

Prayer

We cannot help but praise You, great and mighty God! You have touched our lives in a thousand different ways, and we are eternally grateful for this blessing. Your touch changes everything! It makes sense of the past, it empowers us for the present, and it gives us a certain hope for the future. This is the truth, and we know it! All praise be to You, great and mighty God, AMEN!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Life at Home

It is very hard when your home comes under threat for some reason, perhaps because of financial troubles or through family difficulties. Pray for those in need of help.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the inventions of scientists and engineers
- Pray for those who suffer because of extremes of weather
- Pray for people who struggle with incapacity

Meditation

Be careful, brothers and sisters ...

With the best of intentions, we so easily lose our way
For the world in which we live is full of tempting evils

Be wise, brothers and sisters ...

For there is always more for us to learn about our faith
And the Spirit is our guide to wisdom and discernment.

Be diligent, brothers and sisters ...

Do not be content with a casual reading of the scriptures
For Satan is delighted when we do not know God's Word.

Be positive, brothers and sisters ...

For all things are possible through Christ Jesus our Lord,
Our victory has been won, and our future is secured!

Bible Study - Matthew 12:38-42

³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees replied to him, 'Teacher, we would like to see a sign from you.'³⁹ But he answered them, 'An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign; but no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, yet something greater than Jonah is here.'⁴² The queen of the South will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, yet something greater than Solomon is here.'

Review

In Jesus' day a rabbi was expected to show a sign of credibility before being allowed to take the responsibility of leading followers, and although this could have been the reason why the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign (12:38), it sounds more like an excuse. The real issue at stake was whether people believed that Jesus was the Messiah or not, and as long as the Pharisees were around, there remained a sense of confrontation.

Jesus responded to the request by delivering a strong statement. He began, 'An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign; but no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah'. His accusation of unfaithfulness is strong, but it is no less than what the Old Testament consistently says about the nation of Israel. Hosea prophesied about the unfaithfulness of Israel to her God in the eighth century BC, and later prophets had done the same (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Malachi). The Pharisees thought that they had overcome Israel's faithlessness by rigorously expanding Moses' laws to encompass the whole of life, but as Jesus had already taught in the Sermon on the Mount, teaching could not be the cure of human ills or weaknesses; something more was needed.

The passage continues with Jesus explaining that He was weary of giving signs. The Pharisees had not responded to any His work so far, but accused Him of devilry (9:34)! Jesus did not intend to fuel any further strife, so He refused to give another sign, but with one fascinating exception; the 'sign of the prophet Jonah' (12:39f.). Jesus said something like this on a number of occasions; in Matthew 16:1-4 (very similar to Mark 8:11-12) He refused to cooperate when the Pharisees asked for a 'sign from heaven'. He accused them of not being able to read the signs of the times and said, as in our passage, that they would only receive the sign of the prophet Jonah. In Luke 11:29-32, Jesus talks about Jonah as 'sign to Nineveh', and Himself as the 'sign to this generation'. For these and other reasons, the idea that the 'sign of Jonah' was Jesus' teaching and preaching ministry was a common within the early church, but it does not get to the heart of the matter.

Our passage goes on to say more, by talking not about the ministry of Jesus but about His death and resurrection. Verse 40 mentions the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the 'belly of the whale' and compares it to the time of death Jesus would endure in 'the heart of the earth.' Clearly, this means Sheol, the place of the dead. Some have objected that Jesus was not in the grave for three days and nights, and that Jonah was not exactly dead inside the whale, so the equation between the two is far from exact. Such quibbling is not helpful, however, because 'exactness' is not the measure of either of these signs, but life and death are. The details of Jesus' death and resurrection, just like Jonah's disappearance (and possible death?) in the belly of the fish, have both been debated for centuries without conclusion, but they are both extremely important 'signs'.

By talking about Jonah, Jesus was indicating His coming death and resurrection, and He saw what happened to Jonah as signifying this (it is not an exact prophecy). It does not take much thought for us to realise that the Easter work of Jesus is the most significant and powerful 'sign' given to the world; and for those who believe it is more than a sign, it is the means of their salvation from sin and their peace with God! Any other 'sign' can only be of a lesser kind than this.

The last two verses illustrate the judgement of 'this generation' by referring to Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba, representing the North and the South respectively. Israel was shamed by these two historic examples of positive Gentile responses to God. Was Jesus hinting that the Gentiles would eventually accept His word, rather than the Jews?

It is interesting that these same verses also tell us more about Jesus. If you take the three occurrences of 'something greater than ...' in Matthew (12:6, 41, 42), Jesus is described as greater than the Temple, the prophet Jonah and King Solomon. These represent priesthood, prophecy and kingship respectively, and along with other New Testament texts

about the nature of Christ, particularly from Hebrews, this forms the basis of the classical understanding of Jesus as 'Prophet, Priest and King' of His people.

Yet all this only serves to illustrate the contrast between those who accepted Jesus as God's Messiah, and those who utterly rejected Him like the Pharisees. Our text illustrates how words and requests give away what we have decided in our hearts; they either reveal our faith in Jesus or show that we have rejected Him altogether like the Pharisees.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Why do people like to see 'signs and wonders' in church today? What is the purpose of 'signs and wonders'?
2. Discuss in your group the differences and similarities between Jesus' death and resurrection and Jonah's experience in the 'belly of the fish'.
3. What does it mean to speak of Jesus as our 'prophet, priest and King'? How can this help the church?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Personally, I think that God has allowed us to perform miracles of healing because in His love, He longs to see us helped to live fulfilling lives. Many of the greatest earthly 'miracles' we see also enable people to believe that Jesus has helped them, and are a means whereby people are brought to faith. They only become a barrier when people begin to crave the miracles and not the true worship of God. When that happens, it is time for the church to point to Christ in other ways.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *You may or may not be familiar with the ministry of 'signs and wonders', but if you are willing to venture beyond your normal church setting, you will find that other churches deal with these things in different ways. On one Sunday, explore some other churches, especially those which offer healing and other miraculous signs.*
- *Ask yourself whether your words convey faith or disbelief. This is a hard question to ask, because we will not want to think that we convey doubt or unbelief. However, sometimes we do, and with help and the grace of God we can overcome our sometimes casual negativity.*

Final Prayer

Glory be to You, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. You have triumphed over sin and death, and established the Kingdom where God reigns in love, truth, goodness and righteousness! You have done this for us who are not worthy of Your love; and You have guaranteed a place in heaven to all who have faith in You! Thank You, Lord Jesus, thank You: AMEN