

“Greater Than Jonah, or Solomon”

Pastor Sam Richards

August 21, 2022

Isaiah 33:13-16:

**13 “You who are far away, hear what I have done;
And you who are near, [a]acknowledge My might.”
14 Sinners in Zion are terrified;
Trembling has seized the godless.
“Who among us can live with the consuming fire?
Who among us can live with [b]continual burning?”
15 He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity,
He who rejects [c]unjust gain
And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe;
He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed
And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;
16 He will dwell on the heights,
His refuge will be the [d]impregnable rock;
His bread will be given *him*,
His water will be sure.**

Footnotes

- A. Isaiah 33:13 Lit *know*
- B. Isaiah 33:14 Lit *everlasting*
- C. Isaiah 33:15 Lit *gain of extortioners*
- D. Isaiah 33:16 Lit *stronghold of rock*

This passage is addressed to a split audience: those **far away** in exile in Babylon and those **who are near**, the remnant in Judah who had not been carried off. That would mean the “oppressed” (living in the prison house of exile?) and the “impoverished” those left behind to fend for themselves because their brightest and best had been taken away from them! Both conditions, oppressed and impoverished are lamentable. Isaiah, “the prophet, is inspired and ordained by God to announce to the deeply unfortunate people in their banishment their liberation from captivity, and the blessed future of the restored and glorified theocracy that shall follow thereupon.” Jesus declares in Nazareth, that in him and through him a liberation deeper than the return of the Jews from exile!

17 And the [a]book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the [b]book and found the place where it was written,

**18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are oppressed,
19 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”**

20 And He closed the [c]book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your [d]hearing.”

Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your [d]hearing.” established my point about Jesus announcing liberation in his day! ***This passage is not without some difficulties.*** Isaiah 61:1-2, which is cited here reads:

**61:1 The Spirit of the Lord [a]God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me
To bring good news to the [b]afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And [c]freedom to prisoners;
2 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,**

Footnotes

- A. Isaiah 61:1 Heb *YHWH*, usually rendered *Lord*
- B. Isaiah 61:1 Or *humble*
- C. Isaiah 61:1 Lit *opening to those who are bound*

Bind up the brokenhearted is absent. And **to set at liberty the bruised** is rendered variously, in Luke it is rendered **the oppressed** and in Isaiah the phrase is missing altogether. However, this rather “free rendering” of Isaiah 61 is cited as coming from the mouth of the Lord! And we should receive it as a helpful interpolation. What I want to draw our attention to is the close association here between **the blind** and **the oppressed**. ***This is critical for understanding the actual condition of the scribes and Pharisees who approach Jesus, whether through doubt, or unbelief, and request/want a sign from him.*** Jesus, in essence, indicts them as **evil and adulterous** for this; condemning them for unbelief, faithlessness which is an unadulterated, or unfiltered evil in his eyes worthy of condemnation at the last judgment!

I take this to mean that the sinner who does not believe in God is placed in double jeopardy (and I don't mean the game show!). And it may be helpful to widen our net here and include sinners who believe the wrong things, in addition to unbelief, are truly **oppressed**. They are trapped in lies, deceptions and the snares of the devil—their spiritual prison house which, by virtue of its darkness has blinded their eyes! Now some are imprisoned by a self-imposed blindness at once deliberate and self-willed. Others are imprisoned due to outside forces—social derived, a consequence of persecution. Here are some of the crumbs that lead to the oven in the witch's cottage (Hansel and Gretel). In the lexicon of class warfare: the proletariat is the underclass and they are, by definition, the oppressed; they are “victims” of irresistible social laws (which dictate that revolution is inevitable, the great reset is the “revolution” in formal wear). Because they are oppressed, the victims must be kept in a state of constant agitation such as anger, hostility, envy, resentfulness, discontent and miserable. Increasing their misery is laudable because that will produce the fury necessary for revolution. Those who believe they are ‘wronged’ easily

slide over into the entitled where they blame others for their troubles (society will do as a target for collective rage (laws, institutions and boundaries are translated into the realm of oppressive/coercive power which keep the powerful in power). The result is anarchistic. And in the name of reparative justice, covetous, greedy thieves practice robbery, arson and pillage. If your business is burned up, the arsonist wins: if I can't have it, you can't have it either; it levels everything.

False prophets announce many things: 1. you are a victim; 2. you are helpless and it's someone else's fault; 3. you are an animal, sex is all important—it is your identity; 4. reality is socially constructed, everything is made-up and serves the powerful; 5. you are determined by your circumstances, genetic make-up, race, or accidental history; and 6. if you don't think like me, act like me, you are subhuman, stupid, trash, deplorable and evil. It is wonderfully clarifying that Jesus defines what's truly evil: unbelief and faithlessness in the face of overwhelming evidence of his divinity. Other things can trouble you, this can damn you.

