

29. The Sign of Jonah

Luke 11:29-36

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

In our study of the life of Jesus according to the Gospel writer Luke, we witness the bitter opposition to the ministry of Jesus by the Pharisees and the religious elite of his day. Trying to discredit the ministry of Jesus after coming face to face with the miraculous healings and deliverance He performed, they accused Him of operating under the power of Satan (Luke 11:15). Verse 29 tells us that, along with the Pharisees, there were a crowd of people that were listening to the exchange. Some among them had wanted Jesus to perform a sign to prove that He was not of the devil: “Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven” (Luke 11:16). We must bear in mind as we evaluate this desire for a sign that Jesus was now in His last few months of ministry before His crucifixion. For approximately two and a half years, the Lord had been doing many signs proving that He was (and is), indeed, the Messiah. He had multiplied bread twice before them and healed a multitude of people. He had cast out demons, healed the leprous, the lame, the blind, the deaf, the mute, and raised the dead—and they still wanted a sign?

The Sign of Jonah

²⁹As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. ³¹The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. ³²The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here (Luke 11:29-32).

I find it difficult to believe that the people who were standing there and had watched a demon being cast out were still asking for a sign from heaven! (Luke 11:29). I'm sure there was a sigh in His heart, seeing people believing the lie that was being perpetrated by the religious elite as they hurled their blasphemous slander against Him and attributed the works He performed to Satan. With the crowds increasing around them (v. 29), Jesus responded to the desire for another sign. What they were asking was for more light, i.e. light being a metaphor for more information. They wanted a spectacular sign, such as they had already heard taking place in Galilee and all over Israel that would help them in making a decision to place their trust in Him. Because they were deliberately ignoring all the preceding signs and asking for another, His indictment of them is that they are a wicked generation. Let's stop a minute to think about what He was saying.

The generation that Jesus was living in was the most religious generation ever found in the nation of Israel. They were meticulous in their keeping of the law. If ever a generation could please God by keeping to a standard of rules, that was the generation! If anyone could ever receive eternal life by good works, it would have been that people group. However, instead of pleasing God, they were grieving the Spirit of God by their resistance to God's love and refusal to repent and receive the grace of God. The very best of man's work, our righteous acts, are as filthy rags in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6). We can never approach God on the basis of our works

(Romans 4:5-6). We must come to Him on His terms, i.e. through the sacrificial substitutionary Lamb of God. Out of His care and love for the Pharisees (Yes, he loves Pharisees, too), He reminds them that, if they keep on resisting the love, grace and mercy of God, there will be a judgment that each of them will face. The more understanding that we receive, metaphorically called *light*, the greater is our accountability to respond accordingly. Jesus responded to the “wicked generation” around Him by telling them that no miraculous sign would be “given it except the sign of Jonah” (Luke 11:29).

Question 1) Why wouldn't Jesus give them a miraculous sign except the sign of Jonah? What does Jesus mean by the sign of Jonah?

- 1) Why wouldn't He give them a miraculous sign? It could have been that the attitude of the people was more about curiosity than of deep desire to know the Savior.
- 2) It may have been that He did not want to increase their accountability and judgment. These people opposing Him did not want to believe; they were maliciously testing and taunting Christ by asking for a sign.
- 3) God is blessed by faith, and the writer of the book of Hebrews states “without faith it is impossible to please him” (Hebrews 11:6). Consequently, faith is what pleases Him. Faith is a choice, an act of the will. God will often grant individual signs to a person, but He longs for a faith that will trust Him without the signs. The Apostle Thomas missed the first appearance of Christ after the resurrection, and he would not believe the other disciples when they told him that Jesus had appeared to them. Thomas said to them: “Unless I see the nail prints in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it” (John 20:25). Jesus showed up and very graciously let Thomas do the very things he wanted so that he would believe. Jesus then said “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” John 20:29). He was looking for people who would respond with faith rather than sight.

