

# God's Credentials

Luke 11:29-32

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 26, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>29</sup>When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. <sup>30</sup>For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. <sup>31</sup>The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! <sup>32</sup>The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! (Luke 11:29-32, NRSV)

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I'm getting tired of the security questions. On one level, I get it. A recent painful experience has reminded me that cyber-security is important. Still, just to pay my utility bill on line it feels like I'm going through the level of security clearance that should allow me access to classified national secrets. On top of that, who remembers these sorts of things they require as answers? What was the name of your 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher? I don't know. I don't remember a single thing about first grade. What color shirt was your first girlfriend wearing the first time you saw her? What is the middle name of the street you grew up on? Where does your favorite cheese come from? Is OJ innocent or guilty? Really? I know that SMUD has to verify that I am who I say I am, but some of these questions make me question whether I am who I think I am.

Jesus had a similar problem. The people he was meeting weren't sure that he was who he was claiming to be. In some ways, yes, he acted like he was the Messiah. He spoke with authority. He performed miracles. He enlisted followers. But the crowds weren't convinced. They needed to see his credentials. Specifically, they wanted to see a sign. They had seen miracles, fantastic wonders that he performed in front of them. Now they wanted a sign straight from heaven, a lightning bolt, a voice from the clouds, an angel descending from on high, something that made it clear this man was definitely from God.<sup>1</sup>

And how does Jesus answer their request? "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." These are stern words. Only one sign from heaven will be given and it is evil to ask for another. The one sign given is enough, more than enough. If you ask God for more and more credentials, you are only demonstrating your unwillingness to believe. The sign of Jonah is more than enough to demonstrate that Christ is from God. Which leads to the obvious question, what is the sign of Jonah?

Jonah, as you may know, was a prophet in the Old Testament, a very reluctant prophet. God came to him one day and told him to travel to the city of Nineveh, a wicked city in a foreign land, to tell the people there to shape up or face judgment. It was the last thing Jonah wanted to do. Truth is, he had no interest in seeing these Gentile pagans reformed and would have loved instead to see them get what he thought they had coming to them. So instead of heading to Nineveh, he boarded a ship sailing in the opposite direction.

God was not pleased. God sent a storm to force Jonah off the ship and into the raging sea and then God sent a whale to swallow Jonah and force him out of the sea and back towards obedience. For three days and three nights Jonah wasted away in the belly of the whale. Eventually the whale could stomach him no longer and spit him up on the beach. When he went overboard, nobody ever thought they would see Jonah again, and yet there he was, alive! Word must have immediately spread about this wild prophet who survived such an ordeal. Surely, this was a sign from heaven that this man was on a mission from God.

When God then told Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh, this time he obeyed. And though he likely hated every minute of it, he traveled to Nineveh, went into the heart of the city, and preached the shortest hellfire and brimstone sermon that has ever been preached. One line, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overcome!" That's it. That's all he said. And do you know what happened? The people repented. How could they not? A man sent to them in the belly of whale must be from God. It was a sign they could not deny and so they trusted God. Even the king believed, commanding all of Nineveh to fast and pray for God's forgiveness. And God, just as Jonah had feared that he would, showed mercy to the entire city.

<sup>1</sup> Dale Bruner is helpful distinguishing the difference between a miracle and a sign, *Matthew: The Christbook* (Eerdmans, 2004), 573.

So is that the sign? Is that all the people will be given by Christ in the form of credentials, a cranky prophet from eight centuries before? No. Jesus says that the sign of Jonah *will* be given. This sign was to come in the future, in the *very immediate future* as it so happens. Remember, when we meet Jesus here in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, he is on his way to Jerusalem. It is there that the sign will be given. God has sent Jesus into the world, just like God sent Jonah to Nineveh, with a message. Repent, change your ways, and believe. You are headed down a road that leads to destruction and you must turn around. To make it possible for the world to believe this message, God then gave a sign through Jesus who became the greater Jonah. You see, when Jesus went to the cross he was swallowed up in the belly of the grave for three days. Nobody expected to ever see him alive again. And yet, three days later the grave spit him out again alive. From that point forward, everybody – and I mean *everybody* – who repented and believed was shown the mercy and grace of God in extravagant measure.

So do you follow me here? The people ask for a sign and Jesus says that only one sign will be given to them, the sign of his death and resurrection which was foreshadowed all those years before in the story of Jonah. That is the *only* sign that will ever be given from heaven because it is enough. It is more than enough.

Well, unlike the people in the crowds that day, this so-called ‘evil generation’ as Jesus puts it, we stand on the other side of this sign. According to Jesus, therefore, we have *already been given* the only sign we will ever be given. And yet – let’s be honest – some of us want more. There have been times of unbelief in my life, when I have found myself asking for something more. If I could just have one undeniable encounter with Jesus, one instance where he visibly or audibly revealed himself to me in a way that would forever erase all my doubts, that would be enough. I don’t need two more signs; one will do the trick. Show me you exist. Let me see for myself the scars in your wrists. Tell me that you really do love me just as I am; let me hear it from your own lips. After that, Lord, I will do whatever you want me to do, say whatever you want me to say, go wherever you want me to go, give whatever you want me to give. Wouldn’t you want the same thing as well? Just one clear sign from heaven.

