

## Matthew 12:38-50 The sign of Jonah

Here's a great story told by a youth worker called Ken Davis, he wrote; "In college I was asked to prepare a lesson to teach to the rest of my class. We were to be graded on our creativity and ability to drive home a point in a memorable way. The title of my talk was, "The Law of the Pendulum."

I spent 20 minutes carefully teaching the physical principle that governs a swinging pendulum. The law of the pendulum is: A pendulum can never return to a point higher than the point from which it was released. Because of friction and gravity, when the pendulum returns, it will fall short of its original release point.

Each time it swings it makes less and less of an arc, until finally it is at rest. This point of rest is called the state of equilibrium, where all forces acting on the pendulum are equal.

To illustrate this I attached a 3-foot string to a child's cheap plastic toy and secured it to the top of the blackboard with a drawing pin. I pulled the toy to one side and made a mark on the blackboard where I let it go. Each time it swung back I made a new mark. It took less than a minute for the toy to complete its swinging and come to rest. When I finished the demonstration, the markings on the blackboard proved my thesis.

I then asked how many people in the room BELIEVED the law of the pendulum was true. All of my classmates raised their hands, so did the teacher. He started to walk to the front of the room thinking the class was over. In reality it had just begun.

Hanging from the steel ceiling beams in the middle of the room I had also hung a large, crude but functional pendulum (250 pounds of metal weights tied to four strands of 500-pound test parachute cord). I invited the teacher to climb up on a table and sit in a chair with the back of his head against a cement wall.

Then I brought the 250 pounds of metal up to his nose. Holding the huge pendulum just a fraction of an inch from his face, I once again explained the law of the pendulum he had applauded only moments before, "If the law of the pendulum is true, then when I release this mass of metal, it will swing across the room and return short of the release point. Your nose will be in no danger."

After that final restatement of this law, I looked him in the eye and asked, "Sir, do you believe this law is true?" There was a long pause. Huge beads of sweat formed on his upper lip and then weakly he nodded and whispered, "Yes."

I released the pendulum. It made a swishing sound as it arced across the room. At the far end of its swing, it paused momentarily and started back.

I never saw a man move so fast in my life. He literally dived from the table. Deftly stepping around the still-swinging pendulum, I asked the class, "Does he believe in the law of the pendulum?" The students unanimously answered, "NO!"

And Jesus faced many people who did not believe that he was the Son of God, the Messiah, the rescuer, even though they sometimes appeared to. In our reading some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law came to him and they said, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

Now it seems a positive request, almost as if they will believe in Jesus if he fulfils it and there are many people whose faith demands a sign. Perhaps some of us here today have asked God for sign in the past.

If you did, though, I wonder whether or not it actually did you any good. I remember my training incumbent, when I was curate, once telling me that before he was a Christian he asked

God for sign; as he lay in bed one night he asked God to show him that he was real, he thought, I know, I'll be quite specific", so he asked God to shine a light on the opposite wall and to be even more specific he gave God a time frame of the next 30 seconds.

Well, lo and behold within the next 30 seconds the wall was illuminated with light! Did Steve fall to his knees in fervent prayer and commit himself there and then to the ordained ministry? No.

Steve said that he actually just dismissed it, he rationalised it, after all the light could easily have been caused by a passing car or 101 other things. Why did it make no difference? Because at that point in his journey to faith he didn't really want a sign, he didn't really want proof, he didn't really want to follow Jesus.

And that is how Jesus answers in verse 39, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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."

Jesus says that there is going to be proof, but not a parlour trick, instead it will be the sign of Jonah. Just as the Old Testament prophet Jonah was dead in the water – just as he spent three days and nights in the belly of a giant fish; a watery desolate grave if ever there was one, Jesus would also spend three days and nights in the grave.

If we want proof that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah then it's there in the resurrection, not in some cheap Saturday night magic show trick rather the miracle that Jesus rose from the dead after being crucified, that he was seen by witnesses

and that he then ascended into heaven to reign with his Father and send his Holy Spirit to us.

That really should be proof enough for us, don't you think? But in addition Jesus draws our attention in verse 41 to those Jonah preached to – they were pagans, they were defying God and yet when they heard the call to repentance without seeing any great sign, they responded and repented. Again in verse 42 Jesus says, look at the Queen of Sheba – not one of God's chosen people, not someone who demanded impressive miracles, but she came to hear the great godly wisdom of Solomon.

Now in Jesus someone greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon was here and yet instead of listening to him the unbelieving Pharisees and teachers of the law are simply asking for idle entertainment to satisfy their curiosity so in fact they would be condemned, shamed by the men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba.

On the internet there is a website called "God is Imaginary", it purports to offer 50+ proofs that God doesn't exist. However, it claims that, say Jesus had actually moved Mt Sinai to America leaving behind a four mile square perfectly flat foundation, or had he predicted Pi 2000 years ago, or if he were to simply appear now, physically then this would be accepted as proof that Jesus is indeed God.

