

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 16 June 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:38-45

On 16 November 1864, a whaling ship called the *George W. Lewis* was sailing near the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in pursuit of a wounded sperm whale. As they came alongside the whale, the boat suddenly lurched forward; and the first mate, **Peleg Nye**, was catapulted headfirst from the bow of the ship, into the open mouth of the whale, and was swallowed alive! Fortunately, the whale quickly rose back to the surface, and spat Nye out; and though Nye was unconscious, and had broken bones, he survived. **Captain Hiram Holmes** saw it as it happened, and recorded it in his logbook. To the day of Nye's death, and long afterward, everyone in the region called him the "Jonah" of Cape Cod!¹ However, this was not the last time that this sort of thing happened off the coast of Cape Cod!

Just a few years ago, on 11 June 2021, a commercial lobster diver named **Michael Packard** was going about a normal day's business in the waters of Cape Cod; but little did he know that before the day was over, he would make headlines all over the world. At about 8:00 that morning, as he was making his second dive for lobsters for the day, Packard was swallowed alive by a humpback whale! A crewman named **Josiah Mayo**, who was onboard Packard's schooner, the *Ja'n J*, watched in horror as it happened. Before he knew it, he saw Packard being flung from the mouth of a giant humpback whale, back into the sea!² Packard himself described his experience this way: "I just got slammed. Just like a freight train ... and then all of a sudden, it went black. And water was just rushing, rushing around me... and I could feel pressure on my whole body."³ He said, "I could sense I was moving, and I could feel the whale squeezing with the muscles in his mouth. I was completely inside; it was completely black. I thought to myself, 'There's no way I'm getting out of here. I'm done, I'm dead.'"⁴ Packard figures that he was inside the whale for about thirty or forty seconds; but then, just as quickly as he had been swallowed, he was spat out.⁵ Packard said, "I saw light, and [the whale] started throwing his head side to side, and the next thing I knew, I was outside (in the water)." Packard's friend, Mayo, rescued him, and rushed him to the Cape Cod Hospital, where he was found to have relatively minor injuries.⁶

Now, as amazing as this story is, perhaps the most amazing part is that there are people who *don't believe* that this happened—even though there were eyewitnesses nearby, and it was well documented! Packard was asked how he felt about this: and he acknowledged that it does bother him. When asked what he would say to the doubters, Packard responded, "You say to the doubters that they don't know Michael Packard. I live in this town; and everyone, even my enemies, believe me. That I don't make up stories."⁷

Now, I don't know what Packard's beliefs about God and the Bible are; but I would imagine that his feelings are somewhat like *Jonah's* feelings, after he returned to his homeland, and told his Jewish brethren the story of his voyage in the belly of the whale! Undoubtedly, there were many who laughed at

his story, and refused to believe him! (People are still scoffing at Jonah’s story to this day!) What is truly tragic, though, is that *the Son of God Himself* was laughed at and disbelieved, even though *countless* eyewitnesses saw His miracles right in front of their very eyes—and saw the evidence of His resurrection! This morning, we will be examining the disbelief of the people of Jesus’ day; and we will see how their unbelief is no different from the disbelief of people in *our* day. We will also see how Jonah is a prophetic foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus Christ. The title of this message is *The Sign of Jonah*.

Read Matthew 12:38-45.

I. The illustration of Jonah (vv. 38-40)

As you will remember from last week’s message, Jesus had just finished calling the Pharisees “corrupt trees,” and a “*generation of vipers*.” He had also told them that their hearts were filled with “*evil treasure*,” and that they would one day be judged for every idle word that came out of their mouths. Well, needless to say, the scribes and Pharisees were now beside themselves with anger; and their request for a “*sign*” was not one bit sincere! They didn’t ask for a sign because they *wanted* to believe on Jesus, and simply needed one more confirmation: they asked for a sign because they *despised* Him, and were *defying* Him. They were telling Jesus, “You’re going to have to do better than *that* if you want *us* to believe that you’re the Messiah. Healing diseases? Casting out devils? Raising dead people to life? That’s not good enough! Do something *really* amazing, if you want *us* to believe on you—*Teacher!*” Their request for a “*sign*” was like the request that *I* once heard from the mouth of a scorners, as I was trying to share the Gospel with him. He looked up to the sky, held up his hands, and said something like this: “Go ahead, God! If you exist, then strike me dead with lightning for blaspheming you!” Then, when nothing happened, he said, “Oh, I guess He’s not up there.”

