

## Matthew 12:38-42 – “The Sign of Jonah” – Oct. 15, 2023

1. One of the great blessings of learning the Bible from young on is that we become familiar with the stories of Scripture
  - a. The downside of this is that it means the sense of anticipation often doesn't set in like it does when we're reading a book or watching a movie for the first time
  - b. I think it's helpful to try as best we can to see the Bible through 'new eyes'
    - i. By this I don't mean that we're inventing novel interpretations as we go along, but that we try to get into the story like we aren't already familiar with it
    - ii. To the degree this is possible, we'll develop an ability to get into the flow of what the authors are telling us, and maybe even to ask questions of the text that we haven't been taught to ask
  - c. If you're like me, you have all these stories and encounters rolling around in your head like a bunch of loose marbles instead of like a string of pearls, intentionally placed one after the other along a strand
  - d. The chronology of Matthew's gospel has Christ moving from obscurity to public ministry, and from tension with the Pharisees to open hostility that ends in execution and resurrection
2. The last few Sundays we've seen the intensifying friction, and I wonder how the story would seem if we weren't so familiar with it
  - a. I'm sure we'd be wondering how all this tension was going to be resolved
  - b. The room is filling up with more and more gas, and it seems like it's only going to be a matter of time before someone lights a match and sets it all off

- c. Jesus has gathered His Twelve, He has sent them out preaching a message of repentance, He has pronounced cursing on the cities that won't repent, He has had a run-in with the Pharisees over the meaning of the Sabbath, He has performed miracles and been accused of being on the side of Satan, He has warned the Pharisees of their hard hearts and of crossing a line for which they will never find forgiveness, and last week, we saw Christ explaining that the Pharisees words were wicked because their hearts were rotten. They were bearing rotten fruit because they themselves were rotten to the core.
- d. You can imagine how these men reacted to this open confrontation and complete lack of respect when they were used to honourable titles and signs of respect in the marketplace
  - i. Eventually, Jesus is going to pay the ultimate price for this, and many of His ministers have echoed this pattern since
    1. Hus, Wycliffe, and Luther were willing to defy popes, princes, and bishops when the Word of God was at stake
    2. John Knox, a former galley slave and body guard never preached without his broadsword at his side, and thundered against Queen Mary, even making her cry
    3. George Whitefield had to preach above drums and trumpets trying to drown him out, and he had to do it outdoors because the Church of England would no longer let him in any of their buildings

4. Samuel Davies to George II – *‘When the lion roars, the beasts of the forest all tremble; and when King Jesus speaks, the princes of the earth should keep silence’.*
- e. The Pharisees are agitated and try turning the momentum and the focus of the conversation off of themselves and back onto Jesus
    - i. A desire to change the topic is a common symptom of those who know that their sin is being exposed
      1. The adulterous woman at the well suddenly wants to discuss the proper form of worship
      2. I’ve had people that want to discuss fine points of theology when what we needed to discuss was how their sin was hurting them and others around them
      3. The Pharisees are tired of being on the witness stand and are trying their best to get Jesus back there
        - a. One of Jesus’ most effective tactics is to never take the bait, but to always use His opponents momentum against them
        - b. Jesus always stays on offense and this is one of the reasons He is so frustrating to His enemies
        - c. Here they are asking for a sign
3. VV. 38-39 – *“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.”*

