

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAH

Reading: Matthew 12:38-42

Before we go into the lesson we must fill in a bit of the background to try to grasp what is happening. All through the ministry of Jesus the Scribes and Pharisees were out to trap him and at every turn were trying to make him prove that he was the Messiah. They knew their Old Testament and were waiting for the Messiah to come and rid them of the yoke of Roman oppression. Yet because of their evil hearts they would not recognise Jesus as the one they waited for. Yet the miracles abounded from his hands, there had been a direct voice from heaven at his baptism saying "This is my beloved son" and still they preferred not to believe.

This is the background to our lesson today and the Pharisees came to Jesus after he had been preaching and healing with the question...

... "Master we would see a sign from thee".

You see they had seen all Jesus had done and there was obvious evidence that God was with him and yet they were not sure, they wanted a great sign that he was the Messiah like the signs Moses gave to the people when he came to deliver them out of Egypt. If only Jesus would give them a sign.

But this was not a new question, it was the constant plea from these cautious Pharisees, time and again they asked the question and completely ignored the miracles Jesus performed. But Jesus was ready for them and told them in no uncertain manner they were getting no more signs.

"An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah, for as Jonah 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 word Jonah means *dove*. Can you remember that at the baptism of Jesus when he came up out of the water the Holy Spirit was seen descending upon him in the form of a dove? So now Jesus is telling them that the remarkable experiences of this prophet Jonah foreshadowed the Lord Jesus. If you remember Jonah was in the fish for three days as good as dead, and then he came out of the fish, like a resurrection. After this he went to Nineveh to warn the people that if they did not repent they would be destroyed in 40 days.

Jesus did the same but unlike Nineveh, Jerusalem did not repent and forty years after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus the nation of Israel was destroyed. Jesus now warned the people of their responsibility.

"The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here."

If those Pharisees who knew the Old Testament very well had bothered to look back and read the book of Jonah they would see what was meant.

Perhaps three of them did for when Jesus hung lifeless from the cross, Nicodemus and Joseph publicly acknowledged that they believed in him, and Paul who was also a leading Pharisee wrote later than Christ was buried and rose again the third day... according to the scriptures (1 Cor 15:3)

Sternly, Jesus now looked at those who asked for a sign, he knew their true motive. Later he was to tell them that when they looked at the sky they said they could tell what the weather was to be the following day, yet they failed to see the signs around them as to what was happening with the Messiah in their midst.

He called upon those hypocritical, sign seeking Pharisees to discern the signs of the times to see trends about them as indications of the coming trouble that would destroy the very nation. These signs were obvious if they but opened their eyes to them, but they preferred to close them to facts. They remained blind even in spite of the fulfilment of the great sign of Jonah. This was fulfilled when the Lord rose from the dead after being in the grave for three days and three nights... but this greatest of all miracles made no difference to the leaders of the nation and they remained obstinately unrepentant and refused to acknowledge the Son of God.

In many ways we too can be like the Pharisees. Do we close our eyes to what is happening around us? The rise of Russia, the Jews in the land, war in all lands, all these we are told will show to those who look that the Lord Jesus is about to return. Are we like the Jews who still carried on with their lives, thinking that things would continue as they always had, not concerning themselves with what God wanted them to do? Or are we like the people of Nineveh who, when they realised the truth, repented of their evil ways and God forgave them.

If we listen to our news items and newspapers we have ample evidence that Jesus is about to return. Let us today resolve to do God's will, putting Him first in our lives, and watching for the Lord Jesus to return.

Discussion:

In John 2:18-21 we are given details of another sign. Discuss what it means.

Draw up a list of ways in which Jonah and the Lord Jesus are similar.