

5 – Something Greater Than Jonah // Matthew 12:38–41

Today, I'm going to try to bring home the book of Jonah TO YOU. To land the plane. Jonah is a really colorful story about a prophet of God sent to Nineveh but runs the other way, and gets swallowed by a fish... And all along the way I've shown you that each of us can find our story in Jonah's. But did you know there is a message in Jonah that is so significant, and so important, and Jesus said that if you miss it there is really no hope for you. It's more significant, he said, than if you saw a miracle with your own eyes.

Matthew 12:38–41 *Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."*

They say, "Jesus, we want to see some proof." This is not because they are genuinely convinced; the Bible invites genuine seekers to investigate; but their confusion arises from a stubborn, hardened heart. There comes a time when what you see, or what you don't see, has more to do with the fact that you don't want it to be true than any lack of evidence.

[39] *But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. [40] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

[41] *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

"The people of Nineveh are going to rise up against this generation and condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, who preached a **5 word sermon** and was, by all accounts, a **terrible witness** (he was a hypocrite; he was a freak); but here you are listening to, and seeing, the ministry of one much greater and much more convincing than Jonah, and you are not repenting!"

So, 3 questions for you: **1. "How was Jesus' message similar to Jonah's?" 2. "How was it greater than Jonah's?"** And that leads us to a 3rd question: **3. "Are the people of Nineveh going to condemn you on the Day of Judgment?"** Nineveh responded, if you recall, by putting on sackcloth and ashes, which was a symbol of their inward repentance. Sackcloth: grieved; ashes—my choices have been destructive.

And today, we're going to give you a chance to respond. You see, in the Bible, whenever you respond to God, there is an outward symbol that goes a long with it. Here, **sackcloth and ashes**. In the church I grew up in, it was **walking an aisle!** Great, but not biblical. **Baptism was the sign!**

- **Symbol:** Baptism shows that you put your old life away—buried; laying aside the old garments of sin and rebellion and condemnation; putting on the new garments of righteousness and peace with God. I'm going to give you a chance, like we do from time to time here, to respond. Their sign was sackcloth and ashes. Rip your clothes and put ashes on yourself showing that your sins have destroyed yourself. **Your symbol is baptism; your old life put away forever in the death of Jesus and raised to new life in Him.**
- Many of you in this church have never been baptized. For some of you, it's because you've never repented of your sins and given your life to Jesus, and I'm going to give you a chance to do that today and then be baptized, today. Others of you have made that decision, but you've never shown it by baptism. So, today you're going to take that step.

Here we go:

I. How Jesus' Message is Similar to Jonah's

Let's start with Jonah's message: It was just 5 words in Hebrew *Yohd arba-eem venineveh yome nehpa-ket* "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." **Jonah 3:4**

Not much in there to look at and analyze, but 2 words stand out: **40 days**, and **overthrown**

- **40 days**... In the Bible, 40 is the number of judgment. It means appointed, imminent judgment.
- **Overthrown**... is a war term. God is going to do war against you and put down the rebellion against Him. A lot of times we think of sin as morally devious behavior that hurts others: cheating, lying, stealing, cruelty, cowardice; the most significant dimensions of sin are not its effects on others but its affront to God.
- 2 roots of sin:
 - **Pride**: I know better how to run my life, so I will do it. I don't need to listen to God.
 - **Idolatry**: I matter more than God. My interests and what I want are more important than God and what He wants. At the core of the Hebrew concept of worship is **kabod**: weight. You worship what you give the most weight to. **(not a bad thing: it's when your career, reputation, money, romance, family etc begin to matter more to you than God) Most of us have multiple idols in our heart (John Calvin: idol factory)**, but the biggest idols we have is ourselves. What we want and what we desire is weightier to me than what God wants and desires.
- This is cosmic treason. And at some point, the rightful king comes. And He overthrows false claims to rule.
 - Some people object here: Why does God have to come mess with my stuff? Why can't God mind His own business? Think about the logic of this for a minute; if there is a God who created everything, then everything you see and touch was created by

Him. **Nothing is not His**. That's His air you are breathing. So there is no "God should mind His business and I'll mind mine. You don't have any business. It's all God's business.

- Secondly, God created us so that we function best when we are in right relationship to Him. **Imagine a fish that rebels against the water of the ocean.** "I'm sick of you!" and flops up out of the ocean. Good luck with that. God made us for Himself and it is His love that keeps us close to Himself.