Their great need is for the Light—the people who walked in deep darkness have seen a great light and Jesus is referring to the region's of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum—his neighborhood, where He had performed many mighty works/signs, wonders and miracles in open demonstration of his messiahship and divinity. And even with that, people remained stuck in unbelief and were doubting!

Isaiah 9:2 [a]The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light; (See Matt. 4:16!)

Yes, as the three named, woeful cities had witnessed. The verse is referring, originally, to the Assyrian invasion of Northern Israel and predicting that after this dark period a new light would shine. Matthew (4:16) implies that this is the messiah.

Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.

No one who has celebrated Advent, the Christmas season can miss this point!

3 You shall multiply the nation,
You shall [b]increase [c]their gladness;

I might inquire, where's the joy? the gladsome reception—remember, **Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that shall be for all the people** (Luke 2:10) . . . **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!** (v. 14) This materialized in Nineveh when the people believed God, repented and received the mercy of divine reprieve!

They will be glad in Your presence
As with the gladness [d]of harvest,
As [e]men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

Now we come, again, to the liberation piece.

4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders,

Such a splendid picture of release, of being set free from error, bondage to lies and from the dominion of the evil one.

The rod of their oppressor, as [f]at the battle of Midian.

5 For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult,
And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire.

Fuel of the fire is Saint Thomas Aquinas' epitaph for his for his monumental Summa—it is as, straw, as ashes to knowing the true and living God! Pascal re-invoked the phrase in this notes on his own night of fire!

**6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will [g]rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.**

This is Jesus' self-identification *in its key terms*. Knowing this, you would know who he is, why he has come, what forgiveness from sins through faith in him is all about.

**7 There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.**

His kingdom is the church and this is a marvelous prophecy about the kingdom that Jesus brought to earth, established through his cross—for all who believe.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this. The same divine power that anointed Jesus to proclaim good news to the poor (us!) would bring this about in the new age—the age dawning before their very eyes.

Now let's turn to our reading for today, having some better idea of what all is at stake: Matthew 12:38-42:

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, Teacher, we want to see a [a]sign from You.” 39 But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a [b]sign; and yet no [c]sign will be given to it but the [d]sign of Jonah the prophet; 40 for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, 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 up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42 *The Queen of the South* will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

The place where Jesus **sat beside the sea** (Matt. 13:1) is traditionally called *Cove of the Parables*. It is unique as a horseshoe-shaped cove which had remarkable acoustics (an audience of 5,000 to 7,000 significantly larger than the crowd at an open air event on a hillside). It was a natural amphitheater where it is likely that today's passage occurred. The scribes and Pharisees, who came requesting a sign, refer to Jesus as Teacher. And it is possible that they asked this because Jesus' teaching was so compelling and unique that they wanted further “proof” of His identity.; but probably not. **Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you** comes from a very dark, dark place.

Back in Matt. 11:25 Jesus had declared, **I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the “wise and under-standing.”** This is an indirect reference to the same folks who came requesting the authentication of a sign *because they were either doubtful, or unbelieving*. We are to favor the latter because just prior to this declaration Jesus had indicted Capernaum for unbelief and unrepentant: **And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades** (the gates of hell). **For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom** (meaning the

miracles, the signs already performed—works that Jesus did to bring about repentance, or a turning to God which is a return to faith), **it would have remained to this day** (not endured the wrath of divine judgment in obliteration for non-repentance!). Lord, you have hidden these things from **the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children**. *Little children is Jesus' manner of describing those who receive the gospel in simple faith those who made up the majority of those listening to His revelation.* **Such is your gracious will.** At this point we are to recall that **the scribes and Pharisees, the wise and understanding** have come to Jesus seeking a sign of authentication.

Jesus had already anticipated this line of inquiry. Again, back in Matt. 11:27, **he declared . . . All things have been handed over to me by my Father.** That is, Jesus is Lord of all, He is divine in nature; but **the wise and understanding** are not getting it. Therefore Jesus continues with the explanation for this failure to comprehend: **No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son**—this is an amazing expression of the union of Father and Son, the unity of the godhead! *No one knows either Father or Son except anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him* (the Father). If Jesus does not reveal the Father, we remain in the dark as to who the Father is and, of course, as to who Jesus is. Who is Jesus? He is the One to whom **all things have been handed over**; He is Lord of all. This is Jesus teaching. So their address to Jesus, **Teacher, we wish to see a sign** signifies at least two things. First, they have heard and not believed their hearing. Second, they are asserting that “seeing is believing” which is certainly not true. *Things are often not as they apparently appear to be.* Jesus is Lord, not just teacher. He reveals who the Father is. He is co-equal to the Father in divinity and not merely the man they “see” in front of them. Jesus is wisdom, divine wisdom, deeper and truer than even the revelations given Solomon.