What was the sign of Jonah? Jonah was a prophet sent by God to preach to the people of Nineveh. (Nineveh is in present day Iraq on the Tigris River, about 220 miles northwest of Baghdad.) From Joppa (present day Jaffa in Israel), he paid for passage on a boat heading in the opposite direction going west to Tarshish (modern day Spain). The Lord had spoken to him to preach against Nineveh because its wickedness had come up before God (Jonah 1:2).

The problem that Jonah had was that he did not want to go! He did not want to preach because he did not want the people to repent and receive mercy. He believed that the people of Nineveh should be judged for their guilty sins against Israel, and he did not want to see the mercy of God extended to them (Jonah 3:10-4:2). He discounts how many innocent people there were in Nineveh—120,000 who know neither their left hand from their right. Who are those that don't know their left from their right hand? Perhaps, Jonah is speaking of children (Jonah 4:11) or those who for whatever reason were innocent or ignorant.

God sent a violent storm against the reluctant prophet, which was so bad that the regular seamen on the ship feared the storm was more than normal weather; they feared it to be of a supernatural origin. When they found out that Jonah was the culprit behind the storm, they threw him

overboard! Luke never tells us what the sign of Jonah is, but let's take a look at what Jonah experienced. The Scripture indicates the possibility that Jonah died and was buried in the great fish before being resurrected to show forth the mercy of God. His testimony was:

From the depths of the grave [sheol] I called for help (Jonah 2:2)...To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit (Jonah 2:6).

It could be that Jonah prayed at the last moment and cried out to God for mercy. He said: "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple" (Jonah 2:7). We are told that Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17). Was he alive during that time? Did God bring him back from the dead because there was no "plan B" for Nineveh? I think so. Matthew, in his parallel account of the confrontation over their request for a sign, tells us something additional to what Luke writes:

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 12:40).

For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation (Luke 11:30).

We are not told, but it is very likely that the experience of his body being in the belly of a great fish made Jonah's skin white due to being bleached by the digestive juices in the fish. What a sign it would have been for a completely bleached white person preaching the judgment of God upon them! They saw the sign of one that had been brought back from the dead preaching that, unless they repented, they would see judgment within forty days. No wonder they repented! They believed Jonah's preaching. He was a testimony of God's grace and mercy. Jonah was brought back from the dead and was a powerful witness that God is not only a God of judgment but also a God of faithfulness, One Who will respond to repentance. Jesus was brought back from the dead, and in the same way, those that exhibit faith and repentance toward Him will receive mercy instead of judgment.

He then went on to share two examples of those who will appear at the place of judgment and testify against those who refuse to repent and walk with Christ, viz. the Ninevites and the Queen of the South, referencing the Queen of Sheba.

³¹The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. ³²The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here (Luke 11:31-32).

Question 2) When you think about the Day of Judgment, what or who comes to mind? What do you think Jesus means when he says that He will bring witnesses against those resistant to grace?

To the Christian, the judgment concerning sin has passed. Jesus said: “Whoever hears my word, and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Notice the past tense. When a person truly believes with a trusting faith in the Lord Jesus, there is a crossing over from being under the dominion of Satan to being in Christ Jesus. Jesus told Nicodemus that the condition of the believer is one of being “born again” or born from above (John 3:3). Judgment for the Christian was substituted by the Lord Jesus at the cross. God, in the person of Christ, took the full weight of wrath and judgment on Himself.

One gets the sense from the scriptures that there will be a kind of Nuremburg trial, similar to that at the end of the Second World War, that will be set, i.e. a time where a heavenly court will sit. Daniel the prophet tells us:

Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened (Daniel 7:10).