Now, how could Jesus give the people of Israel greater signs than He had already given them? They had seen Him raise *dead* people back to life! (You can’t get any better than that!) Jesus didn’t raise the dead merely by *praying* over them, either. Jesus didn’t have to *ask His Father* to raise dead people to life (as a couple prophets in the past had done): no, Jesus, by His own divine authority, *commanded* the dead to rise! To the widow of Nain’s son Jesus said, “*Young man, I say unto thee, arise.*” To Jairus’s daughter He said, “*Talitha cumi*” (“*I say unto thee, arise*”). To Lazarus, Jesus commanded, “*Lazarus, come forth!*” These are not the words of a mere prophet: these are the words of God in human flesh! That’s why Isaiah prophesied that the One who would be born of a virgin would be called **Immanuel**, which means “God with us”! According to **1 Samuel 2:6**, God alone “*killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.*” Only God can raise the dead; yet, Jesus raised the dead time and time again, by His own authority—thus proving that He is God!

The Pharisees’ request for a sign was an insult: and Jesus refused to comply with it. Jesus doesn’t put on a “show” for scorners. These men’s hearts were wicked and unrepentant: and Jesus pointed out their real character. He called them “*an evil and adulterous generation.*” Throughout the Old Testament, God repeatedly referred to Israel as His “adulterous wife.” Israel was “adulterous” not only because they committed *literal* adultery, but also because they committed *spiritual* adultery against their God, by worshipping idols. Now, the Jews of Jesus’ day no longer worshipped idols of wood and stone, as their ancestors had done; but they did worship *themselves*. Instead of admitting that they were spiritually bankrupt—and instead of placing their trust in *Jesus’* perfect righteousness—they exalted *themselves*, and boasted of *their own* “righteousness.” As an evil and adulterous generation, they didn’t seek a sign so that they might *believe* on Jesus: they sought a sign so that they might *scorn* Him. It wouldn’t have mattered *what* stupendous miracle Jesus might have done for them: they *still* would not have believed. Therefore, Jesus would not give them any sign—except for *one*. To those who scorned Him, Jesus promised one sign—“*the sign of the prophet Jonas.*”

Now, we don't have to dig deep to find out what Jesus meant by this. Jesus explained his meaning straightaway! He said, ***“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.”*** The three days and three nights that Jonah spent in the belly of the whale were a prophetic foreshadowing of the three days and three nights that Jesus would spend in the grave, before rising again. By the way, Jesus wasn't merely *raised* back to life by the Father and the Holy Spirit (although this certainly is true): but *He Himself* also took back His own life! In **John 17**, Jesus clearly said, ***“I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.”*** Early in Jesus' ministry, when the people demanded a miraculous sign to prove His authority, Jesus said, ***“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”*** Jesus wasn't talking about a Temple of stone: He was talking about the “temple” of His body; and He claimed that *He* would raise up this Temple. Time and time again Jesus claimed that the day was coming when He would be crucified: but that after three days, He would raise *Himself* back to life! Jesus was now making this claim once again: and He was using the prophet Jonah as a picture, or type, of Himself. Let's look at the Old Testament account of Jonah.

Read Jonah 1:1-6, 14 and 2:1-10.