And in response, Jesus says to us, “No. What you are asking for is evil. It’s not a good sign when you ask me for more signs. The sign you have been given, the sign of Jonah, is all you will be given.” The cross and the resurrection are enough.

This is where faith is necessary. Because we were not there when Jesus died on the cross. We were not there

to watch him emerge from the grave three days later. We didn’t have the benefit Thomas had of actually putting his fingers in the scars to verify it was really Jesus. All we have is the testimony handed down to us of these things. It’s a strong and reliable testimony, but still faith is required.

To be fair, there were people who were firsthand witnesses to these events and still did not believe. Plenty of people, actually. What that means is that faith was even necessary back then. You see, for some reason God chooses not to overwhelm us with evidence, or to coerce us into belief. He certainly could do so if he chose to. God could appear to us now in all his glory to the point that we would have no choice but to believe. He doesn’t. He never has. Faith has always been required. Why is that?

Think about it this way. Some of you remember that I’ve used this illustration before. In my hand I have a \$10 bill. I know you can’t see it, but I want you to trust me when I tell you that it’s there. My word is all I’m going to give you. Do you trust me? Am I a person you can trust?

Who here believes that what I’m telling you is true, that there is a \$10 bill in my hand? Why? Hopefully because you find me to be believable, that I have a history of telling you the truth. And that, in a way, is faith. You don’t know for certain that there is money in my hand. How could you? But you are weighing the evidence and then taking a well-informed step of faith forward.<sup>2</sup>

Now, watch as I destroy your faith. As soon as I show you what’s in my hand, you don’t have faith anymore, do you? Instead, what do you have? You have certainty. You have *total* certainty, in fact, which doesn’t require any faith whatsoever. And so if I hide this \$10 in my hand again and now ask you how many of you believe it’s there, all of you now believe without a shadow of a doubt. No longer do you have faith based on my trustworthiness and my history of telling you the truth. Now, you don’t need to trust *me* anymore. Knowledge and certainty and experience will suffice. Faith is no longer needed.<sup>3</sup>

Ben Patterson, the chaplain at Westmont College who was also one of our Fall Retreat speakers a few years back, tells of a common experience of westerners, particularly missionaries, who travel through jungle

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:1 says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

<sup>3</sup> The idea for this illustration comes from Lee Strobel in *The Case for Faith*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, c. 2000), p. 237-238.

sections of the Amazon. Naturally, these foreigners will ask members of a local village to give them directions to where they want to go. “I have a compass, a map, and some coordinates. Can you just give me a few directions to help get me on my way?”

But the villager, who knows precisely the directions to get them there, instead offers to take them himself. But Westerners always decline, saying, “No, that’s okay. The directions will suffice.” And the villagers always refuse, saying, “It doesn’t work that way. I can get you there, but I must take you there myself. You must follow me or you will most certainly get lost.”<sup>4</sup>

Patterson observes how we always prefer directions, principles, steps, keys, proofs, something tangible we can hold and control. But that’s not how God works. For his own reasons, God has not allowed us to see things with absolute certainty, to follow without any trace of doubt, to receive aids *without receiving himself*. And though I don’t know all God’s reasons for requiring faith, I have a hunch that one of those reasons has to do with trust. God ultimately wants us to place our trust in Him. And while things like knowledge, and reason, and experience, and signs and miracles can be a great help to encourage our faith, ultimately God doesn’t want us to place our faith in those things, but in Him, in his faithfulness, in the testimony handed down to us of what he has already done.

But here is the reality. There are some among us in this world who, frankly, don’t want to believe. There is a hardness of heart, a blindness of spirit, in some people to the point that no matter what sign from heaven is before them they are not going to believe because they *do not want to believe*. We all have experienced the power of the human mind and heart to deny an obvious reality that a person does not want to accept. A marriage is in trouble. A loved one is addicted. The good old days weren’t really all that good. A death is final. A dream is over. A thing may be obvious to most, but we don’t want to believe it so we don’t believe it.

John 3:19-20 puts it this way as it applies to the reality of Christ, **“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”**<sup>5</sup> People have their reasons for choosing not to believe what ought to be obvious.

The other day I was climbing onto the levee for a morning run and I noticed a spider web stretched between two trees, an impressive spider perched right in the center. The rising sun hit the web, and the drops of dew that hung from it, in just such a way that I stopped in my tracks to admire the beauty. As I did, this was my first thought. How in the world can anybody look at the creation around us and come to the conclusion that all this was an accident that came from nothing? How does any rationale human being get to that conclusion?

Philosopher Alvin Plantinga believes that there are at least two to three dozen very good arguments for the existence of God. Here are three that are included in his list.

First, something exists in the world rather than nothing and something never comes out of nothing.

Second, the universe is designed in such a precise way to allow for the flourishing of life that it could not have come about randomly. The speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of the weak and strong nuclear forces, the exact distance of the earth from the sun – the probability of these perfect calibrations happening by chance is so tiny it is statistically negligible.