Those whose names are not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Revelation 21:27) will have witnesses that will be brought. The Queen of the South mentioned here in verse 31 is the Queen of Sheba, who will come to bear testimony against those who heard wisdom much greater than Solomon. She was so hungry for truth that she left her native land, i.e. the current-day country of Yemen to the very south of the Arabian Peninsula, and she traveled with a huge retinue to seek out the Wisdom of Solomon. She came more than a thousand miles with all her entourage in search of the wisdom and knowledge of God. Think of how long that would have taken her on the back of a camel, or by chariot. She was earnest in her seeking, and when she got to Jerusalem, she was eager and open to listen.

With great privileges there are also responsibilities. We are privileged to have the Word of God in our own tongue, and yet there are many who will not open the pages and seek for truth. Will those in the Middle Ages be witnesses against those who have had access to the truth and yet will not even consider it? Will those in countries who have had restrictions placed on them regarding the Scriptures be witnesses in the judgment toward those who have never considered Christ as Lord, even when they have heard the Word of truth being plainly taught? This is the type of picture Jesus is painting here. The Queen of Sheba had a thirst for wisdom. She wanted to see firsthand the splendor of Solomon’s kingdom, and she made the journey from southern Arabia (modern day Yemen) to Jerusalem, thus risking her safety and at great expense. If she were to suddenly appear among us, I believe she would be envious of our spiritual privilege.

The hearts of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law had grown harder and harder as they continued to verbally attack Jesus’ integrity and ministry. When one resists the Spirit of Grace, something happens within. We close up our spirits and refuse to listen to correction. When we shut our ears and our hearts to the truth, our hearts become hardened and our spiritual senses become deaf to the truth. When Stephen, the first martyr, stood and shared the Gospel before Saul (who became Paul the Apostle), there was an immediate response from Saul and the men around him. Notice the response of the religious Jews at the end of his message:

“Look, he said [Stephen], I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” At this **they covered up their ears** and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him (Acts 7:56-57).

We are told that God will also bring witnesses from the Ninevites to the court appearance. They had repented at the preaching of Jonah, but the men in front of Jesus had refused to repent even after seeing many miracles. The sad truth is that in some way those that refuse God’s free gift of salvation will have pictures of their rebellion and witnesses that will recall their acts of resistance. When the rich man mentioned in Luke 16 died, Abraham told him to remember (verse 25) what he was like while he was on earth. Hell will be a place where those eternal decisions will be replayed and remembered again and again. Those who chose not to listen will remember how they closed their hearts to the Lord. The understanding of their rejection of the truth will be a painful reality.

The Lamp of the Body

³³No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead he puts it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. ³⁴Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. ³⁵See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. ³⁶Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you (Luke 11:29-32).

Question 3) What was Jesus meaning by saying that our eye is the lamp of the body? (v. 34) What is the function of our eyes?

We live in a world of darkness and light. Jesus uses light and darkness as a metaphor for knowledge and understanding. We still use the phrase that we were “in the dark” until suddenly the light came on, and we understood something that was being taught. Light reveals; whereas, darkness conceals. Those around Jesus on that day were requesting more information so that they might believe that He was of God and not the devil. The Lord was responding by telling them that the problem is not that they didn’t have light, but that they refused to see the light that was all around them. The problem is not the lack of light, but that their hearts had become hardened and resistant to the light, the knowledge, and the revelation that they had already received.

In another place, Jesus had spoken of the Pharisees, saying, “**They are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit**” (Matthew 15:14). The Pharisees considered themselves as the spiritual guides, the ultimate spiritual guides, who had revelation and understanding, but instead, by their words and actions, they were leading others astray. Jesus says that, when this happens, i.e. the blind leading the blind, both will fall into a pit. Even when the sign of Jonah was fulfilled in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, they still would not believe, but instead, they paid money to the Roman soldiers who had witnessed it, and they lied to the common people by saying that the disciples had stolen the body (Matthew 28:12-15). They had eyes to see, but their hearts were closed to the truth.