Scoffers down through the centuries have mocked the Bible's account of Jonah. They call it either a fanciful myth, or a story that was meant to be an allegory, and not real history. Usually, the scoffers' number one argument is that no fish is big enough to swallow a man. However, they are dead wrong! First of all, what Jonah called a “fish” (the Hebrew word *dag*) is what we would call a “whale.” As the Lord Jesus Himself was speaking about Jonah, He used the Greek word *ketous*, which means “whale.” God's doesn't *have* to conform to our Western, Linnaean classification system of animals. We may classify a whale as a “mammal,” since it is warm-blooded, gives birth, and nurses its young; but God calls it a “fish,” since it has fins, and swims. Secondly, there *are* species of whale large enough to admit a man into their gullet. A couple examples are the sperm whale, and the humpback whale. Whales also gulp in large quantities of air into their gullet, and can retain the air for a long time. Of course, no man could, under normal circumstances, survive for three days in a whale's belly; but God can do whatever He pleases. The Bible says that God “prepared” this particular whale. He prepared a whale that was large enough to admit Jonah into its gullet; and He provided a continual air supply in its gullet, so that Jonah could survive for three days. He also protected him from the whale's powerful gastric juices. None of this was any problem for God!

Now, many Christians believe that Jonah actually *died* while he was in the whale's belly, and that he was physically resurrected on the third day. They base this on Jonah's statement that he cried to God ***“from the belly of hell.”*** Does this mean that Jonah had died? Well, the Hebrew word for “*hell*” is *sheol*; and *sheol* can refer to one of two things. *Shoel* can refer to the physical grave, where dead bodies go; or, it can refer to a spiritual realm, deep in the earth, where *departed spirits* went in Old Testament times. Before Christ's resurrection, believers went to *sheol*, and not to Heaven, because Jesus had not yet died on the cross for our sins. It was *after* Jesus arose from the dead, and conquered death for us, that all the Old Testament saints left *sheol*, and went to Heaven!

Now, if Jonah *did*, in fact, die, then he would not have gone to the fiery compartment of *sheol*, where lost souls went; he would have gone to the *restful* compartment of *sheol*, where *believers* went (the place that Jesus called “Paradise”). However, it seems that Jonah did not actually die. For one thing, Jonah promised God to pay Him a vow of thanksgiving. Obviously, Jonah realised that he was still alive—and that if God were merciful to him, he just might have the opportunity to go to the Temple in Jerusalem yet again, and make a vow offering to God! Secondly, Jonah said that the seaweeds in the whale's stomach were wrapped around his head. If Jonah were dead, and his soul were in *sheol*, he wouldn't have been aware of this physical annoyance. Also, Jonah says that he had gone down to the ***“bottoms of the mountains.”*** Jonah was talking about place where mountains have their lowest base

(at the bottom of the sea)! Obviously, Jonah was still alive; and was fully aware of the fact that he was gagging in seaweeds, and that a whale was taking him down to the depths of the sea! To him, it probably *seemed* like *sheol*! Jonah was *almost* at the point of “corruption” (of death and decay), when suddenly, and violently, God cast him out of the whale’s belly. To Jonah, the whale’s belly was a *figure* of death and the grave; and that is precisely why Jesus said that Jonah’s three days and three nights in the whale’s belly were a picture of the three days and three nights that *He* would spend in the grave, before coming to life again.

The message of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection for our sins is called “the Gospel”—the “good news.” The Gospel is the *only* message that can save us from our sins! You and I must place our complete trust in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection in order to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In **1 Corinthians 15:1-4**, Paul says that it is the “Gospel” that saves us from sin and death; and he defines the Gospel as the message that “**Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.**” Christ Himself affirmed the historical reality of the story of Jonah and the whale; and He was not ashamed to compare His own death, burial, and resurrection to the account of Jonah and the whale. Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale were *historical reality*; and so were Jesus' three days in the grave.

By the way, not only does the story of Jonah foreshadow Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection: it also foreshadows the *salvation of the Gentiles*. It was *after* Jonah’s three days and three nights in the whale’s belly that huge numbers of Gentiles repented and believed; and likewise, it was after Jesus’ three days and three nights in the grave, and His resurrection from the grave, that multitudes of Gentiles began to believe on Christ, and be saved! (For centuries before then, it was mostly *Jews* who had access to the message of salvation.) Jesus came first to His own people, the Jews; but He came to save the Gentiles, as well. Jesus said, “**And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold** (in other words, the Gentiles): **them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.**” As for Jonah himself, he had a real problem with prejudice; and it was for this very reason that God commissioned *him* to preach salvation to the Gentiles (just as the Lord Jesus would do centuries later)! Not only did God want the Ninevites to repent and be saved: He also wanted to teach Jonah that He is no respecter of persons. The coming Messiah would not come to save only the Jews: He would come to save the Gentiles, as well. *This* is the glorious Gospel message—that message that “whosoever will” (whether Jew or Gentile, man or woman, rich or poor, small or great)—may come to the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved! Have *you* come to Him for salvation? If not, *why* not? He is waiting to receive you today, if you will own Him!