"Come on Jesus," they say, "if you're so great, give us a sign!" But do you know what? I don't think that any of that would actually convince the people who run that website. They say a sign would be proof enough for them, but in reality, I don't think that it would.

Jesus told a story about just such an attitude, Lazarus and the rich man.

After a self centred life a rich man dies and ends up in hell, he sees someone he remembers – Lazarus the beggar up in heaven and so he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers who are still alive in order to warn them so that they too won't end up in hell.

But what is Abraham's response? He says to the rich man, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' [persists the rich man], 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' [Abraham] said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

How true that is, the website I told you about earlier demands a sign for proof, but utterly dismisses the resurrection – the sign of Jonah. Now I don't think that this website speaks for all unbelievers, but it does represent the attitude of many aggressive atheists and there are many less antagonistic unbelievers who also remain unconvinced even by Jesus' resurrection, such is the danger of a faith which demands a sign.

Then in the next three verses Jesus warns us about a faith which relies upon experiences.

Jesus says, "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

I want you to imagine that you are going on holiday somewhere exotic and before you travel, you need to go and have a few injections to ensure that your health remains good whilst you're away.

What's happening to your body? We all know, you are being inoculated against various threats, you get a little dose of the illness so that the real thing doesn't affect you and Jesus warns us that if we base our faith on experiences then we can likewise become inoculated to real faith in God.

Now, when I talk about "faith based on experiences", I'm, not just speaking about the kind of people who just love going to big Christian events, who bounce from one experience like that to another, one spiritual high to the next and who slip away from faith when the novelty wears off. No, it can be more subtle than that.

I'm thinking about people like the friend I was at Art College with. Whilst we were there his mother became very ill and because he knew that a few of us met for a Bible study and to pray, he asked us to pray for her and in fact soon he started to attend the meetings as well. He began reading his Bible, investigating Christianity and praying with us, eventually his mother began to recover and soon she was completely well again.

But, do you know, when that happened, that was the last we saw of my friend. I wonder if he ever really thought about God, the power of prayer, the comfort from being with God's people. It was almost as if once the need was over, the experience had passed, then his memory faded and God had never been involved – he was inoculated.

As a vicar, over the years I have had countless encounters like that in every church I've been in –

we have seen people who have been so in need of God, but when the need has passed, the experience which benefited them has happened, it is as if they never knew God, as if they are inoculated to him and they are worse off than they were before.

So then, if a sign based faith and an experience based faith can both be shallow, what are the signs of a healthy faith?

Well, Jesus goes on to tell us in the next few verses. A message arrives that Jesus' family (his mother and brothers) are outside and that they want to speak to him – it's a little like call waiting – and you know what family are like, always calling you up at work, thinking that you can drop everything for them! So what does Jesus do?

Does he drop everything? No, he uses the situation to explain to people what sort of faith it is that God wants us to demonstrate.

You see, some people base their faith on demanding signs, some on experiences and leave it there, but Jesus, the Son of God asks in verse 48, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" in other words, who else is in relationship with God?

And his answer? There in verse 49; "Pointing to his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

It's not that Jesus is saying that we are saved by our works, that who ever does the will of God is forgiven their sin, rather he is making the point that it is when our faith is based on obedience to God – a love for him, a trust in him, a longing and a desire to serve him and please him and have him rejoice in us that we then will have a rightly balanced faith.

I often reread our Bible verses from the modern paraphrase “The Message”, but that is because it presents the Bible to us in fresh contemporary language whilst remaining faithful to the original text – and just listen to these verses from the Message; “[Jesus] then stretched out his hand toward his disciples. “Look closely. These are my mother and brothers. Obedience is thicker than blood. The person who obeys my heavenly Father's will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Don't you love that little phrase? “Obedience is thicker than blood”? Here are Jesus' immediate earthly family, but he says that with him “Obedience is thicker than blood” – here in the disciples are his true spiritual family, those who have real faith: They gave up homes, a future with families, careers, financial security, safety all to obey God and to follow Jesus.

Do you remember our teacher who claimed to believe the law of the pendulum, but who then wouldn't obey it? He had faith until it came to the crunch, he was happy to claim that he followed something which seemed not to affect him.

He saw a physical sign, he experienced a safe version of the theory, but when asked to risk all, even having seen clear evidence and proof, he abandoned his faith.

Our challenge is not to be constantly expecting God to be serving us – giving us signs, giving us experiences. That's not faith, that's using God. And what can we ask God for that is greater than the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus – the sign of Jonah.

No, our faith is to be based on thankfulness, gratitude, love and the commitment to obey the good, perfect and holy will of Jesus' heavenly Father.

Real faith doesn't ask God, "What have you done for me today?" rather it turns to him in humble praise and asks, "how can I serve you, how can I obey you, how can I please you today and always as a child in your family, rescued and saved through the sign of Jonah; Jesus conqueror of my sin, defeater of my death."

Amen.