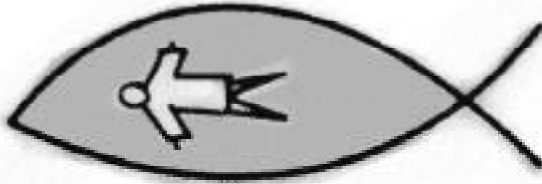


The Sign of the Prophet Jonah



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?

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?

“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?

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?

“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?

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?



One Person's Influence

John Ash III

When Chan, a young bride, moved with her husband to his hometown some 200 miles southeast of Hangzhou, China, she was baffled that she could not find any Adventists living there. She continued her search until she found a small group of Sabbathkeepers who met in the home of one of their members. But the congregation was not Adventist. As she visited the little group of believers she discovered their interesting origin.

During World War II the United States offered the assistance of military specialists to help the struggling Chinese army. Apparently a Seventh-day Adventist military chaplain was assigned to the region where this little group of believers lived. The chaplain did more than just meet the needs of the military personnel; he shared his faith with the local people, and eventually he led seven of them to Christ. Shortly after he baptized the new believers, the chaplain and his unit left the area.

The little group of believers managed to build a tiny chapel, but it burned down shortly after completion. Through the stormy decades of Communism, atheism, and the stifling pressures of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the little group of believers managed to continue worshiping, perhaps because they were isolated from large population centers. But over the years, without the presence of a minister, the little group lost nearly all of the Adventist beliefs, but it managed to cling to the Sabbath and their belief that Jesus is coming soon. They thought they were the only Sabbathkeeping Christians in the world.

Chan rejoiced to tell the little congregation that they were a part of a worldwide group of believers. She helped them contact another congregation of Adventists in a city two hours away. Today this larger congregation has begun to nurture the faithful little group, and today they have grown to more than 100 believers. They were excited to relearn biblical truths that they had lost over the weary decades. The larger church helped the little group buy and remodel a house for a chapel.

The chaplain who led those first seven Chinese believers to Christ may never know this side of heaven what a powerful influence his simple act of faith has made on the people with whom he shared his faith.

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