So Jonah's message was one of appointed judgment. Now, Jesus did not give his audience an actual calendar day like that (and I don't have one for you either); but don't think of 40 days as a set calendar day but as a prescribed time of judgment. "40" in the Bible is symbolic; it means, "When the time is fulfilled."¹

- **Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment."** That means you have a time of judgment set, appointed... there's nothing you can do, really to change that date for you. Might be today; might be next week; 10 years from now; 80 years from now. But that day is set and your accountability to God is set.

Can I ask you a question? Do you ever think about this? **Jesus asked a very penetrating question, "What does it profit a person if they gained the whole world and loses his own soul? And what would a man give in exchange for his soul?"** That

¹ "The period of forty days or years is an important one in Scripture and in Jewish tradition. As the church father observed, it is most often associated with **hardship, affliction** and **punishment** (according to Augustine in De Con. Ev. 2.4.8-9). The flood of judgment in Noah's day last forty days. So does the fasting of Moses and Elijah. The generation in the wilderness wanders for forty years. Israel is in the hand of the Philistines for forty years. Forty days is the length of time Ezekiel lies on his side to symbolize the punishment of Judah. Jonah prophesies that Nineveh will be contingent because the forty days become a period of repentance that nullifies the forecast." ...it goes on to talk about how 40 days in the bible isn't necessarily a precise number. It's more of an approximation that was often used in general conversation. **The important thing to note is that judgment, in Jonah's case, was imminent.**" Ryken, Leland, Wilhoit, James C., Longman, Tremper. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 305.

doesn't even require you really to be religious to see the logic of that.

- If there is an afterlife (and, note, 97% of Americans believe in some kind of an afterlife, which is more than say they believe in God... which is weird; what do you think is out there?" 97% believe in an afterlife. Only 4% believe in hell, which makes sense, culturally, because "We're Americans; we're positive! Somebody else is going to hell, not us!")
- If there is an afterlife, is there anything you could gain here that would make you trade *your soul* for eternity.
- **Think about it.** Think about what you most want out of life *right now*. A certain job. A certain person. A certain achievement. **If you could look just beyond your final breaths, is there anything you want now that would make you trade that to possess it?**
 - **Imagine if I offered you some huge amount of money...** but the price was you gave up your life at midnight. And at that point you had to give all the money back.
 - What person in their right mind would take that deal?
 - **Let's say that you gain absolutely everything you want out of life:** You are happily married to the love of your life; retired wealthy after having accomplished everything you wanted to accomplish professionally; you die peacefully and painlessly at a good old age with your adoring family gathered around your bedside; what does all that profit if in that moment you lose your soul for all eternity?
- That's what is happening! Some of you are so focused on life's prospects here that you are all but oblivious to what is coming in eternity.
- **But it is coming. It is appointed. Yet 40 Days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.** An appointed time for you. It may be today; year; it may be 30 or 50 years from now, but it is coming.
- **Why would you forfeit something that is eternal for something you can never hold onto?**

- What kind of fool would do that? Think about it... whatever you are holding onto, you're going to lose anyway. That's what Jesus said, "*He who saves his life will lose it.*" You ever think about how much of what we do is designed to "save life?" We buckle our seat belts. We eat healthily. We save for retirement. But no matter how well you "save your life," you'll lose it—you can run every day; eat broccoli and hummus... but one day you'll lose it.
- So, here's the question: if you've got to lose it anyway, why not lose it to gain something eternal?
- What kind of fools holds onto something he can never keep and trades that for his eternal soul?
- Jesus is everything. Jesus + nothing = everything. Everything – Jesus = nothing.
- The problem is not that most of us don't believe this stuff, it's that we just don't take this that seriously...
- Me at a funeral... There is a weightiness I feel I must preach with...

2. How Jesus' Message Is Greater than Jonah's

A. The Sureness of It

- Nineveh got a very truncated message. (Jonah was like a little kid who was obeying his parents but still with a defiant spirit. Fulfilling the letter of the law.) All he said was, "Yet 40 Days..." He didn't tell them about God's compassion, His love, His offer of forgiveness.
- Remember the king says this, 3:9, when he orders everyone to repent, "*Who knows, God may turn and relent... so that we may not perish?*" **Jonah 3:9**. He doesn't know.
- We, by contrast, have the promise of grace.
 - **Jesus said, Matthew 11:28**, Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

- **John 6:37**, “The one who comes to me I will never for any circumstances cast out.”
- **John 3:16**, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son so that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.”
- **The prophet Isaiah promises (1:18)** “Come now, let us reason together says the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, I will wash them white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, I will make them like wool.”
- The Apostle Paul says, **Romans 10:13**, “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

