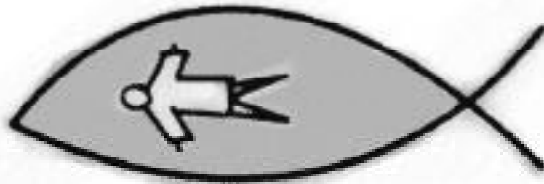


The Sign of the Prophet Jonah



Sabbath Afternoon

AT THIS POINT IN OUR STUDY, the narrative, the story of Jonah and his exploits, has ended. It was quite a story, with some amazing exploits, to be sure. However, while the narrative portion of the Jonah story is now over, the message of the story, and the reasons it was included in the biblical canon, still aren't.

Jesus Himself, during His earthly ministry, is recorded three times talking about Jonah, all in the same context: that of Jonah in the belly of the fish. Obviously, for Jesus, the story of Jonah, particularly the parts He specifically mentions, is pertinent and, obviously, because His words regarding Jonah are recorded in two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, there must be something there for us, as well.

This week we'll take a closer look at what Jesus said about Jonah, the reluctant prophet, and the reasons He used Jonah to relay an important message, not only to those listening to Him speak but for us, as well.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What is asked of Jesus that causes Him to refer to Jonah, and who asks it? Why does Jesus speak such a sharp rebuke to them over what they ask? Why will there always be room for doubt? How does Jonah's experience prefigure Christ's death, burial, and resurrection?

MEMORY TEXT: "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40).

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 20.

“THIS ADULTEROUS GENERATION.”

“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40).

As shown in the first week’s lesson, Jesus believes in the truth of the Jonah story, particularly the most “unbelievable” part; that is, Jonah’s undersea excursion in the belly of the big fish. In fact, Jesus refers to Jonah, not just in Matthew 12 but in Matthew 16:4; meanwhile, Luke (11:29-32), as well, records Jesus referring to Jonah. All these references are in the same context too.

Read Matthew 12:38-45; Matt. 16:1-4; and Luke 11:29-36, the three times Christ mentions Jonah. What is the background of His response? What do all three accounts have in common? Why does He refer to this “wicked” or “adulterous” generation? What’s the point of the reference to the Queen of Sheba? And to the Ninevites?

In many ways, particularly given the context, we see here a repeat of what happened with Jonah. All through the book it was the pagans, the non-Hebrews, who were responding to the signs, the warnings, as well as the expressions of God’s grace, while Jonah, the only Hebrew in the book, seems hardened to them all.

Jesus is dealing with a similar situation here: Those who, like Jonah, should know better, don’t. By referring to Jonah, Jesus points to a story that, if heeded in faith and submission, would provide them with a clear object lesson.

This should teach us that to be given great light and the great privileges that come with that light are no guarantee of salvation. To know “truth”—that is, a series of propositions and statements about God or the nature of God—in and of itself, means nothing. The pages of the Bible are crammed full of people who are given truth but don’t bear the fruit of that truth in their own lives.

Read carefully Matthew 12:43-45, keeping the context in mind. What point does the Lord make here? What message should there be here for us, as Seventh-day Adventists?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Matthew 12:40.

Teachers Aims:

1. To explore the significance of Jesus' references to Jonah.
2. To illustrate how Jonah's experience prefigures Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Lesson Outline:

I. Comparisons Between Jonah and Jesus.

- A. Jonah was three days and three nights in the fish just as it was prophesied of Jesus that "the Son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).
- B. The nonbelievers of Jesus' day responded to Him just as the nonbelievers of Nineveh responded to Jonah—with undeniable acceptance.
- C. In the same spirit of discontent as Jonah, believers of Christ's day were not prepared to accept God as He truly was.
- D. We must guard against making this same mistake.
- E. Just as Jonah's *resurrection* from the belly of the fish eventually led to mercy for the Ninevites, so Christ's resurrection offered mercy to all.

II. The Profound Truth of Christ's Life on Earth.

- A. The most profound and wonderful truth is that God stepped into the garb of humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ and died to save us.
- B. The rejection of Christ by His own people illustrates how great light and the privileges that come with that light are no guarantee of salvation.
- C. Many people today reject truth, not so much because their mind denies it but because their flesh does.

Summary: Despite our frailty and rebelliousness, God still strives to uphold us. He encourages us to freely accept His offer of salvation, urging us to cling to Him.

Commentary.