- a. At this point, Jesus has resisted Satan's temptation during an extended fast; He has cleansed a leper, remotely healed a centurion's servant, cast out demons, calmed a storm at sea, healed a paralytic, raised a girl back to life, healed two blind men as well as a mute man, healed a man with a withered hand, and now in this most recent exchange has again cast out a demon from a man who was blind and mute
- b. Naturally, the Pharisees think to ask for a sign that they may believe that Jesus is the Messiah
- c. Christ is obviously not opposed to performing signs out of compassion for the needy, and these miracles are called signs because they *signify* the validity of Christ's ministry
- d. What Christ is unwilling to do, here and in other cases, is to turn His miracles into a performance, and He is especially unwilling to do it for those who come in arrogant pride instead of in humble faith
- e. The constant demand to put a greater and greater burden of proof on God in order to believe is itself a symptom of sin
  - i. Keller anecdote – 'what's the name of the girl you're sleeping with?'
  - ii. Bahnsen vs. Stein debate – a miracle won't convince – people grasp at alternative explanations
  - iii. These men just saw a blind and mute man start to speak and see, and they came up with the alternative explanation that Jesus was channelling Satanic power – why on earth would they accept the next miracle?!
  - iv. Christ refuses to play on their terms and refuses another miracle

- f. He even rebukes them for the request
- g. The Pharisees are cultural leaders of their generation, and Christ calls them and their generation ‘evil and adulterous’ for seeking a sign
  - i. These men should be convinced by the Scriptures alone that Jesus is the Christ
  - ii. From the moment of His conception onward, He has followed the biblical template perfectly
  - iii. He has shown Himself to be the true Israel, as the pattern of His ministry has followed perfectly along the footsteps of Israel’s journey in the OT
  - iv. He has performed miracles to validate His ministry; He has been heralded by John
  - v. These men read their Scriptures more than anyone, and have in-person contact with Jesus and they still don’t get it – what kind of hardness is this?
    - 1. *Nothing is as dangerous as the routine handling of sacred things*
  - vi. People seemingly get bored with Scripture and they start to prioritize other things to stimulate their imaginations
    - 1. In Luke 16 in the account of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man pleads for his brothers, and Abraham’s response was ‘*They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.*’ 30 And he said, ‘*No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.*’ 31 He said to him, ‘*If they do not hear Moses and*

*the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'*

vii. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul exhorts the church to not fall into the trap of playing by the opponents rules: *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach<sup>2</sup> to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”*

- h. The Pharisees are so close to both the Scriptures and to Christ and yet they can't see it – their proximity won't save them
- i. How many people grow up in church and should trust the Bible and the sufficiency of God's Word and yet are imprisoned on the treadmill of personal experience in order to trust that they truly have intimacy with Christ?

- ii. How many of us aren't chasing signs but are trusting our theological knowledge?
  - 1. We can win a Bible trivia contest or handle ourselves well in a theological debate, but like the Pharisees refuse to bend the knee to Christ
  - 2. This exchange is happening right on the heels of the portion about a tree and its fruit
    - a. I don't care if your eschatology is bang on if I see you being an idiot and having one beer too many with the guys
    - b. I don't care that your understanding of the gospel is even more Reformed than Luther and Calvin and Spurgeon if I know you're messing around with your girlfriend and not zealously guarding her sexuality until marriage
    - c. I don't care that your doctrine of Scripture is superior to the charismatics if they're honouring their parents more than you are
    - d. I don't care that you have the right last name and come from four generations of church elders and musicians if you refuse to bend your knee to King Jesus and quit living like the world
    - e. And if you're holding out on submitting to Christ because your pastor isn't interesting enough or your parents didn't teach you well enough or your Christian friends aren't

perfect enough, or your church isn't whatever enough, or your kids are making you too busy to practice godly disciplines, you are just like the Pharisees, hiding behind an excuse for not coming Christ

f. The only reason you're waiting for all the conditions to be right is because your heart is proud and Pharisaical – you're trying to make an excuse for your unbelief and you know you don't have one

i. These kinds of things can mark any generation, but Jesus is speaking specifically to His generation

i. They are the ones to see Christ in the flesh, after all

ii. They are the ones to witness His miracles

iii. As the gospel of Matthew goes along, this generation is damned most especially by Jesus when He calls down the curses of Deuteronomy on them and they gladly accept "*Let His blood be on us and on our children*" (27:25)

j. The very people whom God has especially blessed with His covenants and with the giving of the Scripture are moving closer and closer to formally rejecting their Messiah

i. They are an adulterous generation because they have been unfaithful to the terms of the covenant which God gave them and they are on the march to formally rejecting Jesus Christ



