

Jesus is a better Jonah and Solomon

Matthew 12:38-42

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Matthew 12, reading from verse 38: Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For 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. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed, a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the south will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed, a greater than Solomon is here."

The Gospel of Matthew is a fascinating gospel if you read it from start to finish. It deals with Jesus coming to His people as the king of His kingdom. It contains huge numbers of miracles of Jesus showing His kingdom power and the way in which His kingdom will restore creation. It contains a large amount of teaching where Jesus doesn't teach like He does in say John, where He is often appealing to people and telling you of the love that God has for His people. Instead, He teaches in Matthew about what His kingdom is like. The Sermon on the Mount will be the classic example of that. Three chapters devoted to Jesus teaching about what life is like in His kingdom. And the significance of all of this is that Jesus in Matthew is coming to His own people, to the people of Israel who had been expecting a great king to come and restore the kingdom to the glory that it was like when Solomon was around. And so Jesus comes displaying and teaching what His great kingdom is going to be like. He comes as the king.

And in Matthew, what you see time and time again are the religious rulers in Israel rejecting this king who has come to them. And here we have in Matthew 12 an example of this rejection. Look at verse 38 there: Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." Now this follows on the heels of Matthew 5, 6, and 7, which I mentioned Jesus teaching with great authority is what the scriptures say about what life is like in His kingdom. And then if you read chapters 8 and

9 of Matthew, you will find no less than nine miracles that Jesus performs. Healing a leper, healing paralytics, multiple of them, healing fevers, casting out demons from demon-possessed people, stilling the storm on the sea. He even raises a dead person to life in Matthew 9. He heals a blind man and someone who is mute. He has them speak again. How many signs do you need? This is in all of the history recorded to us in the Bible, this is the greatest period of miracle-working you will ever see. Two chapters packed full of signs that this is the King who has come to restore God's created order. You notice what all of those miracles are doing? They're taking things that are broken, things that are sick, demons that have invaded God's good creation, and even commanding the elements of nature itself. As the storm rages, bringing chaos, Jesus speaks, bringing calm.

And yet these Pharisees and the scribes come to Jesus saying, we want another sign. And Jesus says to them, "I'm not going to give you a sign except for one. I will give you one sign. I will give you the sign of the prophet Jonah." And Jesus explains what He means because that's a reasonably obscure reference. Jonah is a prophet that would have been well known to the Israelites. You can read about him in a very short book in the Bible. I think it's four or five chapters, sits on two pages typically. You can read it in 15 minutes. And there's no sign, there's no miracle that Jonah does in the book of Jonah. But Jesus explains it for us there in verse 40: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." See, that's the thing we all know about the Jonah story, isn't it? Jonah was a prophet who got thrown into the sea and eaten by a big fish, and he lived in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights, and then was vomited out onto the beach. And Jesus says Jonah himself is the sign. And I'm going to be just like him but greater. Because the sign I'm going to do is not to go into the belly of a fish but to go into the belly of the earth. And He is, of course, speaking of His death. But it's nothing special to go into the belly of the earth, is it? We do that all the time. We go to funerals and watch people go into the heart of the earth as we bury them. What's special is that Jonah came out of the fish. What's special is that Jesus comes out of the grave.

And what's remarkable about this sign that Jesus gives to the Pharisees here, and He says you're going to be able to look back and see it. And we read in Matthew 28 of how the Pharisees did in fact know that Jesus rose from the dead. The guards of the tomb themselves who saw the angel roll away the stone came and reported it to these Pharisees and scribes, quite possibly the very ones that Jesus is speaking to here. They knew. They knew that He rose from the dead. But what's truly remarkable about this sign is that this sign was not just for the Pharisees and for the scribes. This is the only sign I would hazard to guess that Jesus performed that is

