
Prayers

To God

Pray in silence. Let your mind reflect on the mercies of God you have known, and also His assurances for the future. Try not to be side-tracked

For myself

Thank You, Lord God, for the blessing of life itself. You have given me so much, my mind can hardly take it in. I am grateful for my health, despite having some problems; I am grateful for my family and friends, even though I struggle with some; I am grateful for my work, even though I often find it difficult. By Your Holy Spirit within me, may I rise above the trials of life and always rejoice in its glories. Thank You, Lord God: **AMEN**

For others

Weekly theme: those at sea

Pray for those serving on military sea vessels, who have the primary responsibility to keep the seas safe and defend the nations. Pray that the force at their disposal may be ultimately used for good and not for evil.

Meditation

God, our Father,

Deliver us from Satan's ways,
And give us eyes to see and ears to hear, Your eternal truth:

Deliver us from false belief,
From those who peddle religion instead of the love of God:

Deliver us from lying tongues,
From those who lead the church astray by malicious gossip:

Deliver us from lovers of war,
From those who choose to fight instead of working for the best:

Deliver us from false accounting
From those who use the treasurer's art to deceive the faithful:

Deliver us from ignorance of sin,
From those who trust their own judgements rather than the Word:

God, our Father,

Deliver us from every kind of evil,
And from all that Satan uses to disrupt God's work in our world.

Bible Passage

Luke 11:27-32

²⁷ It so happened that as Jesus was saying these things, a certain woman in the crowd cried out,

“Blessed is the womb that gave You birth and the breasts that nursed You.”

²⁸ But He replied,

“Blessed rather are those who hear God’s Word and keep it.”

²⁹ As people began to crowd around, Jesus said,

“This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but they will be given nothing except the sign of Jonah; ³⁰ for as Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.

³¹ “On Judgement Day, the Queen of the South will awaken with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the very ends of the earth to hear Solomon’s wisdom, but someone greater than Solomon is here.

³² “On Judgement Day, the people of Nineveh will stand up with this generation and condemn it; for they repented when Jonah preached, and someone greater than Jonah is here.”

Review

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture, which draws together some threads of important teaching. To begin with, a woman shouts out her own form of faith in Jesus, by calling down a blessing on His mother (11:27), and Jesus does not so much rebuke her as direct her towards a deeper truth (11:28). He then responds to the gathering crowds (11:29) remembering their previous call for a sign (11:16). His teaching about this is penetrating, and not that well understood. So we must tread carefully if we want to grasp the meaning of what He said.

I say this because some have concluded that in this passage, Jesus says in effect that miracles are of no importance. In preparing for this study, I have read at least two commentaries on Luke that say just this! Now clearly, Jesus performed miracles before this incident and afterwards, and commended people for seeing in them the evidence of God’s work in the world and the coming of His kingdom (10:13, 19:37). So what was Jesus really teaching here?

Our reading today seems to split into two parts, the first two verses about the woman who called out to Jesus, and the next four verses about ‘signs’. Their message may appear different; the first about being obedient to God’s Word, and the second, broadly, about responding to Christ. But we will discover that these two parts of our reading belong together, and they are linked by an important theme; Luke placed these two incidents together for a reason.

To begin with, we read about the extraordinary cry of a woman who proclaimed a very feminine form of faith, announcing a blessing on the mother of Jesus (11:27)! The language is touching and graphic. We do not know exactly how people would have reacted to such a

cry in those days, but it is quite likely that men would have wanted to silence this woman and get her out of the way. In Jesus' day, women were frequently repressed by men; but Jesus' reply was far more generous. He wanted everyone to respond to what God was doing through Him, but He neither sought personal attention for Himself or His family or disciples; so He was not going to accept the blessing of His mother as a form of faith! However, He did not rebuke the woman, who clearly saw in Jesus something profoundly important. Instead, He called on those who heard Him to consider a deeper truth, that those who were truly blessed were those who put God's Word into action (11:28). We must now hold this thought while we look at the rest of the text, but we will come back to it!

Jesus then spoke firmly to the crowds. He had not rebuked the woman, but he certainly rebuked those who wanted to see more signs that He was the Messiah. It is quite likely that they wanted Jesus to do something amazing, perhaps like Moses' parting of the Red Sea and defeat of the armies of Pharaoh! A miracle such as this to evict the armies of Rome from Jerusalem would have done nicely.

Jesus was desperately disappointed. Had these people not seen the miraculous signs done in their midst? He had already spoken against the Gentile and Jewish cities of His day for not believing '*the deeds of power done in you*' (10:13). Jesus did not think that He was wrong to do miracles, but He was upset by the lack of faith which met His work. So when Jesus says, '*this is a wicked generation ... no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah*' (11:29), it is not that He wanted to stop doing miracles, or that He thought '*the sign of Jonah*' was a sufficient miracle in itself. Jesus wanted His hearers to focus on two important truths, because ultimately, everyone would be judged (11:31,32) by their response to them. Moreover, both are illustrated in the story of the prophet Jonah.