I. The Controversial Sign.

A group of Pharisees and religious leaders demanded a miraculous sign from Jesus to authenticate His mission (Matt. 12:38). But He replies that the only demonstration they will receive will be "the sign

Monday

December 15

SEEKING A SIGN.

What question prompted Jesus' strong response regarding Jonah? Why would Jesus have reacted as He did? See Matt. 12:38; 16:1.

Skim through the first 16 chapters of Matthew, events that preceded these questions, and what do you see? Lepers healed (Matt. 8:2-4); a centurion's daughter healed (vss. 5-13); a paralyzed man healed (Matt. 9:1-8); the blind receiving sight (vss. 27-31), and so forth. And yet, some of these people still wanted a sign?

How do all these signs explain why Jesus reacted to their request as strongly as He did? See also Luke 16:31.

Ultimately, those who don't want to believe in God, or in Jesus, will always find reasons for the unbelief. In fact, it's hard to think of anything God could do to get someone to believe if that person really doesn't want to believe.

Imagine if, suddenly, the words *JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, DIED FOR THE SINS OF THE WORLD!* were written every day across the sky in every land, in every language, by a means that eluded rational, scientific explanation. However miraculous, however great a sign these words would be, belief that *JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, DIED FOR THE SINS OF THE WORLD!* would still require faith. Even such a powerful sign would not be absolute proof, and those who still don't want to believe would not be persuaded, even with something like this heralded across the sky.

After all, Christ's atoning death on the cross was a historical event that happened in the past. It's gone. The only way we could ever know about it is to be told about it, and, because we weren't there and didn't see it happen, we can take what we've been told only on faith. How else? Faith, because it's belief in what's not "proven," always comes with the potential for doubt, and all the signs, miracles, and wonders in the world will never erase all doubt. Thus, those who want to cling to doubt will always have something to cling to, no matter the signs.

What are the things that have caused you to believe in the Lord Jesus? Would you like something else to happen that could, you think, strengthen your faith? If so, what is it? Now, imagine that what you ask for is given to you.

Do you imagine, then, that all your questions and all your doubt will completely vanish? Certainly not. The question is, What do you do with that doubt?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

of the prophet Jonah' ” (vs. 39, NRSV). Also see Matthew 16:1-4 and Luke 11:29-32.

Jesus does not explain what He meant by His reference to the sign of Jonah, and commentators have struggled ever since to make sense of it. The two most frequently offered explanations involve either Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites or his deliverance from the great fish.

Those who advocate that the sign alludes to the prophet's preaching point to Luke 11:32, in which Jesus declares that “ ‘the people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah’ ” (NRSV). Thus the sign is Jesus' call for repentance, just as Jonah urged the people to repent. But people frequently preached repentance, so it hardly would have been something unique and striking. Furthermore, in Matthew 12:40 and Luke 11:30, Jesus clearly indicates that the sign was something in the future.

The second major interpretation—that of Jonah's deliverance from the great fish—is the most likely meaning of the allusion. Jesus says in Luke 11:30 that “ ‘just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation’ ” (NRSV). And in Matthew 12:40, He says, “ ‘For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth’ ” (NRSV). Not only do the phrases about being in the belly of the sea monster for three days and nights and being in the heart of the earth three days and three nights parallel each other, in Greek the words *belly* (*koilia*) and *heart* (*kardia*) echo each other.

II. “A Wicked and Adulterous Generation” (Matt. 16:4, KJV).

Three times the Gospels refer to the sign of Jonah. In each case, Jesus describes those who demand some kind of a sign from Him to legitimize His ministry to a “ ‘wicked and adulterous generation.’ ” His reply suggests the only sign they will receive is one involving judgment. Nineveh escaped judgment for a time, but eventually it brought judgment upon the northern kingdom of Israel. Jonah's mission led to the deliverance of Gentiles and the destruction of Israel. Could Jesus' mission result in the same? (See Luke 19:42-44, Rom. 11:11-15.)

III. Do Three Days Equal 72 Hours?

Certain religious groups stress that the three days Jesus spent in the tomb had to be a literal 72 hours. They even rearrange the events of crucifixion week to get that exact time period. Other commentators point out that Jesus was using a type of thinking called *inclusive reckoning*. Even today, when some event covers a full day and parts of other days, we refer to those additional partial days as regular days in our description of the time span involved. For example, if we leave town for twelve hours on Friday, all of Saturday, and eight hours on

Tuesday

December 16

“A GREATER THAN JONAS IS HERE.”