still a sign to you and me today. And I'll tell you why. The resurrection is historical fact. And there are many, many great books you can read that will go in intricate detail showing you how the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fact that can be proved beyond all doubt. I just want to give you one of those today because we've got other things we need to look at. But the most compelling way that I can demonstrate to you that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a sign to you and me today and a sign to every living person is this: When Christians came onto the scene days after Jesus was murdered, the single claim that they based their entire movement on was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They banked everything on it. I'm going to give you three pieces of homework today. Here's homework number one: Go and read the book of Acts. Read every sermon that the apostles preached and underline when they speak of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And what you will find is that in the vast majority of sermons in the early church, when the movement of Christianity was only just beginning, they were all based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first sermon that Peter preached in Acts chapter 2, he says, "This man Jesus, whom you crucified," he's speaking to the very people not 40 or 50 days after Jesus had died, he's speaking to the very people who witnessed his death, and he says to them, "This Jesus that you crucified, God has raised up and made both Lord and Christ." And 3,000 believed based on that message, 40 or 50 days after they watched him die. That was the message that early Christianity was built on. And like I said, go through Acts time and time again. You get to 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul is speaking to the Corinthians again, a couple of decades after these events, he says, "If the resurrection did not happen, our faith is in vain. Give up. Go home, Corinthians. All of you, if the resurrection didn't happen, walk out of here. Go and enjoy your Sunday because it's useless what we're doing here today." If the resurrection didn't happen, and he's saying this to the Corinthians a couple of decades after Jesus died and rose again, and he says to them, "I don't want you to just trust me on this." He says, "He rose. He appeared to Peter, to the apostles, and to more than 500 of the brethren." And listen to this, "Some of whom are still alive today." Can you imagine the Corinthians sitting there in the audience as this letter is being read to them going, "Oh, I'm not sure if I believe this." What could they do? Paul, can you just give me a few names? You know, write back to him, "Paul, a few names, please. I just want to go and check this out." No worries, Paul says, "I know their names. That's how I know there's 500 of them. Here you go. Go talk to them." And they live in the great Roman Empire when travel was safe. They could have gone and visited Jerusalem, met the very people who saw the resurrected Lord Jesus, but Paul stakes everything on this claim. The reason I know that the resurrection of Jesus Christ happened is because you are here today. There would not be Christianity. There would not be a Christian church. There would not be Christians if Jesus didn't rise from the dead. No other religion stakes itself on a historical miracle like Jesus Christ dying and ris-

ing again. And so this sign that Jesus points to here is a sign not just to the Pharisees but is a sign to you and me. And I have to ask you this morning, if you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, you must grapple with this very fact. Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is historical fact, and it demands a response. You cannot sit back and say, "Well, this has no impact on me," because of the next two verses. Because look at verse 41: Jesus says, "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed, a greater than Jonah is here." What's He talking about? Well, the people of Nineveh were the people whom Jonah was sent to preach to. Jonah was a prophet that God came to and God says to him, "Go and preach to the people of Nineveh." And it's fascinating. This is homework piece number two: Go and read the book of Jonah. Because if you read it, you will find out some very interesting things about Jonah as a prophet. The first thing is that when God told Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites, Jonah said no, I'm not doing that. And he ran away. Some prophet, eh? And Jesus says, "I'm greater than Jonah." Do you know why? Because Jesus didn't run away. Jesus was a man sent by God. He was, in fact, deity in flesh, God Himself come down to speak with us. And He did this willingly. And what did He come to say? He came to say a message that was greater than Jonah's. And in Jonah's message, God said, "Jonah, I want you to go to the Ninevites and I want you to say to them that you're wicked and you're going to perish." That's it. Pure judgment. How would you like to be given that as a message? He does not tell them to repent. He does not tell them that there's hope. He does not tell them that God would be merciful and forgiving. He just tells them, "You're a wicked people and God is going to come and destroy you." That is the message of Jonah. And he runs from that. He doesn't want to say this message even though these are Israel's enemies. These are people who Jonah wants to be destroyed.

Jesus comes willingly to a people who are His enemies. And He preaches a message greater than Jonah's. And it was greater firstly in its declaration of judgment. Jonah's message of judgment was quite brief and temporary or physical. "Your city is going to be destroyed," is what he was saying. Jesus comes and He tells you exactly what the judgment is going to be like. And it is horrifying. Go and read through any of the Gospels. Go and read through Matthew, for example. And pick up on all the times that Jesus speaks of the judgment that is to come. He speaks of the angels coming and gathering together all the people of the world. And separating out those who are righteous, those who love God, from those who have lived their own way and refuse to repent and refuse to come to God. And He says they will gather these people together and they will cast them into outer darkness. No light. No display of God's good grace. Outer darkness, away from the presence of God. And He says there will be weeping. There will be gnashing of teeth. People will be in agony, in pain, in torment. He

speaks of a man who is in this torment who just desires a drop of water on his tongue, just to ease his pain. And Jesus says this is what awaits you. This is what awaits every one of us if we do not turn from our sins. Eternal fire.