Jesus sees through their request (their presenting concern) and, kindly, warns them **an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given but the sign of the prophet Jonah.** (12:39) Just what was the sign of Jonah? Was it Jonah's rescue? Was it the miraculous deliverance of a rebellious prophet who ran from God rather than preach repentance to those he hated? *He knew that a word from the Lord could work repentance among the Ninevites.* Was that the sign? Jesus says, **three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish**, a manifest miracle; that was the sign. Those who repent are rescued. What Jonah went through was for Jonah. The apparent disaster, being eaten by a great fish, never materialized; Jonah, although consumed with hatred for the Ninevites, was not consumed by the fish nor did he die of drowning! But by the mercy of God he was saved from death and planted on the shoreline of obedience. Jonah entered that great city a day's journey—it was three days journey wide—and **he called out, Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth.** (Jonah 3:3-5) *I can tell you that neither sackcloth, nor fasting will avail for anything if they are not sincere gestures of hearts broken over sin, and souls very aware of their divine jeopardy for non-repentance!* So what is the word of God for the scribes and Pharisees, and for the unbelieving city of Capernaum? It is “believe God, believe Jesus.” Both Jonah and Jesus did a work that resulted in a staggering mission to the Gentiles—and that is something that Jonah the patriotic Jew both feared and refused to welcome. Except this: Jonah's sin, rebellion and anger were not the last word! What humility it must have taken to publish the whole story, both Jonah's depravity and God's overturning, or triumphant mercy!

Then in Matt. 13:40, seemingly out of nowhere—surprisingly, but not accidentally, we are confronted with a prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection(!): **so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth** (meaning, the grave). (v. 40)

That is the sign of redemption you are seeking, **scribes and Pharisees**—*signal judgment of God on human sin, resulting in a death burial and a reversal in three days.* Victory snatched out of the jaws of defeat (defiance? death?)! And, in case you scribes and Pharisees still don't comprehend the significance of Jesus mission (or Jonah's), **the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation . . .** yes, there will be a resurrection and a judgment and the **men of Nineveh** together **with this generation**, meaning the general resurrection will gather the generations however disparate in time they may be. All the generations of mankind will be raised, and judged. The testimony of those who believe **will condemn** those who did not believe. And note this, **the preaching of Jonah** was far sparser, much thinner than the preaching of Jesus. Jesus preached a full-orbed message of repentance from sin and of faith in Him bringing forgiveness of sins and eternal life! And this is because **something greater than Jonah is here . . . something greater than Solomon is here.** The Greek for "greater" is STRONG'S NT Gk 4119: *πλείων, pleion*, meaning "greater in quantity" (18x's) and "more excellent," greater in quality when followed by the genitive of comparison. The word is in the comparative degree. Jesus is greater than the prophet Jonah, and wiser than Solomon, and greater than Solomon as king. Greater in the revelatory office of prophet, and wiser than the wisdom of man, certainly, but wiser than the wisdom of God revealed to Solomon—a more excellent wisdom, more excellent prophecy. These two are authentications of who Jesus is! Jesus is superior as prophet (revelation), as king (authority), and as our source of wisdom (teacher) . . . the only institutional office in Israel not mentioned is that of priest. That category is, perhaps, alluded to in the atoning sacrifice located in **three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** It truly is "Up from the grave, He arose!"

This is an example of the wise God giving us, His foolish people, wisdom through the wisest King, or being in the entire cosmos, King Jesus so that we might learn to live wisely, love God and submit to His ways. I have already recommended Proverbs 1:2-5: **To help us know, or to gain knowledge and instruction, for gaining words of insight, for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, *doing what is right and just and fair*; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion of the young. Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance . . . Right and just and fair are mentioned here as **instruction for prudent behavior**; but love and truth and mercy are not—at least not explicitly. Prudent behavior is righteous, and holy as well.**