When we read what Jesus says to the people in Matthew 12:41, 42 (see also Luke 11:31, 32), in both accounts Jesus utters an interesting and important phrase: “Behold, a greater than Jonas is here”; “behold, a greater than Solomon is here.” The context of these utterances shows Jesus comparing the attitude of these people to that of the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba.

Read 1 Kings 10:1-13, about the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon. What was her reaction, and why? What was it about Solomon that made her act as she did? What does this teach us about what Israel, had it been faithful, could have accomplished for the Lord? See also Deut. 4:5-8; 8:17, 18; 28:11-13.

Notice also in Christ’s words the other comparison He’s making; that is, not just the comparison between “this generation” and the pagans but between Himself and both Solomon and Jonah. He’s saying, essentially, that the Ninevites repented at the words of Jonah, who is hardly the greatest example of fidelity, faith, and zeal; and yet, here He is, the Son of God Himself, doing all that He has done, *and you still refuse to repent?* And here’s the Queen of Sheba, a pagan ruler, who, of her own choosing, came to hear Solomon, a mere sinful mortal; and yet, here He is, the Son of God, *who came to you, and you still wouldn’t listen?*

In what ways is Jesus greater than either Solomon or Jonah? See John 1:1-4; 8:58; Col. 1:16.

Of all the truths we ever can know, the most profound and wonderful is that God Himself stepped into the garb of humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ. No matter how big and scary the world, God through Christ has reached down and linked Himself to sinful, dying mortals in a way that should give us incredible hope and comfort, for our God has been among us, as one of us, and thus He knows us better than we can know ourselves. Even more so, He loves us too.

How does the deity of Christ give you comfort personally? Why do you think the deity of Christ is so important? What would it mean if Jesus were a created being like us, as opposed to being the Creator Himself?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Sunday, we do not say we were gone for one half day, one full day, and one third of a day. We consider we were away three days.

Also, those who demand that the parallel between Jonah and Jesus be exactly 72 hours do not push the literalism between the two incidents to the point that they require Jonah to have been dead like Jesus. Scripture does not even say that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for 72 hours. The two experiences are similar, not identical.

Finally, miraculous or unusual events in Scripture often use the number three. See Genesis 42:17 and 1 Kings 17:21. Perhaps this is a way of indicating a significant period of time.

IV. Learning From Pagans.

The allusion to Jonah is one of two illustrations Jesus employs to show how people should respond when God sends someone with a call for repentance. The Pharisees and scribes were well educated. But even they could learn something—and from pagans at that. The people of Nineveh, although belonging to a tyrannical empire that worshiped blood-thirsty gods—could still respond when confronted with the God of Israel. Perhaps, Jesus suggested, Israel’s leaders could profit from Nineveh’s example. Just as Nineveh heeded Jonah’s preaching, so the Pharisees and scribes should respond to Jesus’ teaching.

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Text for Discovery: Matthew 12:38-41.

1. Despite the fact that God did miraculous things for Jonah, the prophet was slow to repent. Yet, the Ninevites repented without having seen one miraculous sign. Jesus did miraculous things when He was on earth. Why do you think that those who saw what Jesus did still did not believe?
2. Read Matthew 12:38-41. Just as Jonah did not want to believe that God could forgive the Ninevites, the Pharisees refused to believe that Jesus was
- the Son of God. Jesus gave them an answer to their desire for a sign. Why could they not make the connection?
3. The lesson stated that Jonah was a poor man’s example of what would happen to Christ. What other examples like this one, foreshadowing Christ’s death and resurrection, are in the Bible?
4. Reread Matthew 12:38-41. Why do you think Jesus referred to Jonah during this discussion with the religious leaders of His day? How appropriate are His words for us?

STRONG WORDS.

Though we're used to the gentle Jesus, the kind, loving, forgiving Jesus, the Jesus presented in these episodes comes across a bit differently, at least on the surface. Matthew 16:1, by elaborating on the motives behind those who ask the question, helps us understand why Jesus speaks as He does.

Of course, this wasn't the first time Christ spoke strong words of rebuke and censure during His earthly ministry.

Read Matthew 23. Who is Jesus rebuking, and why? What parallels exist between His rebuke there and what we've seen in the texts regarding Jonah for this week?

Notice, too, in His discourse in Matthew 23 that He more than once calls the leaders "blind." Thus, how fruitless it would be to give them the sign they asked for in Matthew 12, because the blind can't see. No matter what Jesus does—healing lepers, raising the dead, casting out demons—these scribes and Pharisees refuse to see, and that's because they don't want to. And Jesus, by pointing out their sins and corruption (in Matthew 23), shows why they don't want to: If they had, if they would have accepted Him by virtue of the signs and wonders He performs, then they would have had to reform radically their lives and practices, something that many of them, apparently, didn't want to do.

For many people today, the same principle applies: They reject truth, not so much on an intellectual basis, not so much because their mind rejects it, but because their flesh does.

Though Jesus refuses to give them, in this situation, the kind of sign they want, He, nevertheless, amid the rebuke, gives them a "sign" anyway. Look, again, at Matthew 12:39, 40. Jesus uses the Jonah story, a past event, to talk about something that would happen soon. What is that event? How does the Jonah story prefigure this event? How, even here, is Jesus saying something to these people, that, if they listened, could have opened their eyes to Him and who He was?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

In Matthew 12:42, Christ uses a second example—the queen of Sheba. She had traveled a long distance to hear Solomon’s wisdom. The Pharisees and scribes called Jesus “Teacher” (vs. 38, NRSV). But were they willing to respond in the same way as this ancient queen? After all, Jesus’ wisdom was infinitely greater than that of Solomon’s.

V. Something Greater Than Jonah Is Here.

Jesus repeatedly stressed that His role and Person were greater than that of Jonah’s. We must let nothing distract us from the fact that He is the purpose, meaning, and goal of all Christianity. On a practical level, we must not quibble about how long Jesus was in the tomb. We must accept and proclaim that He was *in* the tomb and that His death, burial, and resurrection gave Him authority for all salvation. And it demands our praise.

Jonah points to Christ. St. John’s Church in Gouda, the Netherlands, has a stained-glass window of Jonah striding from the mouth of a large fish. The background depicts him being tossed overboard from the ship. As the prophet walks toward the viewer, he points toward a banner he is carrying. Its slogan declares in Latin, “Behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”

WITNESSING

Jonah did not obey the Lord, while those on the ship who did not know God worshiped Him. Jonah was unforgiving and filled with anger, while the Ninevites responded to God’s word and were subdued by His love.

Are we like Jonah, professing to be servants of the Lord, while in our hearts we are unloving, unforgiving, and disobedient?

“Sincerity of purpose, real kindness of heart, is the motive that Heaven values.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 81. “Half-and-half service places the human agent on the side

of the enemy as a successful ally of the hosts of darkness.”—Page 94. We can only hope that in the end Jonah had a change of heart. Now is the time for us to be sure that our hearts are right with God so we can be ready to meet Him when He comes.

The Lord has outlined the events that will lead to His second coming, just as there were signs that pointed to His birth, earthly ministry, and death. We can be true servants and faithful witnesses by telling others of these signs and pointing to Jesus, the Way of salvation.

“IN THE HEART OF THE EARTH.”

Even amid His strong rebuke of their spiritual blindness, Jesus still seeks to win their allegiance, for though He is God, He will not force anyone to follow Him. Then, as now, service to the Lord must be given freely; otherwise, it’s slavery, and God doesn’t want slaves. (If He had wanted slaves, He wouldn’t have made us free moral agents.) Thus, Jesus uses the story of Jonah to describe what would happen to Him; that is, His death, burial, and resurrection; the idea being that, after it happened, they—remembering what He said—would have more reason to believe in who He was.

In Jonah 2:2, Jonah says that “out of the belly of hell cried I.” The word for “hell” there comes from the Hebrew *sheol*, which means “the grave” or the “underworld.” In Hebrew, it’s often synonymous with death. Jonah, in the belly of the fish, saw himself as “dead,” only to be resurrected; that is, saved from his fate, and only by the power of God.

What does each verse say that helps explain why Jesus would use the Jonah story as a “sign” of His own experience?

Matt. 26:61; 27:62-64; Mark 14:58 _____

Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; John 21:14 _____

Acts 2:15; Rom. 4:24, 25; 1 Cor. 15:3-5; 2 Cor. 4:14; Eph. 1:20 _____

However poor a symbol of Jesus that Jonah was, the Lord uses the story of Jonah, his descent to “sheol” and then his ascent back to “life,” as a symbol of what would happen to Him, when—having died under the crushing weight of the world’s sins—He would descend to “sheol,” only to be brought back to life by the same God who brought Jonah back from “sheol,” as well. And just as Jonah’s “resurrection,” in a small way, would lead to mercy given to the heathen, Christ’s resurrection would, as well, only, of course, on a much greater scale. Jonah was a poor man’s example of what would happen to Christ.