B. The Richness of It

- Nineveh had only the hope that God would relent from the destruction He had promised.
- The gospel is that Jesus took our place.
 - **2 Cor 5:21**, “God made Him, who knew no sin, to become sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.”
 - **Thought of this when I was praying... when I approach God**, I say, “here’s why you should hear my prayer.”
- Around the Summit, we say that you can summarize the gospel in 4 words:
 - **Jesus in My Place**
 - Gift righteousness: **What’s mine became His; what’s His became mine.**
 - **Illus.** When I got married I was a full-time Ph.D. student without really any money. I had a part-time job (here, in fact, but y’all didn’t pay me hardly anything) and I had barely enough to pay rent and keep gas in my car. Ramen noodles every night... V had to deal with all those difficult kids. I’m

not complaining, I didn’t work that much... because I was a Ph.D. student... just the point is I had “no cash flow.” Veronica had graduated, however, and when we got married she had a full-time job as a teacher at a public school. You don’t get rich off it, but it’s a salary. When we got married, and she and I said those words, “I do,” I received, first of all, a beautiful, godly bride; my best friend and the love of my life; but you know what else I got? CASH FLOW. I didn’t even have to deal with all those snot-nosed kids at the school she taught at. She did all the work, I got access to all the reward.

- To so much greater a degree... the promise of salvation is that Jesus paid it all!
 - The offer of salvation is that all my sin and shame and judgment became His, on the cross, and all the privileges and promises that Jesus deserved become mine.

The message we have received is greater because of the sureness of it, the promises of it, and finally, because of...

C. The Character of the One Bearing It

- Jonah hated the Ninevites. He only went because God had forced him to. **Jesus could not have been more different...**
- Jonah ran from his assignment; Jesus ran toward it.
- Jonah came only because he had to; Jesus came because He wanted to.
- Jonah sat outside the city and hoped for Nineveh’s destruction; Jesus stood outside Jerusalem and wept and pleaded for her salvation.

- The only reason Jonah delivered the message to Nineveh was to save his life, he knew if he didn't God would kill him; Jesus delivered his message even though it cost him his life.
- Jonah was thrown overboard into the sea because of his sin; Jesus was cast into the sea of God's wrath for ours. Jonah was taken down into the depths of darkness for 3 days because of his disobedience; Jesus was taken into darkness of death for 3 days for ours.
- Jonah was more upset about the death of a plant giving him shade than he was the destruction of children; Jesus gladly, Hebrews 12:2, endured the pain of the cross for the joy that was set before Him, the joy of making rebels into sons.
- Jonah showed up bearing only an announcement of condemnation; Jesus said (John 3:17), *"God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."*
- When God's mercy was extended to Nineveh, Jonah wallowed in self-pity and cursed God. Jesus depicted Himself as a Father who yearns for the return of His son so badly that he runs to meet him and forgives him before he can even say I'm sorry.
- **Jesus is the truer and greater Jonah.**²

Matthew 12:41, (again) *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

You have no excuse. No excuse.

You say, "I need a sign from God." For most of you, "no, you don't." You know it's true; you just resist it. **The problem is not your**

² This comparative list inspired by (and, in some places follows) Tullian's comparison in *Surprised by Jonah*, 181.

head; it's your heart. Your head invents reasons because your heart doesn't want to believe.

- The reason man won't come to God is because of pride and idolatry:
- Remember this verse? **Jonah 2:8**: *"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could have been theirs."*
- What keeps you from God is *idolatry*. Something you put more weight on than God.
- The tragedy: It makes you forfeit grace! Forfeit = it was yours for the taking! You didn't have to earn it. It's like you've been given a million dollars and you just got to show up at the bank to **claim** it but you never do. You "forfeit" it.

- **In eternity**

- **The refused pardon of George Wilson.**³ One of the strangest Supreme Court decisions on the books came in 1833...

You forfeit grace in eternity; you forfeit grace...

- **In life**

- There is a grace, and a love, and a fullness, that God intended for you.
- **It is the missing piece many of you have been searching for.**
- **How much of your life has been spent looking for this?** It's what you sought first

³ 1833. **United States v. Wilson** was a trial in the United States in which the defendant, George Wilson, was convicted of robbing the **US Mail** in Pennsylvania. Due to his friends' influence, Wilson was pardoned by **Andrew Jackson**. Wilson, however, refused the pardon. Due to the incredibility of events, the **Supreme Court** was asked to rule. The decision was that if the prisoner does not accept the pardon, then it is not in effect. The court stated: "A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential, and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered; and if it is rejected, we have discovered no power in this court to force it upon him." Therefore, Wilson was not released from prison early.

from your parents; then from your friends; then in marriage; then in money. But it was not in those things. The fulfillment your soul craved is in the steadfast, never-changing love of God. You forfeit it because you cling to worthless idols.