But His message didn't stop there. His message was not just greater in its clarity of judgment. It was greater in that He offered hope. Jesus came to a people deserving of hell and fire and darkness and He said, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He comes offering mercy and grace and forgiveness. In fact, what He actually does... You see, Jonah as a prophet, he is a third party to this whole thing. God and the Ninevites are enemies. And God says, "Jonah, I want you to come." And Jonah stands over here somewhere and he says, "Ninevites, God wants you to know that He is going to judge you." Jesus says, "My friends, there is judgment coming. There is hell and torment beyond your worst nightmares coming. And I will walk it for you." What a prophet. He says, "I will come and I will go onto the cross. And I will bear all the weight of your guilt and your shame. I will bear the full brunt of the wrath of God that is stored up for sinners like you and like me. I will go all the way down to the grave. I will give up my very life. I will have the Father put me in outer darkness, so that there will be hope for you. So that if you come to Me, I can give you rest. So that if you come trusting and believing in Me, I will take all of the wrath that God has stored up for you and I will wipe it away because I have borne it already. I have borne it already."

And better than that, when Jonah preached to Nineveh, the Ninevites repented. They feared the wrath that was to come, this temporary physical wrath of God destroying their city. They repented in dust and ashes. And God saved their city for a time. But we learn later on that Nineveh was destroyed because they returned to their evil ways. And this is the amazing thing: Jesus comes telling us of the wrath to come, telling us that He has provided a way for us to be freed from that wrath, and then saying, "Listen, when you come to Me, I am not just going to save your life here and now." You know, all those miracles that He did, healing the blind and raising the lame, and having the mute speak and casting out, they are all temporary things. They are band-aid solutions to our deeper problems. Because every one of those people who Jesus healed were still going to die. They still had a sinful nature. They were still going to continue in their own way. They needed a greater healing. And Jesus comes offering that.

And all of this, by the way, is explicitly tied to His resurrection. Because He could not have made a way through hell into new life unless He didn't just die but rose again. And He could not heal the deepest sickness of your heart unless He died and rose again and ascended on high and received from the Father the Holy Spirit that He might send Him into the

hearts of His people. Unless He might take the power that it takes to raise someone from the dead and place that in your heart. Because that is what Christ offers. He doesn't just offer a solution to a temporary problem. He offers new life. Eternal life. Life that doesn't just begin later on but life that you can experience in part right now as you find your soul changed and transformed by His resurrection power, by the very power it takes to raise someone from the dead. He comes and He works that in His people, in all who come to Him. All those frustrating sins and vices that you can't get rid of, He says, "I'll take them away. I'll give you a new power, a new life."

And a future hope and a life to come that will be perfect and pure, that will have no sin whatsoever. And that will go on and on and on for all eternity. And here's the challenge for us: The people of Nineveh, when they heard Jonah's reluctant, poor, half-standard message, repented. And you today have heard Jesus Christ's better message. You've seen the greater prophet as He's been described to you here in His word. Will you repent? Or will Nineveh rise up in judgment against you?

But it gets better. Look at verse 42: "The Queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed, a greater than Solomon is here." He's speaking here of a different person. We've looked at Jonah, but now He's speaking about Solomon. And you need to go back to 1 Kings chapter 10. That's your third piece of homework. In fact, you could read the whole of 1 Kings chapter 3 through to chapter 11 if you'd like. Because the glory of Solomon was astonishing. Solomon was the greatest king of Israel. He was wise beyond measure. There was none who's been wiser than Solomon. He was rich beyond measure. He was powerful. He brought peace to Israel. Read the description of him in the early part of Kings. It's incredible. And yet Jesus says that a greater than Solomon is here.