II. The indictment upon the house of Israel (vv. 41-45)

(Read Matthew 12:41-45 again.) Jesus had just prophesied of His death, burial, and resurrection; and with this in mind, He now moved on to the topic of **judgment**. Jesus knew that most of the religious rulers would refuse to believe on Him, even after His resurrection from the dead; and He knew that some of them would actually *try to cover up* His resurrection, by bribing the Roman guards to say that the disciples had stolen His body. Therefore, the only thing that these men had to look forward to was the fiery wrath of God! Jesus didn’t “beat around the bush”: He told them that *judgment* was coming to them, unless they repented!

Now, at this point, Jesus said something very curious. We know that *God* is the Judge of all mankind; yet, Jesus says that on the judgment day, there will be certain *men* (and women) who will be involved in passing judgment upon the evil and adulterous generation of His day. First of all, Jesus said that **the men of Nineveh** will rise up in judgement against them. Let’s go back to the book of **Jonah**, and examine what kind of men these Ninevites were.

Read Jonah 3:1-10.

The Assyrians were an extremely cruel and violent people, who struck fear in the hearts of all the nations around them. Their wickedness was exceedingly great. Yet, *God* wanted to *save* them! He gave them forty days to repent; and by the end of those days, the unthinkable had happened. The people *actually repented*; and therefore, God did not destroy them!

Now, no one has, *as yet*, found any Assyrian records that speak of this spiritual revival. However, Assyrian records do tell of a terrible six-year famine that struck their land during the reign of Assur-dan III (from 765-759 B.C.), and also of a solar eclipse that took place in 763 B.C. The Assyrians, like all pagans in those days, were fearful and superstitious about such things; and the Lord may have used these events to strike fear into the Assyrian's hearts, so that they would receive Jonah's message.⁸ Now, sad to say, it wasn't long—probably no more than a generation—before most of the Ninevites returned to idol worship. The prophet Nahum, in 713 B.C., prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed for their wickedness; and that is exactly what happened in 613 B.C., when the Babylonians destroyed Nineveh. Yet, the revival of Jonah's day was not superficial; it was genuine. The Ninevites (at least, the greater part of them) genuinely **“believed God,”** and repented in sackcloth and ashes; and Jesus said that because they repented of their sins, they will one day “rise up in judgment” against the Pharisees. In other words, they will stand as witnesses in God's heavenly courtroom, and will testify that they, when confronted with the message of repentance, believed God's message, and repented of their sin. Their testimony will be a stark rebuke to the Pharisees, who saw the *Saviour of the world* with their own eyes, yet refused to repent. Having absolutely no excuse, they will be condemned; and the Ninevites will have contributed to their judgment. However, the men of Nineveh won't be the only ones to rise up in judgment against the Pharisees. Jesus said that the **queen of Sheba** will judge them, as well. **(Read Matthew 12:42.)**