Firstly, Jesus spoke about Jonah; He said '*for as Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.*' (11:30). Now, Jonah was a 'sign' to the people of Nineveh, because his testimony was that he had been saved from a whale by God. So when Jonah eventually preached in Nineveh (Jonah 3:1f.), people quickly responded to his message! His was an impressive story to tell. Scripture says little about what Jonah actually preached (Jonah 3:1f.), but along with calling for repentance, this is the most likely scenario.

Therefore, the first part of Jesus' message here is this. When He is saved from death after three days and nights in the tomb, this will be the outstanding sign of God's saving power. Luke does not say this in so many words, but Matthew does (Matthew 12:40), and this is clearly what Jesus means.

Secondly, in verses 31 and 32, Jesus says something more about the signs by which people will be judged, and He places together the prophecy of Jonah (11:32) with another great Old Testament story, that of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon (11:31). In each, Jesus presents His case in the same way. People responded to the miraculous wonders God had done on earth by changing their ways; the Queen of Sheba came to see the wisdom of Solomon, and the people of Nineveh repented. Now this, of course, is what Jesus wanted people to do in response to His work for them. In response to the miracles of God's grace, He wanted them to come to Him, to repent and to change their ways.

Now there is a clear link between this and what Jesus said earlier to the woman who called out to Him (11:27,28). In both instances, He wanted people to do more than hear His teaching or believe something about Him, He wanted them to put their faith into practice. He called on people to '*hear God's Word and keep it*' (11:28) and he asked them to repent and believe in Him (11:29-32). Through the miracles and works of power He had done, and also the one great miracle of salvation that would yet complete His life, He wanted people to see that '*something greater ... is here*' (11:31,32), to believe in Him, and turn to God.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V27 ***'blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts that suckled You'***

Other translations:

'blessed is the mother that bore You and nursed You' (NIV)

'blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed' (ESV)

Many will be familiar with the NIV, which is normally very concerned to stay close to the plain meaning and word use of the original text. But in this case it does not. The translation I have given (together with the other translation example I have given of the English Standard Version) is almost word for word a direct translation of the Greek. It seems strange that the NIV should recoil from this plain meaning and prefer to speak in generalities of the *'woman that bore you ...'*. The language here as reported by Luke is powerfully 'female', but this is part of the point here, and it does not help our understanding of this passage if we dilute it into generalities.

VZ ***'Blessed, rather ...'***

Purely in a linguistic sense, the Greek word for 'rather' does not mean that Jesus disagreed with the woman who cried out (11:27). Instead, it indicates that what Jesus said next is more important (11:28).

V31 ***'the queen of the south'***

This means the 'Queen of Sheba' from the famous story in 1 Kings 10, as Jesus plainly says. It is a little uncertain where 'Sheba' was, because the name means 'seven', and is similar to 'Beersheba' (meaning 'seven wells'). However, Beersheba was a town within the nation of Israel, and tradition says that the Queen of Sheba came from the far south, far deeper south than Beersheba. So here, Jesus refers to this tradition of the Queen of Sheba being from the far 'south'.

V31 ***'will awaken the people of this generation'***

Other translations:

'will rise ... with the men of this generation' (NIV)

'will rise up with the men of this generation' (NRSV)

There are a number of translation issues in this sentence, but the main one is to do with the Greek word usually translated 'rise' or 'rise up' (see NIV and NRSV). The Greek word used here is often used of the resurrection, and especially of Jesus' rising from the dead. However, the word is not exclusively used for this, and it can be used to mean 'wake up' as well as 'rise from a chair'. It seems to me that the way Luke uses this word is to mean that on the day of Judgement, *'this generation'* and the *'queen of the south'* (the Queen of Sheba) will awaken and stand before God, the Judge of all things, and God will decide their fate. The juxtaposition of the two illustrates the failings of 'this generation' in the judgement of God.

Further Comments

What is the 'Word of God' today

When Jesus says to the woman, *'blessed rather are those who hear God's Word and keep it'* (11:28), we are entitled to ask what He meant by the term 'God's Word'. In a purely Jewish sense, this term was reserved for Scripture, and especially the laws of Moses. However, Jesus used this term in a new way, and it was only as the church of God grew after His death and resurrection that the early Christians began to use the term in a new way, reflecting on what they had learned about Jesus.

