

The Sign of the Prophet Jonah

<i>Text</i>	Jonah 1:17, 2:10; Matthew 12:38-40
<i>Readings</i>	Matthew 12:22-42; Jonah 1:17-2:10
<i>Theme</i>	Jonah is miraculously swallowed by a fish and after three days is vomited onto dry land.
<i>Sermon Theme</i>	Jonah in the fish is a type of the death and resurrection of Christ.
<i>Purpose</i>	To show how Jonah is a type of the death and resurrection of Christ and direct us to faith in Jesus.

Congregation,

This is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. Almost everyone has heard about 'Jonah and the Whale'. It is one of the favourites for children and often chosen for bed-time story reading.

Yet while it is a well-known and well-loved story for Christians it is often ridiculed by un-believers. Many of them think the Bible is a book of myths and fables and they cite this story as a prime example of this. "Fancy believing that a man could be swallowed by a whale and then survive there for three days! Ridiculous! What next?!"

Christians believe this story because it is in the Bible and that is enough for us. This book is the inspired word of God and it *is God's Word* – all of it, from cover to cover. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in Righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Every story in it is trustworthy and true.

And we believe in the miracles recorded in the Bible because God is all powerful. He is the great Creator. We don't have to think up rational or scientific explanations to explain the miracles. The Lord God can do anything he pleases.

Nor do we need evidence from outside of the Bible to confirm the truth of the biblical stories. We believe the Bible because it is the word of God. Having said that there is much from secular history and from archaeological discoveries that does confirm the truth of the Bible. So we believe the story of Jonah because this is part of the word of God.

We should also note that the Bible does not mention a whale but rather 'a great fish', so it could have been any type of large fish.

Chapter 1:17 tells us that God "*provided* a great fish to swallow Jonah." The word 'provided' also means prepared or appointed. God can do this because he is the God of the sea and the wind and the waves, but

he is also the God of the *creatures* of the sea. He controls and directs everything he made for his purpose. So he provided this great fish to be in that place and at that time – right when and where Jonah was thrown overboard. This was the miracle of this event.

Not only that, but God preserved him for three days in the belly of the fish. This was another miracle.

And a further part of this miracle was that while Jonah was there the fish was swimming its way through the Mediterranean Sea to the place where God wanted Jonah deposited. The fish arrived and the Lord commanded it “and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (2:10). Sometimes we say to someone; “Come on, cough it up!” This is what happened to Jonah. One commentator says that the fish “obediently and doubtless gladly spews up this indigestible object and swims off...” (L. Allen). After his ‘submarine’ journey through the sea Jonah finds himself coughed up on a Mediterranean beach somewhere.

But we need to be sure that we see the real point of this story. Campbell Morgan observed that “men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.” We don’t want to fall into that trap. The ‘hero’ of this story is not Jonah, the disobedient but repentant prophet, nor the great fish, but rather the Lord who rescued his prophet. We need to focus on this Great God and what he was doing.

We understand what God was doing when we look at this incident from the perspective of the New Testament. We don’t always get a New Testament commentary on the Old Testament, but we do with this event. Jesus explained to the Jews that Jonah pointed forward to him. Jesus himself gives us a commentary, an explanation of the significance of this story.

Jonah was a ‘type’, a pattern, of what Jesus would do. He was a ‘sign’ pointing forward to Jesus. What happened to the runaway prophet was a picture of what would happen to the Great Prophet. This event in Jonah’s life foreshadowed the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

To see this we need to go to **Matthew 12:38-40**. Please turn to that passage and let’s read that...

Earlier in this chapter (verse 22) Matthew had described how Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. In response the Pharisees claimed that Jesus drove out demons by the prince of demons, i.e. by Beelzebub, or Satan.

Jesus countered that by showing them that their claim was illogical – that would be like a kingdom divided against itself. Rather, he was driving out demons by the Spirit of God (verse 28).

The Pharisees and teachers of the law then said to him; “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you” (verse 38). Jesus had just performed a miracle for them to see, but they didn’t want just another miracle; they wanted a definite sign that would remove the uncertainties in their minds and the ambiguities they

supposedly saw in his other miracles. They had seen these other miracles and somehow they had managed to explain them away.

For Jesus this was a temptation to remove the limitations of his humanity and give them a full display of his divine nature; to show them his glory; to let them have the full dose.

This was like the temptation that came from Satan in the wilderness when he urged Jesus to turn stones into bread. It was a temptation to use his divine power in a way that went beyond the mission and the task God had given him.

Jesus refused to give in to these temptations. He refused to satisfy their desire. He was not going to give them a sign like this.

But the Jews were not the only ones who wanted to see definite signs.