So scripture is given so that we learn how to think. As I expounded the sign of Jonah, how was your thinking shaped? Did you think about the discernment of the Lord into the motivations behind the request: **Teacher, we wish for a sign from you?** Were they callous enough to think Jesus was a performing seal? Someone who did miracles to startle, impress the crowd, mislead the gullible? Jesus answers with a charge, **An adulterous generation** (that would be you) **seeks for a sign.** In the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Jesus puts a similar rebuke into the mouth of Abraham, who is depicted as very much alive in the afterlife, **They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them . . . If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.** (Luke 16:29, 31) *The fundamental problem is unbelief; the scribes and Pharisees have "heard" Jesus and they simply balk at believing in Him.* Signs, wonders, miracles and the like will move no one unless they have first been moved by the Holy Spirit—that is, called by God to God. Then a sign is impertinent. If these wise ones were cloaking their unbelief, Jesus blew their cover—just as He does for us!

Here, these Jews are privileged. They most likely knew the story of Jonah. They may, or may not have seen Jonah's sign as a redemptive sign; they may, or may not have connected the dots between Jonah and Jesus. So Jesus does that for them *and for us*. The Jonah story is about repentance of a nation—Nineveh in the first instance and Israel in the second. The Ninevites did not

see themselves as particularly evil; but they were. And they were plainly unbelieving until they heard the word of the Lord and their eyes were opened! The scribes and Pharisees would have been the last to self-identify as **evil and adulterous!** Jesus does not refuse them a sign; He offers them the same sign as Jonah: repent, or die. That is astonishing. Hardly politically correct! But as Jesus proceeds to explain, *something big, something greater than the turning of the Ninevites to God (They believed God) is going down.* Perhaps, on this steep learning curve, the scribes and Pharisees were challenged to pay attention. Someone greater than the prophet Jonah, the King of Israel, the wisdom of Solomon and the royalty of the Queen of Sheba. If the priestly role is extended to the brief sermon of Jonah, *then all the chief institutions of Israel were being renovated—in this Teacher,* this Lord Jesus.

Those lines, or something very like them, map out how a Christian is to think about the world, salvation and our God. Prudence would dictate care in the kind of open requests we make and we might want to check our heart attitude before we make them. This is prudence affecting behavior!

This is Christian thinking. It is different. It draws us nearer to God . . . looks to discover His purposes and redemption as the chief theme of world history. What Christ is here for and what we are here for may be out of synch and the Spirit is operating to synchronize them. The best question to ask is this: what is God's wisdom in this instance? Thinking before we ask, thinking before we act is a great way to keep one's face. This is going to take patience, practice, studiousness and hard work. Prudent people are deliberate, thoughtful; they are neither impulsive, nor reactionary. They seek wise counsel and take guidance from those more experienced in the ways to the Lord. They work at staying teachable, keeping their minds supple and agile and alert.

We may all be in the same boat, but we are not all placed in the same positions in that boat. We listen to senior officers, we take our orders from those in charge of us. We are not all alike, not all equally trained adept, or qualified. But all of us struggle to live wisely, prudently. To become literate, we learn the alphabet and grow a vocabulary; we move on to words, grammar and syntax. We learn how to form phrases and clauses and all sorts of sentences (commands, questions, declarative) and we study style to become adept at word-smithing. We read and re-read. No one is going to write like a master out of the gates and very little of our first attempts is worth archiving. Math, dance, science, social studies, sports and medicine? The approach is always the same: learn the basics, master the basics, practice and enhance your skills (skill set). Keep at it, be disciplined. We must learn to read critically, carefully and in-depth—everyone who succeeds in any of this, progresses in the same way. Christian formation follows the same protocol.

So, in becoming a Christian, what is most basic? **The fear of the Lord. Filial fear of the Father.** And the best, quickest way to get in touch with that fear is to have it brought to your attention, either by the Spirit, or by your fellow believers, that you are not in a right relationship to God. That is something that an encounter with Jesus causes. The scribes and Pharisees who thought they were okay, in a right relationship, learned abruptly that they were not. It was their request that opened them up to that disclosure. It may not be as blatant as the sin of Adam and Eve, but the reaction is identical: we sin, we hide . . . we are terrified because we know divine judgment is coming any moment now. *There are consequences and they are imminent!*

Isaiah 33:13-16:

**13 “You who are far away, hear what I have done;
And you who are near, [a]cknowledge My might.”**

14 Sinners in Zion are terrified;
Trembling has seized the godless.
“Who among us can live with the consuming fire?
Who among us can live with [b]continual burning?”
15 He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity,
He who rejects [c]unjust gain
And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe;
He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed
And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;
16 He will dwell on the heights,
His refuge will be the [d]impregnable rock;
His bread will be given *him*,
His water will be sure.

Amen.