Christ’s resurrection from the dead leads to the promise of ours, as well (see 1 Thess. 4:14). Why is the promise so important to us as Christians? What would our faith mean without it?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: Harry Rimmers's book, *The Harmony of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1936), relates the experience of an English sailor who fell overboard his ship and was swallowed by a fish. A couple days later, the sailor's shipmates found the fish, floating on the water. They took it ashore and opened it. To their amazement, they found their shipmate alive inside the fish. The sailor had survived the smelly ordeal, but his skin had turned a chalky white and remained so for the rest of his life. Many more incidents such as this have been recorded and, in all cases, the person turned chalky white!

Thought Questions:

1. Imagine the reaction of the citizens of Nineveh to such a bleached-skinned man, who smelled like fish and ranted about the end of time. Jonah probably drew large crowds. He even may have remained chalky white for the rest of his life, a reminder of his experience and of a time when a great city was almost destroyed. What other effects do you think this strange event had on Nineveh and the surrounding cities? How do you suppose Jonah lived out the rest of his life?
2. Jesus refers to the story of Jonah

and to other stories and prophets of the Old Testament. (See Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 5:27; 10:35, 36; 11:10-14; Mark 14:27; Luke 4:18, 19; 4:25-27; 20:41-44; John 5:45-47; 8:56-58.) Considering how small the book of Jonah is and that its message is specific to a city and not to the entire world, why do you think Jesus points to Jonah as a sermon illustration? What are the elements of Jonah's story that keep it alive from one generation to another?

Application Questions:

1. Jonah was a stranger to Nineveh with a hard-to-believe message. Compare Jonah with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What are some things said of us by the media and by other denominations? What kinds of benefits are gained in becoming more mainstream? What are the dangers of becoming like any other Protestant denomination?
2. The story of Jonah was told and retold, from generation to generation, for a divine purpose. List the lessons you have learned so far from Jonah. How are these lessons applicable in today's world? How are they relevant in your own personal witness of Jesus' saving grace?

FURTHER STUDY:

The important point is that the Ninevites ‘repented’ in spite of the fact that Jonah worked no miracles for them. They accepted his message on his own authority, because it carried conviction to their hearts (see Jonah 3:5-10). The same should have been true in the case of the scribes and Pharisees, for the message Christ bore certainly carried with it convincing evidence of His authority (see on Mark 1:22, 27). But in addition to the words He spoke He wrought many wonderful works, and these constituted an additional testimony that His words were true (see John 5:36). Yet in spite of all this evidence the scribes and Pharisees still obdurately refused to believe the evidence afforded them.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary* on Matthew 12:41, vol. 5, p. 398.

Jesus said that He would spend “three days and three nights” in the heart of the earth; yet, He was buried late Friday and rose Sunday morning, which isn’t three full days and nights; that is, a complete 72-hour cycle. Obviously, then, the phrase “three days and three nights” doesn’t automatically mean exactly 72 hours. Instead, it’s simply an idiomatic expression meaning just three days, such as (in this case) Friday, Sabbath, and Sunday (see Luke 23:46–24:3, 13, 21). It doesn’t have to mean a complete 24-hour Friday, a complete 24-hour Sabbath, and a complete 24-hour Sunday. In other places, Jesus said that “in three days” He would raise His body temple (John 2:19-21) or that He would be “raised again the third day” (Matthew 16:21). These references mean the same thing as the “three days and three nights”; that is, Jesus would be crucified and raised from the dead over a three-day period, even if only one of those days, the Sabbath, encompassed a complete 24-hour day. He was crucified late Friday, spent Sabbath in the tomb, and rose Sunday.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

George Washington was the first president of the United States, right? Yet, who alive today ever met him? Who ever saw him in his office? Alexander the Great was a powerful leader of the ancient Greek Empire. But how do we know? Has anyone in your class ever met him or seen him in his role as leader? In other words, all these things, like the life of Jesus, require some amount of faith, do they not? Discuss.

SUMMARY: Jesus used the Jonah story to give a stern warning. Who will heed it?