In the Middle Ages people were very superstitious and they were attracted by stories of miraculous events, of supernatural healings, of visions. They wanted to be able to see something happen.

People today are the same.

Some want to see God work directly in the world, bringing an end to war and suffering and famine. "Why does God stand by in the face of such evil? If there is a God, why doesn't he act? Why doesn't he show his hand? Use his power?"

Even some Christians want to see evidence of his power in signs and wonders so that people will be convinced of the truth about Jesus. They call this "Power Evangelism".

But Jesus warned us against looking for signs. In verse 39 we read: "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign." Jesus takes the attitude of the Pharisees as representative of the whole nation of Israel. They did not really want to believe in him. In fact, the religious leaders had already decided to kill him (Matthew 12:14). Even if Jesus had produced a 'convincing' sign they would still have refused to believe. Their eyes were blind to the light of the gospel and their hearts were hardened against its truth. The teaching and the miracles of Jesus were proof enough of the truth about him, but still they weren't convinced. They did not believe.

In the parable about the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus explains that this will be a pattern all through history (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man was in hell and he wanted Abraham to send Lazarus down to earth to warn his brothers "so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Abraham replied: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ (Luke 16:29-31).

Many today think like the rich man. If only I saw this or that, then I would believe. Jesus says; “You have the Bible – that is enough. Believe it.”

However, Jesus did say he would give them one sign: “The sign of the prophet Jonah. 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 12:39-40).

Let’s pause for a moment to explain **the three days**. In Jewish reckoning three days includes a full day and a part of each day either side of that. So it referred to a period of time reaching backwards and forwards beyond 24 hours. The body of Jesus was laid in the tomb on Friday afternoon and he arose again on Sunday morning. So he was there part of Friday, all Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), and he rose on the Sunday; in Jewish reckoning, 3 days.

Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days. He was there because of his sin. This was the consequence of his wrongdoing. He had run away from God and now the Lord caught up with him. “The wages of sin is death”, writes the Apostle Paul (Romans 6:23) and it was as though Jonah had died. He was still alive but it was like being in a tomb. This was his humiliation.

This was a picture of the **humiliation and death** of the Lord Jesus. The Apostle Paul wrote; “He humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). “The wages of sin is death”, and Jesus took those wages for those he loved. He was perfect but he took our sin on himself and he died in our place, bearing the punishment of the sin of all who believe.

Just as Jonah was willing to be thrown over the side and to put his life into God’s hands, so too Jesus placed his life into the hands of his Father. “Not my will, but your will be done.” “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

After three days of being entombed in the belly of the fish **Jonah was spat out onto dry land**. He was delivered from death. It was as though he came back to life. It was a miracle of resurrection!

He was **a sign pointing to Jesus**. After three days in the heart of the earth Jesus was raised from the dead. This was a great miracle. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were all instrumental in raising Jesus, the Son of God, from the dead. He was raised with his glorious resurrection body, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep in him. He ascended to heaven as the guarantee that we will one day join him there.

His resurrection from the dead was the proof of his victory over evil; it demonstrated that the price of sin had been paid for; it guaranteed the triumph of Jesus over Satan.

“He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25).

The resurrection of Jesus is so important that the Apostle Paul hung everything on it. He told the Corinthians that what he received he passed on to them “as of first importance”: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day.” Later in this chapter he wrote; “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4,17). Everything centres on the resurrection of Jesus.

This is why Jesus could say that this was the only sign that was going to be given – not just to the Jews, but to all of humanity – to all the generations of people who would follow.

This is a sufficient basis for faith.

Here is enough evidence to believe.

Here is a foundation for solid conviction.

If the Jews did not believe in his resurrection they would not believe in anything he said or did.

Jesus died and he rose again. These are the foundation stones of Christian faith.

We read them in the Bible.

We confess them in the creed.

We hold them in our hearts.

We live them out in our lives.

This part of the story of Jonah is a great miracle.

But this disobedient prophet was only a faint foreshadowing of the True Prophet who was going to come.

What happened to him was only a pale reflection of what would happen to our Lord.

What he went through was only a poor imitation of what Jesus went through.

This is why Jesus could say; “**But now One greater than Jonah is here**” (Matthew 12:41). He could say that with truth and accuracy. There was no pride in that claim nor any delusions of grandeur. He was greater than Jonah because he was, and is, the Son of God, the Second Adam, the Eternal Lord, the King of Glory.

Today we have ‘the sign of the prophet Jonah’ in the humiliation and exaltation of Christ;

In his death and resurrection;

In his dying and being raised to life.

“One greater than Jonah is here.”

Believe in him and trust him;

Love and serve him;

Listen to him and obey him;

Praise him and follow him;

Bow down in honour and worship.

Amen.