Until fairly recent times, most historians claimed that the Bible's account of the queen of Sheba was a fairy tale. According to them, there *never was* a kingdom called “Sheba” in southern Arabia. However, in 1870 and 1888, a Frenchman named **J. Halevy**, and an Austrian named **Eduard Glaser**, managed to enter this dangerous region; and they found copies of ancient inscriptions that proved that **Marib** (the ancient capital city of Sheba) really existed. In 1951, **Wendell Philips** was invited by the king of Yemen to do excavations in his country; and his team found information about the ancient pagan temple of Marib. They found that the people of Sheba worshipped a moon god named Ilumquh, who was similar to the god Baal in Canaan. They also worshipped a moon goddess named Shayba, who was called “Queen of Heaven” and “Mother of God.”⁹ Since then, mountains of information about Sheba have been uncovered; and we now know that Sheba was, indeed, a fabulously wealthy kingdom, just as the Bible says. Sheba supplied spices, precious stones, gold, exotic cloths, translucent glass, and exotic wood, to nations as far north as Lebanon, and as far east as India! Using a sophisticated irrigation system, and a sixty-foot high dam, they transformed the desert into a blooming oasis, where costly spices, such as frankincense and myrrh, were harvested, and prepared for international commerce.¹⁰ But what about the “*queen*” of Sheba? Was Sheba really ruled by *queens*? Yes! In fact, ancient Arabian and Ethiopian documents show that Sheba was such a matriarchal society, that they made it a *law* that only a woman (particularly, a virgin) could be queen. Sheba was ruled by queens for more than a thousand years; and one of these queens travelled 1,500 miles to visit King Solomon.¹¹ The Bible tells us that this powerful queen placed her faith in Israel's God, and was saved. Let's examine her story, and find out why this woman has been deemed worthy to be a judge of the Pharisees' generation.

Read 1 Kings 10:1-10.

The queen of Sheba grew up in heathen darkness: yet, Jesus says that this woman will have a part in judging the Pharisees, and most of the Jews of their generation. Why? Because this Gentile woman *came* to the Light, and *believed* in the Light—whereas most of the Jewish people, who *had* the Light at their disposal, rejected it! They refused to believe the very Scriptures that they knew so well—the Scriptures which point to Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah. Their hearts were so blinded by pride and self-righteousness, that they didn't recognise their own Messiah when He was right there in their midst, doing all the miracles that the prophets had foretold that He would do! Now, the queen of Sheba certainly is not *worthy* to be anyone's judge. (*None* of us are “worthy,” because we are all unrighteous sinners.) However, because this woman placed her faith in Israel's God, and in the promise that a Saviour was coming to take away her sins, God counted her as “righteous” (just as though she had the perfect righteousness of God's Son). It is for *this* reason that the queen of Sheba will be deemed worthy to stand up on the Great White Throne Judgment at the end of the world, and say, “Yes, I believed in the God of Israel. I trusted in the coming Redeemer; and because of this, I am saved.” Her testimony will be an everlasting reproach to those who had so much light, yet rejected it. By the way, *all* true believers will be involved in the judgment. God says that His people will judge the world—not only during the coming 1,000 year Kingdom, but also at the Great White Throne Judgment, when all the lost of all ages stand before God.

Read Daniel 7:21-22.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-2.

Now, there is one more “judgment” that we need to examine. Not only will the house of Israel be judged *in the future* for their rejection of Christ, but they were *already* being judged in their *own* day, through the agency of the demonic world! Let's read **verses 43-45** again, and see what Jesus said about this. (**Read Matthew 12:43-45.**)

Folks, I know a pastor who, years ago, was called upon to pray, on several occasions, over a demon-possessed person; and after this pastor had prayed for several minutes, the demons left. Because a Spirit-indwelt believer was interceding on that person's behalf, the demons had to leave. Yet, within weeks, the demons came back, and afflicted this person with even greater vehemence; and the pastor had to intercede for this person once again. (And it appeared that there were even *more* demons this time.) Why? Because no true conversion had taken place in this person's soul. This person had tried to stay away from immorality; but it didn't last, because there was no true repentance of heart or turning to Christ—only a desire to be delivered from the demons. The “house” of this person's body had been left empty; but because the Spirit of God did not indwell that house, the demons were soon back.