- How many of us spend our lives trying to invent some purpose to give our life meaning? Many of you are thinking, “I’ve got to leave a legacy. I’ve got to leave my mark. I don’t want people to forget about me when I’m gone.” I’ve been liberated from the pressure to leave a legacy, because just in being faithful I am a part of the greatest story ever told. I’ll never be forgotten, not because of my accomplishments but because of my participation in His.⁴
- Now, some of you say, “I just can’t believe this, this kind of stuff is not for me. I’m too far gone. Too messed up.”
 - Listen: God loved Nineveh. Idolatrous, unspeakably cruel, barbaric, Nineveh. That in itself is a sign that He loves and reaches out to you. *God’s pursuit of the Ninevites is proof that his grace stretches to you wherever you are.*⁵
 - **“God’s ability to clean things up is infinitely greater than our ability to mess things up.”**⁶

Conclusion:

- Why do you forfeit the grace that could be yours?
- **Leo Winters**
- You are bloodied and bruised, come home.

⁴ Ibid. 152.

⁵ Ibid. 165.

⁶ Ibid. 149.

Here’s how I am going to give you a chance to respond. Some of you need Jesus. You are not right with God. You’ve never received Jesus as your Savior, or don’t know for sure that you have, and you need to do that today.

Or maybe you’re wandering far from Jesus, and you need to come back to Him. It’s time to stop running.

Come forward in a moment at all of our campuses. You are going to talk with a counselor, and they are going to show you today how to put your trust in Jesus, how to give your life to Jesus, and then, if you’ve never been baptized, you are going to demonstrate your decision to follow Jesus by being baptized.

Others of you here have already trusted Christ (you know beyond any shadow of a doubt that Christ is your Savior—and that’s not something you’re doing today), but you’ve never taken that step to be Scripturally baptized! Today, you need to take that step of obedience, demonstrating your faith in Jesus Christ.

- Now, let me talk about baptism for a minute. Like I told you at the beginning, in the Bible, repentance is almost always followed by an outward sign. Now, to be clear, repentance is a heart issue only, but an internal action of the heart should be followed by exterior manifestation, or symbol of that.
- The people of Nineveh put on sackcloth and ashes. In the NT, that symbol is baptism. Just like they tore their clothes as a symbol of what was going on in their heart, you are going to give a picture. But this is so much richer of a symbol! You are buried under the water showing that Jesus was torn by death *for you*. His body ripped for you, and then you come up out of the water with new life; Jesus putting on you the garments of His righteousness. Jesus wore the garments of condemnation, in your place, so you could wear the robes of His righteousness.
- Excuses:
 - No clothes

- I rode with people (they'll wait, we're going to do them in service; if we still haven't done you when the service is over, they'll wait, I promise. And if they say they won't, send them to talk to me and then they'll get baptized)
- You say, "Well, what's the big deal? It's a big deal because it's a command of Jesus." Who are we to decide which of Jesus' commands we want to marginalize?
- Baptized as a baby
 - Scripturally, you'll see that baptism is supposed to be a confession of your faith. Every single baptism we see in the NT, every one, happened to an adult. It was a profession of their faith.
 - If you were baptized as a baby, whose faith was that a symbol of? Theirs. You need to make one of your own.
- "But I'll dishonor my parents." Let me ask you this: what was their hope when they baptized you? In a way, you are fulfilling their desire! You are ratifying their decision.
- "I'm not ready to switch denominations." I'm not asking you to switch denominations. **You don't ever get baptized in the name of a denomination.** You get baptized in the name of Jesus. We are not going to baptize you as a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, or as a Catholic, but as a follower of Jesus.

So, some of you need to come, talk with one of our prayer counselors, trust Christ today, and then show it through baptism.

But others of you in here have already trusted Christ (and you know beyond any shadow of a doubt that Christ is your Savior—and that's not something you're doing today), but you've never taken the step of being Scripturally baptized! Today is your day. It's time for you to take that step.

Stand to your feet, at all of our campuses, and as our worship teams begin to play, you come.

PRAYER

CAMPUS PASTORS