- k. Christ is unwilling to perform a miracle on demand for them, but He does let them know that there is still a sign coming
  - i. *You are going to see one more sign yet, and it will be interesting to see if you'll be able to see yourselves in the story or not*
  
- 4. VV. 40-41 – *“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.”*
  - a. Christ is clearly making typological connections between Himself and Jonah
  - b. Typology is a kind of foreshadowing – it is like live action prophecy in the form of people, places, and things
    - i. Typology insists on the literal history of the OT, but shows how these literal people, places, and things are symbolic of something bigger
    - ii. Typology moves us from shadows and promises to fulfilment; from fact to meaning
    - iii. Types are fulfilled, perfected, and terminated in Christ, and this is why Christ succeeds where all the old types and shadows ultimately fail and let us down
      - 1. This is why we say that Christ is the “true and better” Adam, Moses, David, etc.
      - 2. Christ is also the true and better Jonah

- c. Jesus makes the most obvious connection to how Jonah is a typological Christ figure
  - i. He spends three days and nights buried in the belly of the earth
- d. Jonah was called to preach to a wicked people, and runs the other direction
  - i. Christ was called to preach to a wicked people and He walks right in
- e. Like Jesus in Matthew 8, Jonah faces a mighty storm on the sea
  - i. The anger of the sea is frequently used as a model of God's wrath
  - ii. Jonah offers to be thrown overboard and give his life in order to calm the storm, a picture of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus who also offers His life and is thrown into the judgment and wrath of God in order to spare the lives of others
- f. Like Christ descending into Sheol/Hades, so we get a picture in Jonah 2 (*turn there*) (cf. Psalm 30)
  - i. You can put these words into the mouth of Jesus as He struggled in His dying hours at Calvary:
    1. *"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. 3 For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. (the pulling of hair, the lashes, the mocking, the scourging, the flesh being torn open) 4 Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight (my God, my God, why have You forsaken me?); yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' 5 The waters closed in over me*

*to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 6 at the roots of the mountains. (like Christ takes upon His sacred head the crown of thistles which so clearly symbolize the curse on the earth and on the garden, here the typological Christ has these cursed weeds covering his head) I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. 7 When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. 8 Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!” 10 And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.” (the tomb likewise vomits Christ out)*

2. Some see the language here as suggesting that Jonah actually died and was resurrected, but even if this is not the case, at the very least he goes down in a typological death and back up in a typological resurrection
3. And lest we think that the fish was the punishment, we need to remember that it is the water which killed – the fish was the instrument of Jonah’s resurrection – the fish brought Jonah back to safety

- a. The fish was a mercy from God in the same way that Christ's tomb is a mercy for us
  - 4. Likewise, the death of Christ is just as much the instrument of new life as it was the instrument of judgment
    - a. The sea of God's white hot anger had to receive a substitute in order to be calmed
    - b. And because God by grace receives this substitute, He is vindicated when death itself can no longer contain Him and must vomit Him back up to the shores of the living, having conquered the curse
  - g. At the end of v.41 Jesus says that the greater Jonah is standing right in front of these Pharisees, and that He is about to be vindicated with His resurrection after three days and three nights of death
- 5. V.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.”*
  - a. This is a reference to 1 Kings 10, where the Queen of Sheba, quite possibly from modern-day Ethiopia comes to see and hear Solomon in person, after hearing accounts of his great wisdom
  - b. Interestingly, Solomon's main contribution to Scripture is the book of Proverbs, where wisdom itself is portrayed as a person
  - c. Solomon, like Jonah, is quite clearly a type of Christ
    - i. Son of the Great King, heir to the throne, possessing great wisdom