You see, when you go to Acts and you look at the way that the apostles understood the resurrection of Jesus Christ, what you find is that the resurrection of Jesus proved to them that Jesus was the judge of the world, which is related to Jonah's message. Acts 17:30-31 says that this time of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. Why? Because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He's appointed. And of this, He has given assurance to us all by raising Him from the dead. But it's not just that. It wasn't just that He's the judge. It was also that the resurrection of Jesus pointed to the fact that He was the great king. He was the Lord of all. That's what Peter points to in his sermon in Acts 2: "This Jesus," he says, "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised Him up,

loosing the pains of death." So let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, He's made Him king, this Jesus whom you crucified.

And this is what Jesus is pointing to here in verse 42 of Matthew 12. He's saying, "I'm going to go through this sign of Jonah. I'm going to die and be raised to new life. And that proves that I am going to be a greater judge than Jonah, a greater prophet than Jonah, and a greater king than Solomon." Think about it. If you go back through 1 Kings, you'll find that Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. He spoke proverbs of trees and of plants and of animals, over 3,000 of them. But the Bible explicitly points out a couple of other wise men of the time and says, "Nope, Solomon knew more proverbs than them." He knew he could talk about any topic. But Jesus comes, and we find that He doesn't just speak proverbs about trees or wisdom about trees. He's the one who spoke trees. Wisdom is understanding how life works. Jesus built life. He designed it from the ground up. You want to know how to live? Don't go to Solomon. Well, do go to Solomon; read Proverbs. They're really good. But don't go to Solomon who worked out how to live. Go to the guy who designed life, Jesus Christ.

And the amazing thing is that when Jesus rose from the grave, He proved that He's the author of life. And He gained the right to send His Spirit into each one of His people so that they would have the guiding principle of life in their very soul. "He will guide you into all truth," is what He says. You want to know how to live? Go to Jesus Christ, who has provided great wisdom, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

But Solomon was also the first king of Israel who brought about a tremendous peace. The kingdom of Israel was never bigger than it was under Solomon, and it was never more peaceful. All of his enemies were put at bay, and everyone lived under his vine and under his fig tree. But Jesus brings a peace to His kingdom that surpasses understanding. It's not just a worldly, political peace. You see, the people in Solomon's kingdom, yes, they might have had provision more than any, they might have not had a threat of enemies at all, but they still had turmoil in their soul. They still had the threat of judgment. They still had all of these unanswered questions about how it is that God would bring about salvation.

But Jesus Christ comes, and He brings to His people, to His kingdom, a peace that covers every single possible aspect of life. A peace in relationships, peace in our soul from anxiety and concern, not just about this life but about the life to come. He brings a calm into the very hearts of His kingdom people. Solomon was a man of great wisdom, a man of great wisdom. Solomon was a king who was righteous for much of his life, but he fell, didn't he? And so, in comparison to Solomon, this great king who was

known for his righteousness and his wisdom for the early part of his life, Jesus comes and lives a perfect life. He is the perfect ruler. He never gets it wrong. He never makes a mistake, not just in His life that He lived on earth, but even now as He rules over every aspect of this creation. Everything happens according to the wisdom and righteousness of Jesus, that great king.

Solomon was a great king also because he was the king who built the temple, the very dwelling place of God on earth. And yet, just a couple of chapters before Matthew 12, Jesus says, "I am the greater temple." And He is. Not just when He was on the earth; He was walking amongst us as God with His people. His body was the temple. But when He rose from the dead, do you know what He did? When He buried His body, He was the great temple. Do you know what He did? When He broke the grave, He made His temple flood the earth. Because when you read the New Testament from Acts onwards, you find that God's people are the temple of God here on earth. So Solomon built a house in Jerusalem for God. It looked amazing. Jesus went and put temples everywhere. That's greater than Solomon.

Not only that, but Jesus' plan is to bring about a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, when God will dwell perfectly with all of His redeemed. That's the sort of temple that Jesus is going to build. One greater than Solomon. Solomon was also known for his wealth. He was phenomenally rich, far richer than you could possibly imagine. In 1 Kings 10, we're told that silver was considered as nothing in the days of Solomon, and that in Jerusalem, he made silver as common as stones. Some estimate that it was worth 2 trillion. For reference, Elon Musk's worth about 300 billion at the moment, and all of that's tied up in stocks. Solomon was rich in gold. And Jesus says He's greater than Solomon. How can that be? Jesus didn't own anything when He was here on earth.