Jesus said that the eye is the lamp of the body. Our eyes do not generate the light, but they let the light in. The light is regulated by the eye. The problem wasn't that they didn't have enough light, the problem was their sight. They had closed their spiritual eyes. The men of Nineveh or the Queen of Sheba had nowhere near the light that the Pharisees had, yet they had responded to the truth. They will appear as witnesses that they had responded to a lot less light than the Pharisees had been given.

We must endeavor to seek that every part of our inner being would have open doors and windows to the light of truth. We are told that the Spirit of God lives within those who belong to Christ. **“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).** As a temple has many rooms, so does that invisible part of us. Jesus went on to talk about the eyes needing to be good (v. 34). The Greek word means to be “single, sincere, without an agenda—to be clear.” The Light of the World, Jesus Christ, wants to shine in every room of the temple of your inner being. A person's will is involved in this desire to be sincere in allowing the Word of God to do its work in the inner man.

When Jesus goes on to talk about the eye being bad, He means to have the shutters up, for the eyes to be blurred and not allow the light in to the inner man. Again, the will is involved in intentionally closing down thoughts of truth, thus keeping the inner man, i.e. his spirit, in darkness. It is a choice to refuse to listen to truth and to hold on to sin in our life. The Spirit will be faithful to point out to each of us the areas of our life that are in conflict with the Spirit of God, i.e. any areas of darkness that need to be brought into the light. Sometimes, our agendas and desires block the entrance to the light of change. Many prefer the darkness. We can get used to the darkness and be oblivious to it.

People can open their lives to Christ but still have areas ruled by dark habits. They can receive Christ, yet the soul, i.e. their minds, wills, and emotions, are still under the dominion of the enemy in some area. This is most clearly seen when we have thoughts and attitudes that are in conflict to God's word. Light must be brought into every area of our lives. One can have the Spirit, but the Spirit might not yet have you and rule over every area of your life. Habitual sin might still dominate. For instance, a person's tongue may not yet be brought into subjection to the Spirit of God. Other people may still have an area of their life where they are addicted to pornography or alcohol or any habitual sin. The eye is the gateway to the soul. What we fix our attention on can rule us.

We must starve what we are feeding on if it is not building up our spiritual life. Allow the light of the Gospel to come to every area of your life; hide nothing from Christ. Let His light shine on every dark corner of your life. He knows everything about you, anyway. Nothing can be hidden from Him, so ask for His help in bringing every room of the temple of your inner life to Him. Focus your attention on being obedient to Christ and His Word. What will happen when we are willing to do this? The greater the light we allow to shine through us, the greater the glory of God will shine forth for others to see.

We are living in a day when darkness and light are the same to many people. It is not a popular notion, even among some Christians, to draw the line between that which is good and that which is evil. Some people even question the reality of evil. Jesus leaves no question about the reality

of good and evil in these verses. In speaking of our eyes, the Lord is addressing our spiritual perception. R. Kent Hughes writes, “If our spiritual eye is good – literally ‘single’ or simple, open, uncomplicated by sin – it will admit the light that Jesus shines on it, and our interior being will be illuminated.”¹

Jesus gives us a challenge: “See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness” (v.35). “See to it.” What does that mean? Clearly, Jesus is telling us that we have a responsibility. There is something that is within our power to let the light in. How gracious our Lord Jesus was when confronted with those that questioned His ministry, looking for a sign. They wanted to make sure that they were on the “right side.” He could have looked around the group, pointing to each one and exposing the secrets of his heart. Instead, He invited each one to look inside his own heart and to open himself to the truth.

Question 4) How do we “see to it that the light within us is not darkness?” Discuss.

We all make decisions every day about the following:

What we choose to behold,
What we choose to hear,
What we choose to agree with,
What we choose to dwell on and think about,
What we choose to emulate,
What we choose to accept or reject, or
What we choose to love.

Our prayer today, Father, is that we may be children of the Light and not walk in darkness. I pray that we be children of light, holding out to others the light of life. Amen.

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¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke Volume 2- That you might know the Truth*, Printed by Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill. 1998. Page 17.