- ii. Yet like Jonah, Solomon is also a failed Christ figure in that he doesn't follow his own counsel
  - 1. He warns his son of seductive women who will pull him off the path of wisdom, and Solomon himself is pulled off the path of wisdom in exchange for empty sexual promises
- iii. As promising as Solomon looks, he too lets us down and leaves us waiting for One wiser than him, who will not let us down
- d. Christ presents Himself as the greater Solomon here as well
- e. Calvin also notes something very important about both Jonah and Solomon
  - i. Both of them minister to foreigners
  - ii. Jonah is called to the Ninevites, who are strangers to the covenant
    - 1. Nineveh is located in present day Mosul, Iraq
    - 2. The hostility that we continue to see in the Middle East even this very week was raging back then
    - 3. This is why Jonah wanted to resist the call to evangelize these people – the animosity from one group to another was very clear and strong
  - iii. A southern queen, also an outsider to the people of God is not only willing to listen to Solomon, but to make a great journey at her own cost to seek him out
- f. Look at the contrast this sets up though – you have outsiders to the covenant, Ninevites and an African queen responding positively and repenting at the preaching of lesser Christ figures, and now you have the real Christ, the God-

Man, the true and better Jonah, the true and better Solomon coming to His own people who have been entrusted with the promises and the covenants and the Scriptures for generations and they reject Him

- i. No wonder Jesus says that the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South are going to rise up at the judgment with that generation and condemn it
- ii. *Lesser people who respond positively to lesser light have every right to condemn to the uttermost greater people who respond stubbornly to greater light*
- g. (ASIDE) – the fact that Jesus has the men of Nineveh bring resurrected together with the Pharisees at the final judgment does underscore the fact that Jonah was a literal person with a literal audience that he preached to
  - i. Too many in modern scholarship don't seem to know whether Jonah was a flesh and blood type of Christ, or whether he was a mythical tale
  - ii. Jesus indicates that he is every bit as real and historical as King Solomon was
- h. *The sign of Jonah is that God's messenger is commanded to go preach a message of repentance, and after an intense three day war against death in the heart of the earth, He will rise up and preach to outsiders who are far away from God. Amazingly, these outsiders will respond in humble faith, shaming those who are nearby but stubbornly refuse to bow to the Lord.*

## 6. APPLICATION

- a. There is real redemptive-historical consequences for the generation in which Jesus appeared and ministered that are unique to them

- b. The fact that the Jewish leaders so clearly rejected the Messiah gives significance to the very specific curses that Jesus brings down on the city in Chs. 21-24
- c. The nature of *that* generation and the curses provide a theological meaning to the Jewish Civil Wars and the utter desolation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, 40 years or a biblical generation after Jesus' earthly ministry
- d. All of that must be understood in its proper place in the story of redemption
  - i. In Romans 11, Paul talks about what seems to be a large scale conversion of the Jewish people to the gospel
  - ii. Even though their leaders clearly cut themselves off from the gospel at the time of Christ's first coming, there will also be widespread acceptance of the gospel before the time of His second coming
  - iii. The logic of Romans is that Israel is cut off because of her hardness of heart, which we're seeing here, and consequently, God brings the Gentiles in to His family.
    - 1. This is meant to provoke the Jews to envy so that they too may be grafted back in to the people of God by their acceptance of the Christian gospel
  - iv. the logic in the case of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba is similar
    - 1. God grafts outsiders in so that He can put His mercy on display and show that His covenant dealings are not about ethnicity or birthright but about union with Christ
- e. Put this way, it is not hard for us to make application for ourselves