In Scripture, I can find five different way in which this phrase is used, all within the writings of Paul and the other letter writers. The 'Word of God' is:

- The Scriptures, especially with Jesus as its fulfilment – John 1, 1 John 1
- The preserved teaching of the apostles found within the tradition of the church - 1 Cor 14, Phil 1:14
- Revelation in the heart of the individual (including reason & experience) - Col 3:16, James 1:22,23
- The preached Word of God - Romans 10:8f. 2 Tim 4:2 1 Peter 1:23
- The evidence of God to be found embedded within His world - Romans 1:18f.

A comparison with Matthew 12

The only other place in the Gospels where there is a similar passage of Scripture is Matthew 12. In the light of what we have studied above, it is helpful for us to compare the two passages: firstly, from Luke 11:29,30:

"This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but they will be given nothing except the sign of Jonah;³⁰ for as Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.

Now from Matthew 12:39-41:

This is a wicked and adulterous generation, and it asks for a miraculous sign! But it will be given none except the sign of the prophet Jonah.⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

You can see here how Matthew's version includes the description of the significant '*three days and nights*', but Luke misses this. Either Luke has copied Matthew and left this out, or Matthew has copied Luke and added this to the account because he believed he remembered Jesus saying this! We cannot ever know!

A sign for the Gentiles

It is intriguing that in response to the crowd around Him, Jesus gave an example of the prophet Jonah and the Queen of Sheba, for these examples do not refer to Jewish responses to God, rather to Gentile ones. The people of Nineveh were Gentiles, not Jews, indeed, that is one reason why Jonah did not want to go there! In addition, the story of the Queen of Sheba is a famous example in the Old Testament of a Gentile response to the great things God does amongst His people.

For this reason, some feel that the 'sign of the prophet Jonah' is really not about a Jewish response to Jesus but a Gentile one. It has been suggested that the early church was keen on this teaching of Jesus because it helped them come to terms with the idea that the Gospel was for the Gentiles, a key theme of Paul's preaching.

Discipleship

Application

Wanting affirmation from God

The woman who called out to Jesus with a blessing on His mother may well have had sincere intent; Jesus certainly did not rebuke her. She might have been one of those who was seeking attention by shouting out something that was rather 'out of the ordinary', but because we do not know too much about the culture of first century Judaism, we find it difficult to know for sure.

Still, people come to Christ believing or saying the wrong things, and often very sincerely. Just as Jesus sought to correct this woman, or perhaps even meet something of her need, we should always do the same. It should be a source of concern if we allow people to come to church and believe what they like about God and Jesus without correction within the fellowship of believers. It should also be a source of concern if women or any other group of people are oppressed or prevented from coming to Christ, so that they have to make a 'scene' just to be heard.

People who want signs ...

Even today, people will often say they want 'signs' from God, but often not believe them, or turn to God because of them, even in thanks. I have known occasions when miracles of healing have taken place, for example, but people have not wanted to give thanks to God for them. They have been happy to be healed, but not happy to go to church!

Some say that this is a good reason for not placing any trust in the use of miracles or 'signs and wonders'. However, such things are not always received badly, and although we have a clear duty to present the Gospel by declaring to all people the miraculous resurrection of Christ, other signs and wonders are still evidence of God's active interest in His world and His desire to bless people today.

Seeing what is on front of our eyes

However, it remains true that people do not always find it easy to see what is in front of their eyes. The people of Israel did not find it easy to accept the miraculous things Moses did at the time; it was later generations who found the great events of the Exodus ultimately compelling. In the same way, the people of Jesus' day found it hard to accept Him, and He was only worshipped as 'Lord' by a wider community of people, after His death.

So if we turn our eyes to today, we should perhaps forgive those who find it hard to see the miracles of God's work that happen before them. But this does not mean that they are without value. It seems to me that the work of a Christian is to do what Jesus did, and more (John 14:12), which includes the performing of miracles. It also includes the Gospel work of explaining God's work in the world and calling on people to change (repent) and turn to God.

Ideas for what to do

- What words would you shout out to bless Jesus, if He walked by? Please think about this, for if we are inclined to be slow to speak out, perhaps we are not as willing to be Christ's messengers and apostles as we like to think ...

- Ask yourself what the sign of the prophet Jonah means to you, and what you believe about the place of miracles in the life of the church today.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is the message of the Gospel made available equally for men and for women today, and is there any need for a special understanding of the needs of women, especially oppressed women, wherever they live in a male dominated world?
2. Discuss the sign of the prophet Jonah. What does Jesus mean by referring to Jonah in this way?
3. Discuss what will happen on 'Judgement Day' when people of this generation stand up before Almighty God with the Queen of Sheba and the people of Nineveh ...

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, help me to see what is in front of me to see, and perceive the evidence of Your love for me within everything that happens to me. May I rejoice each day of my life to see You at work in my life, doing the miracles of grace by which I live and have my being! I praise You, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN
