

Luke 11:29-36 **The Sign of Jonah**

Jesus did not have an easy life. Not only the horrible way He died, but His life was a constant struggle. Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes each took their turn attacking Him and challenging His authority. Nothing He ever did was right. When Jesus first proclaimed Himself the fulfillment of prophecies regarding the Messiah, people in His own home town “got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (Luke 4:29). When Jesus healed a paralytic who had been dropped down in front of Him while He was teaching, “the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, ‘Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?’” (Luke 5:21). When, in the synagogue, He encountered a man with a deformed hand “the scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him” (Luke 6:7).

The religious leaders of His day challenged His disciples when they casually picked grain while walking through a field on the Sabbath (Luke 6:2) and when they did not follow the ritualistic washings before meals (Luke 11:38). When Jesus cast out demons, it was said He was in league with Satan himself (Luke 11:15). Yet despite this constant harassment, Jesus always responded graciously, though at times forcefully and directly. In this passage, Jesus concluded a conversation with these men by asserting His deity and taking away any excuse they might have for not believing in Him.

Previously in the conversation, some in the crowd, “to test Him, were demanding of Him a sign from heaven” (Luke 11:16). Their claim was that they were not to blame for not believing, Jesus had simply not given them enough proof. If only He would perform some miraculous sign, then they would believe. One more miracle, they seemed to insist, would convince them that Jesus was the true Messiah and not an ally of Satan.

This was absurd. Jesus had done little else than teach and perform public miracles for nearly three years. Just looking at Luke’s gospel alone shows that Jesus had thus far in His ministry driven out demons (Luke 4:31-35), healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39), healed others in the same village (Luke 4:40-41), healed a leper (Luke 5:12-15), healed a paralytic (Luke 5:17-25), healed a centurion’s slave (Luke 7:2-10), raised a dead man to life (Luke 7:12-15), cured “many people” (Luke 7:21), calmed the ocean during a storm (Luke 8:22-25), expelled a demon (Luke 8:27-33), stopped a woman’s long-term hemorrhaging (Luke 8:43-48), raised a young girl to life (Luke 8:49-55), fed thousands with virtually no food (Luke 9:12-17), and most recently, cast out a demon (Luke 11:14). No doubt there were other miraculous events as well. This was not a matter of lacking evidence.

The Accusation

As more and more people gathered around, no doubt looking to watch the confrontation between this traveling rabbi and the religious leaders (there was not much to entertain in those days), Jesus continued, “this generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah” (v. 29). This was the direct answer to the challenge posed earlier in the conversation asking for some sign to prove He was not of the devil.

Some commentators have noticed that this the same illustration had been used by Jesus previously (Matthew 12:39), but that ought not to concern us. Teachers often have at their command several concepts that they emphasize over and over again when the timing is right. The use of the words “began to say” (v. 29) are used to signify such a repeated statement.

More important is Jesus accusing the people gathered around Him. Never one to seek the applause or approval of men, Jesus unhesitatingly referred to them as “a wicked generation” (v. 29). Again the phrasing is significant. Jesus was speaking to these people, but He was calling out the entire population as wicked.

This can seem surprising. After all, the Jews were not some uncivilized, pagan tribe. They abhorred sacrifice to idols. They worshipped Yahweh, the One true God. They were moral and religious in the extreme. They had made religion a way of life, for example one of their one-time leaders boasted that he had been “⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:5-6).

Yet they were indeed wicked. Their self-righteousness obscured the fact that, like all people, they were sinners unable to please God. Their own Scriptures said clearly that

“The fool has said in his heart, ‘there is no God.’
They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds;
There is no one who does good” (Psalm 14:1).

Jesus had claimed that He had been sent to

“To proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18)

But these people were self-righteous. When He first made His claim to be the Messiah, “²⁸all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; ²⁹and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (Luke 4:28-29).

When He invited a hated tax-collector to join His group, they celebrated later at his home but “²⁹there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, ‘why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?’” (Luke 5:29-30). Their imprisonment in the false religion of works blinded them to the truth that they needed a Savior.

The Evidence

But the context demonstrates that Jesus did not call them wicked because of their sinfulness and self-righteousness. He called them wicked because they asked for a sign. In his account, Matthew adds ‘adulterous.’ That is, they were unfaithful to their God, Yahweh.

By demanding a sign, the people were arrogantly blaming Jesus for their own lack of belief. The fault was His. He had not done enough to prove He was the Messiah. But they were not sincere even in this. Scripture shows that their motive was clear. They were asking for a sign not because they truly wondered if Jesus might be the Messiah, but “to test Him” (Luke 11:16).

The surest proof of their insincerity is that even after the sign - the resurrection - the Jews still refused to believe,

“¹¹Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. ¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³and said, ‘You are to say, “His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.” ¹⁴And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.’ ¹⁵And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day” (Matthew 28:11-15).

We should not underestimate the amount of unbelief in the time of Jesus. Nor should we do so today. In fact, it is a wonder any of us are saved. Our sinful natures, the world around us, and the attack of Satan all work to our destruction. God’s grace must indeed be extraordinary to overcome all of this.

Nevertheless, Jesus promised them a sign, though not the miracle they wanted. He said “²⁹no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation” (v. 29-30). We all know the story of Jonah, the unwilling prophet commanded by God to preach destruction to the Assyrian stronghold of Nineveh. Despite his flight in the opposite direction, God used a large fish to swallow him up, then accepted his repentance and allowed him to finish his mission.

For the people of Nineveh, the sign was the miraculous reappearance of a man thought dead. Jonah signified the power of God and the grace and mercy of God. Jesus would be the same kind of sign. Just as, in the temple, Simeon prophesied the baby Jesus would be a sign (Luke 1:25-32), so His death and resurrection would be the ultimate example of God’s power, grace, and mercy.

The Witnesses

Jesus then used two Old Testament examples to demonstrate the failings of this “wicked generation.” The first was the Queen of the South. Jesus proclaimed that “the Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them” (v. 31). Her story is told in 1 Kings 10,

“¹Now when the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with difficult questions. ²So she came to Jerusalem with a very large retinue, with camels carrying spices and very much gold and precious stones. When she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart. ³Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was hidden from the king which he did not explain to her” (1 Kings 10:1-3).

The Queen of Sheba was contrasted with the Jews of Jesus’ time. She would stand in judgment “because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon” (v. 31). Though there is no record of her being invited to Solomon’s court, she came. Though she was a pagan, she sought the truth. The Jews in Jesus’ time were constantly invited to hear the wisdom of Jesus, but ignored Him. And when she

heard the truth, she accepted it. Now even though “something greater than Solomon is here” (v. 31), the Jews refuse to listen and believe.

Another group to stand in judgment over the generation that rejected Jesus were the people of Nineveh. Just as Jonah went to Nineveh to announce the impending destruction of the city so, too, Jesus came to preach the salvation offered by the kingdom of God. Jonah came to them risen from the depths of the sea, and they believed his message. They “repented at the preaching of Jonah” (v. 32). And again, “something greater than Jonah is here” (v.32) yet the “wicked generation” refused to believe.

The Ninevites repented, these Jews did not. Though given more opportunity (the Son of God among them) they did not believe. Many question the authenticity of the repentance of the Ninevites. That is, were they truly saved? To respond, we must consider the following. First, though Nineveh was eventually destroyed, it was not until 612 BC, some 150 years after Jonah. So there is not necessarily a spiritual connection between the Ninevites of Jonah’s day and those living at the time of the destruction of the city. Second, nowhere in Scripture does it insist that all Ninevites repented. Third, In Luke 10:13-15, Nineveh is not listed among the cities that did not repent. Fourth, the very fact that Jesus says Nineveh shall stand in judgment must be taken as a sign of belief

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” (Psalm 1:5).

There are two kinds of darkness - ignorance and stubborn unbelief. Though burdened with the first, but the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites repented and followed the truth when they heard it. The “wicked generation” of Jesus’ day, had no excuse. They were not ignorant of the truth, Jesus had given them far too many examples for them to claim that as a defense. They were simply too stubborn and self-righteous to accept it.

The Judgment

Jesus gave three reasons why the “wicked generation” was to be judged. The first was that they had a singularly unique opportunity to know the truth. “No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it away in a cellar nor under a basket” (v. 33), Jesus said, stating what must have seemed an obvious fact. The purpose of light is to illumine things, to bring them into our vision, to make them seen. Jesus had done just that. He had been among them. He had taught publicly, He had performed His miracles for all to see. He had been, as it were, “on the lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light” (v. 33).

Some of the most vivid and beautiful metaphors of Scripture involve light.

“This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

“For with You is the fountain of life;
In Your light we see light” (Psalm 36:9).

“There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man” (John 1:9).

“Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will

not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life” (John 8:12).

“For God, who said, ‘light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Lamps are meant to be seen. Jesus had shown Himself off to all who would look. The same is true today. We possess a great privilege of faith, and we must make use of it. For that we are accountable. It is not enough to hear the truth. It is not enough to agree with it. It is not enough to admire it. It must be accepted and applied. And furthermore, we must reflect all the light we can. We cannot be selfish with the truth we know.

Second, the people of Jesus’ generation had chosen not to see. They had light everywhere, but they closed their eyes to the truth. Evidence of Jesus’ deity had been clearly taught. Perhaps more importantly, it had been clearly demonstrated in His power over both spiritual forces and nature. The evidence was clear, but what was also clear was the indictment of Jesus as to their self-righteousness.

Jesus called them out for their choices. Jesus explained that “the eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is clear, your whole body also is full of light; but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness” (v.34). At another time He said that “they are blind guides of the blind. and if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14). They chose the darkness willingly. “¹⁹This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

Finally, these people were self-deceived. Jesus warned them to “watch out that the light in you is not darkness” (v. 35). They were to be careful that they did not convince themselves that they were spiritually enlightened when, in fact, they were lost in darkness. False systems of belief are notorious for giving their adherents a sense of false security. Romans 1 describes such people,

“²¹For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (Romans 1:21-23).

In such a case people ought to be careful, for there will come a time when God will give them over to themselves and allow them to descend into darkness.

“²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Romans 1:24-25).

Finally, let us appreciate that there is a sense of completeness described in this passage for the true followers of Jesus. “If therefore your whole body is full of light, with no dark part in it, it will be wholly illumined, as when the lamp illumines you with its rays” (v. 36). The point Jesus made was that the whole body is either light or dark. This reminds us that we cannot compartmentalize our faith. We must be single-minded in our faith. No compromises, no lukewarmness. Let us not forget the “one thing . . .”

“One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord
And to meditate in His temple” (Psalm 27:4).

“⁴¹But the Lord answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; ⁴²but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42).

“Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13).

Take Aways

Having received faith in Jesus Christ, let us be singularly focused to live our lives in the light, enjoy fellowship with the Light, and spread the light of the gospel to all we encounter.