- i. Some people still think that inheriting the kingdom is a birthright or that it comes by some kind of Christian ethnicity instead of by genuine personal faith in Jesus Christ
  - ii. They make the same proud error as the Pharisees
  - iii. Being born into a Christian home, or being baptized or being a member of the church will not ensure your citizenship in the kingdom
  - iv. We can be thankful for all those things, and as parents we have an obligation to offer covenantal blessings to our children, and God often works in and through families and communities but ultimately God saves people one by one
- f. If you're here this morning and think that you're in union with Christ because of your last name or because of your church attendance record or because of your Bible knowledge, you are making the same exact mistake as the Pharisees
- g. You will soon see the most unlikely of people standing in judgement over you at the resurrection
- h. If we put this whole extended passage together, what we have in our own context is a picture of church people who are content to separate head and heart, root and fruit, and assume that they have peace with God because of their knowledge or because of their rejection of knowledge, or because of when and where they're born and their proud assumptions will be laid bare at the end
- i. It might be the equivalent of someone here who refuses to bend the knee to Christ being judged by a blue haired feminist who starts out far from the



kingdom of God, but despite her poor start, acknowledges her rebellion and bends the knee to Christ

ii. Imagine a Christless conservative being put to shame and judged by this most unlikely convert

i. or to frame it the exact opposite way using Alistair Begg's clip about the man crucified with Christ, despite his very limited knowledge or his very short time to learn about Christ, showing up in heaven with nothing more to claim than the fact that the Man on the middle cross saying he could come

j. now imagine him walking in here

i. imagine the Ninevite converts or the Queen of Sheba walking in here

1. what would they think seeing that we worship the risen Christ every Lord's Day, we have a completed Bible in our languages, we have pastors opening the Word every Sunday, we have commentaries, we have systematic theologies, we have devotional materials, podcasts, and biographies. We live on this side of the cross, of the Church Fathers, of the Reformers, the Puritans, great evangelical preachers and theologians like Bunyan and Edwards and Spurgeon, great missionaries like Carey and Taylor and Livingstone, and are we going to let that all go to waste like the Pharisees and have outsiders pointing their finger at us and our ingratitude as we are thrown into the outer darkness?

2. Or will we be that much for thankful for the gifts God has given us, as well as the eyes to see it and the heart to embrace it, so that we can turn a profit on these gifts?
- k. It is my goal in these last two sermons to be crystal clear that not a single person in this church is saved because of their parents, because of their church affiliation, because of their theological tribe, or even because of their working Bible knowledge. These are all good things that genuine Christians must press into, but if they are not accompanied by genuine conversion and true evangelical faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then we have misunderstood Christ just as badly as the Pharisees did, and our outcome will be just as dark as theirs. Perhaps even worse since we are now on the other side of the sign of Jonah that they were promised.
- l. All of us are the recipients of many gifts. You all have a Bible in your hands, you are all in a church that is ministering to you through prayer, music, and preaching. Many of us have been taught the gospel for many years, so rather than just thinking of greater people rejecting greater light being judged by lesser people being transformed by lesser light, what would happen if we would be a people who start with great light and multiply it by our obedient response to even greater light? What if the next generation did the same? And the one after them the same? How much could we multiply God's blessing?

## 7. CHARGE

- a. *Christ's ongoing conflict with the Pharisees keeps inching towards its climax. Christ refuses to turn His miracles into a circus act, and so rather than respond to the request for yet another sign, He turns and exposes their unbelief. These men*

*are the guardians of the Scriptures and yet they refuse to see the Christ of those Scriptures. Jesus points to Himself in the account of Jonah and Solomon, and contrasts the high handed unbelief of these insider Pharisees with the repentant faith of those outsider converts. So today it is for us – Christless conservatism cannot save. Trying to be mainstream and middle of the road cannot save. Imitation forms of pursuing justice cannot save. Leftist and progressive schemes for utopia cannot save. Morality apart from the glorious gospel of grace cannot save. At the resurrection, do you want to be judged and condemned by those that you think are more wicked than you? If not, then you must hold fast to Christ. He has offered the terms of peace. He is happy to justify generational insiders and longtime outsiders; but regardless of which group you come from, He will only do it one way. He only has one people – and that one group of people, as varied as they are by age and ethnicity and background are those who lay down all forms of pride and presumption and self-righteousness and humbly reach out the empty hand of faith to receive all the promises of Christ.*

## 8. CHARGE

- a. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 – *“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*