But the gifts that Jesus comes and gives to His people were greater than any gold. He comes and He gives gifts from on high. We've spoken already about the Spirit living in the hearts of His people, but He gives eternal life. He gives wisdom. He gives peace. He gives all of these things. They're gifts from Him directly. And some of those are absolutely priceless. Forgiveness. What price would you pay to be forgiven for your sins? And Jesus gives it to you for free. For free. Because He earned it. He earned that wealth that He stored up and can provide to His people.

But Jesus also speaks of the fact that He is going to inherit this entire world. And He's not the sort of king who hoards. He says, "I'm going to give you that inheritance." And Paul says that it was the resurrection of Jesus Christ that placed all of these riches in our hands. In Ephesians 1,

he says that he wants us to know what are the riches of His glorious inheritance and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His great might that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead. That He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead. That's where He gained all of His wealth. That's where He gained all of the riches of grace and mercy and peace and forgiveness and inheritance that He then pours out on His people.

And lastly, around Solomon, Solomon was a great king, but he died. And when a great king dies, what usually happens is the kingdom falls to pieces. And that's exactly what happened with Solomon. But Jesus' resurrection shows us that He is a king who not only will never die but also He's a king whose kingdom is only just getting started. You can look back at Solomon's kingdom and you can say, "What a glory that was." And you can see very clearly, I think, ways in which the glory that we experience right now because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the grace that is poured out to us through that, is better than even what the Israelites experienced under the reign of Solomon. But what we experience now is just a tiny foretaste of what is to come.

How do I know that? How do I know that? Because Jesus is the kind of king who knows the pathway through death into life. Because He will one day resurrect this entire world. And He will bring to fulfillment and to culmination and completion all of the work that He's been doing in building a great kingdom. And He will do that in your life and in the world. And He will do that in the world itself.

Now imagine you're around in the time of Solomon. This guy's building a temple that's coated in gold. He's building a house for himself that just has rooms with gold shields lining the walls. He's building a house for his wife that rivals that as well. Tons and tons of gold and silver and precious woods and all sorts of things. I mean, he's got like 30,000 slaves who work for him, and he just has them on rotation. He can do anything he wants. He's got people who are assigned to provide his table just for one month of the year. Like, that's your entire job, 12 months a year, you're working to provide his table for one month of the year. With food, right? Imagine there's a kingdom today where that sort of rule was occurring. What do you think that the tourist economy of that kingdom would be like? There'd be lines out the door to go and just get a glimpse of this kind of kingdom.

I mean, to talk to the king himself, the queen of Sheba was willing to just ladle on the gifts. Jesus says the queen of the south traveled from the ends of the earth just to talk to Solomon, just to see something of his glory. And this is the thing: Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom that He is building is far superior to Solomon's. And He offers you right

now, here today, the option to come into that kingdom, to lay down your weapons, to surrender to Him, and to say, "Lord, would you forgive me?" And He will. And He will bring you in and pour upon you all the bountiful blessings that come from being a part of His kingdom.

The queen of the south was willing to travel from the ends of the earth just to talk to a great king. And will you do that? To a great king? And will you not lay down your own desires? Will you not lay down your sins at the feet of Christ? Will you not lay down your very life just to be a part of the kingdom that He is building? If you don't, Jesus says the queen of the south herself will judge you on that great day because His kingdom is far, far superior. And we all have an opportunity to be a part of it because it is built by a king who knows the way through death, who knows how to bring life to dead souls, to dead bodies, and to a dead world.

I think that's something glorious, something worth being a part of. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that You have sent a greater prophet than Jonah. Lord, if we just had a message of judgment, we would despair. But what hope we have in Christ. And we thank you, Lord, that You have sent to us a king much greater than Solomon. Lord, we look out on this world, and we know we need a king. We need someone to bring order and rule and to restore. And we thank you that You have done this and are doing this and will do it through Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord, that You would cause our hearts to rejoice. We pray that any here who have not repented and believed on the name of Jesus would do so today. We pray that we might look forward to the full culmination of Your kingdom, to the new life that You offer eternally to all who come to You. We praise You in Jesus' name. Amen.