Yet, what does this have to do with what Jesus had just been saying? Jesus had just told the Pharisees that the Ninevites, and the queen of the south will rise up in the judgment, and condemn them; but then, all of a sudden, He starts talking about demons' returning to afflict their victims. What does this have to do with the judgment that is coming upon the Pharisees? Plenty! You see, Jesus was using the scenario of the demons as an *illustration*. He was illustrating the worthlessness of *trying to reform yourself*; and He was applying it to the nation as a whole. You see, there had been a *moral* reformation in Israel during the years of John the Baptist's and Jesus' ministries. There were many people who *professed* faith in Jesus, and received baptism; yet, for many, their professed “faith” was not real. They had *cleaned themselves up* morally; but there had been no true inner transformation. They had “gotten religion”; but they didn't have a relationship with the Lord. Therefore, they were even *more* susceptible to the attacks of the enemy! The nation of Israel, as a whole, was like a person who has gotten “cleaned up” morally, and who has been freed from demons *temporarily*: yet, because there was no inner conversion, the demons came back with a vengeance!

You see, sin is its own affliction; and demonic possession is just one manifestation of that affliction! The more the people of Israel rebelled against their Messiah, and prided themselves in their self-righteousness, the more they gave themselves over to Satan and his demons! Have you ever wondered why there were so many demon-possessed people in Israel in Jesus' day? You would *expect* there to be plenty of demon-possessed people in the pagan, idol-worshipping Gentile world. (And there *were!*) However, you wouldn't expect that there would be so many demon-possessed people among the *Jews*. After all, they had the light of Scripture. They had the Law, and the knowledge of the true God. *They* didn't worship idols. Why, then, would *they* have been so afflicted by demons? **Because the more truth that people possess, the more accountable they are for rejecting that truth!** When people *have* the Light of the Gospel, yet reject it, they open themselves up to even greater judgment, and to greater affliction from Satan! Most of the people of Israel had been rejecting their God for centuries; but now, they were committing the greatest apostasy of all. They were rejecting their own Messiah; and because they were rejecting Him, their judgment was compounded all the more!

Read John 15:18-25.

Conclusion: My friends, you have *heard* the truth about Jesus. But do you *know* Him? Have you surrendered your life to Him? Have you been translated into *His* Kingdom? You see, you are either on Satan's side, or Christ's side. At God's judgment bar, which side will *you* be on? At the Great White Throne Judgment, you will either be *judged* by God, and condemned to an eternity of separation from Him: or you will be on *God's* side of the judgment bar, giving your voice in the judgment. If you are not on the Lord's side, I plead with you to *get on* His side today! He wants to save you, and give you eternal life. Repent of your sin, and place your trust *completely* in what Jesus did for you on the cross! Should you be saved already, I would ask, "How serious are you about reaching the lost?" The Gospel is the only thing that can save your friends, family, and neighbours from eternal death. They *must* hear that Jesus died for their sins, was buried, and rose again the third day to save them from sin and hell. Don't be like Jonah, who didn't want to warn the wicked! Let God use you to proclaim the message that "Jesus saves!"

¹ Eric Williams, *Cape Cod Times*, "Curious Cape Cod: Sperm whale swallows a Cape Cod man off Cape Verde islands 150 years ago," <https://eu.capecodtimes.com/story/news/2021/06/16/man-swallowed-whale-cape-cod-provincetown-harbor-pelegnye-new-bedford-whaling-museum-log/7704006002/>.

² Doug Fraser, *Cape Cod Times*, <https://eu.capecodtimes.com/story/news/2021/06/11/humpback-whale-catches-michael-packard-lobster-driver-mouth-provincetown-cape-cod/7653838002/>.

³ Williams, *Cape Cod Times*, <https://eu.capecodtimes.com/story/news/2022/06/09/cape-cod-man-swallowed-humpback-whale-recalls-one-year-later-escape-mouth/7542877001/>.

⁴ Fraser, *Cape Cod Times*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Eric Williams, *Cape Cod Times*, <https://eu.capecodtimes.com/story/news/2022/06/09/cape-cod-man-swallowed-humpback-whale-recalls-one-year-later-escape-mouth/7542877001/>.

⁸ Thomas Strouse, *But Jonah...* (Newington, CT: Emmanuel Baptist Theological Press, 2002), p. 9.

⁹ David Cloud, *Bible Times and Ancient Kingdoms* (London, Ont.: Way of Life Literature, 2014), pp. 249-260.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*