple as a “sign” that He truly was the Messiah (Luke 119-12).
- And so he looks at these religious leaders and responds to their wicked request for a sign and states, *“The only sign that will be given to you is the sign of Jonah! Just like God sent Jonah as sign to Nineveh, He has sent me to be a sign to this generation!”*
- Interestingly, Jonah performed no miracle at Nineveh. He simply appeared and announced God’s coming judgement on Nineveh because of their great wickedness. And they repented. Like Jonah, Jesus had come from God. Unlike Jonah, He had done many mighty miracles. Like Jonah, Jesus preached God’s coming judgment. Unlike Jonah, Jesus preached mercy and announced grace!
- So . . . just as God sent Jonah to be His sign to Nineveh; He sent Jesus to be His sign to His people.
- What would they do with this sign? How would they respond? Would they believe and repent? Or reject and resist?

B. The Validation of the Sign (Matthew 12:38-40)

- How would “this stubborn generation” know that the sign God had sent in their midst (Jesus) was who He said He was?
- The same thing that happened to Jonah would happen to Him. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, so the Son of Man would be in the heart of the earth for three days and nights.
- And just like God brought forth Jonah from the depths of the ocean; He would bring forth Jesus from the tomb by raising Him from the dead!
- The resurrection validated Jesus’ work and vindicated His claims! And still, this “evil generation” refused to believe!

C. The Condemnation of the Sign (Matt. 12:41-42; Luke 11:31-32)

- Because someone greater than Solomon is here giving you greater wisdom from God than even Solomon gave, the Queen of the South (Sheba) will rise up and condemn the men of this generation because she

came from the far reaches of the earth to hear and receive Solomon's wisdom and you are rejecting the Wisdom God has sent you in Jesus!

- Because someone greater than Jonah is standing here preaching to you and exhorting you to repent, the men of Nineveh will rise up on Judgment Day and condemn you! (Luke 11:32)
- Which leads us to the final and most important spiritual reality that Jonah would want us to grasp by means of his sign – how will we respond to the wisdom of Jesus and to the word of His preaching?

III. Me – Mercy Received (*Responding to the Sign: Luke 11:27-28; 33-36*)

- Right in the middle of this amazing, direct, and scathing rebuke that Jesus gives to the religious leaders who are “testing him” by demanding a sign, Luke tells us about a woman who speaks up!
- Jesus has just cast out a demon from a man that was blind and mute (Matt. 12:22; Luke 11:14). Some of the Pharisees began accusing him of doing this miracle by the power of Satan. Others were demanding a sign. ***And in response to all of this, Jesus tells a story (a parable) to expose the truth about Himself and the evil foolishness of their hearts (Luke 11:17-26).***
- The story Jesus told had to do with a strong man/king who uses his might and power to defend his home and possessions but who encounters an even stronger man who attacks and overpowers him and removes his protection and takes away all his possessions.
- In the story, Satan is the strong man who has come into the Land God had given to Israel and had taken it captive. The evidence of this was the spiritual darkness and moral wickedness that pervaded the land – and the demon possession that afflicted the people who lived in God's land.
- BUT God sent a stronger man (Jesus) who had come into the “house that was occupied by Satan” and overpowered his defenses, delivered his captives from bondage, and healed those his demons had afflicted.
- ***The point to the story was this*** – Jesus was the stronger man who came into his own land and cleansed the house from all the damage and defilement Satan had wrought.

- BUT – an empty house was not secure. It had to be occupied by the champion who had brought about this deliverance. ***And that was the point at hand*** – the religious leaders were leading the people to refuse and reject the Champion who had come from God and was bringing about all of this powerful deliverance.
- If they refused to receive the Champion from God, it would only be a matter of time before they were right back in bondage to the old master who had enslaved them for so long.

- As Jesus was giving this stunning teaching – an unnamed woman lifted up her voice from the crowd and blessed Jesus on account of what she was hearing – *“Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed!”* (11:27).

- This was one of the greatest ways a woman could praise a man in Jesus' day. And this woman is brave enough to speak up in the presence of the most exalted, respected religious teachers of her day and express a view different than theirs!
- While they were deprecating Jesus and blaspheming the Spirit that empowered him, this simple unnamed woman lifted up her voice and said – *“I praise you, Jesus! May God be blessed for sending you to us!”*
- Jesus received her blessing and then added these words to what she said, *“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”* (11:28).
- Jesus went on to talk about light sent from God coming into the spiritual eye of a person and filling that person with light so that he could then light the way for others. However, those who refused to receive the light were filled with darkness and would lead others into even greater condemnation. (11:33-34)
- And Jesus ended this powerful message with a personal exhortation – ***“Watch out that the light in you is not darkness!”*** (11:35). In other words, make sure that you receive the Light God has sent you by responding to His words and obeying them! (11:36).

Conclusion: *So what are we supposed to do with all of this?*

Four important questions we must answer humbly and honestly before God and others:

1. Have I responded in praise to the Champion God sent to deliver me?
2. Am I obeying the Word God sent through Him?
3. Am I being transformed by the Light God sent to dispel the darkness that is in me?
4. Am I reflecting the Light to others accurately and attractively?

If not, why not?