Third, beauty is too powerful to simply be the neurological hardwired response to certain sensory input. In other words, a stunning work of art, a moving piece of music, the sight of a brilliant sunset over the ocean, or even the look of the face of your child asleep, gives us all the undeniable sense that life is not, as Shakespeare put it, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

So much evidence of our Creator’s existence, and yet there are some who simply refuse to believe. No sign is good enough. C.S. Lewis put it this way,

Nothing like small enough. For a damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes fast shut. First they will not, in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see.<sup>7</sup>

Here’s the thing. There must be a tipping point. There always is a tipping point. We pray there is a tipping

<sup>4</sup> Cited by John Ortberg, *Faith & Doubt* (Zondervan, 2008), 172.

<sup>5</sup> NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2008), 128-135.

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Collier, 1946).

point. The glory of the created world around us, the existence of beauty, morality, goodness and love, the very witness of the life, death and resurrection of Christ himself, none of it moves us to faith until the day when we reach the end of our rope. That's usually the tipping point and it's one of the best places we can find ourselves. When we realize we can't make a way forward ourselves. We face the fact that life is not something we control. The hardness of life becomes unbearable. We realize the darkness we loved will never satisfy and always betray us in the end. And in that lowest point we turn our eyes and hearts heavenward, perhaps not even knowing what we will find there. Our prayer is simple, though we might not even call it a prayer. "Help. If you are there, help. Whoever you are, if you actually are, help me to believe. I'm out of options and it's down to this. God, if you exist help me now!"

This week I came across the story of Slavko Hadžić. In 1992 he lived in Bosnia, his home country, as war waged all around him. It was a desperate time. He was supposed to join the army but because he was in a mixed marriage, whatever side he joined he would end up fighting against half his family. At the time he was a very strong atheist but suddenly became desperate, at the end of his rope. So for the first time in his life one day he prayed to God. It was a very short prayer. "God, if you exist, please help me now." That's it. Short and sweet, but also sincere.

In response there were no lightning bolts, no angels descending from heaven, no other sign was given. And yet, God moved in his life. He and his wife were led out of the country, imagining they would never go back to that violent place. In time, however, some friends shared with him the Christian Gospel, the testimony of the one sign that had been given, and eventually he placed his faith in Christ as his Lord and his Savior. In the years to come Christ led him to be trained as a pastor to be sent back to Bosnia where he now works tirelessly to share the love of Christ with others who have yet to reach that tipping point. His life of dedication to Christ began where all lives dedicated to Christ begin, at the end of the rope.<sup>8</sup> I think of Jeremiah 29:13-14 which reads, "**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.**"<sup>9</sup>

Do you understand that faith itself is a gift? There is a spiritual blindness in all of us, a hardness of heart against the reality of God that we cannot soften on our own. We cannot work up faith in our own souls. We

can ask for it, but ultimately it is the work of the Holy Spirit that penetrates our minds and hearts and helps us to trust. Ephesians 2:8 proclaims, "**By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is *the gift of God.***"<sup>10</sup>

Lots of you know what this is like. At some point in your life, often after a season of humbly seeking the truth about God, one day you just came to believe. You're not sure how you got to that point, but you did. Somehow there is now a conviction in you that the sign you have been given is enough. You weren't smart enough to figure this out on your own. There were doubts along the way. But now you believe, at least believe enough to step forward in faith. It's humbling, and from that point we don't look down at others who do not have faith because we can't take credit even for the faith we possess. It's a gift, an undeserved gift for which we are profoundly grateful, a gift for which we now pray that others would also receive.

The Ninevites were given this gift following the sign of Jonah and it changed everything for them. Queen Sheba, here referred to by Jesus as "the queen of the south", also received that gift. You might remember the story from I Kings.<sup>11</sup> This queen traveled from her homeland to test King Solomon in Israel to see if he had the credentials of a true agent of Yahweh, Israel's God. God used what she heard and saw in Solomon to give her the gift of faith as well. By the time she returned home she was blessing Solomon's God.

To those who continue to demand a sign even after the one sufficient sign has been given, Jesus says that the witness of the Ninevites and the witness of the Queen of Sheba will condemn them. It's a remarkable thing that he's saying here to this Jewish audience because both the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba are outsiders, Gentiles who, from the Jewish perspective, clearly fall outside the favor of God. Not according to Jesus. According to Jesus, faith in the one sufficient sign is the only dividing line. It doesn't matter who you are, as long as you believe.

Literally, it does not matter who you are, where you have been, what you have done, who you have done it to or with, what you look like, what you own or don't own, who you have slept with, what you have put into your body, who you voted for, what you have believed or thought or intended in the days before. None of it matters in this respect. If you come to the point in your life where you seek the truth about God with your heart and God shows you the one sufficient sign and then gives you the gift of faith, it just doesn't matter who

<sup>8</sup> Hear more of his story at <https://langham.org/god-exist-please-help-now/>

<sup>9</sup> NIV

<sup>10</sup> Emphasis mine

<sup>11</sup> See I Kings 10:1-13.

you are as long as you receive that gift. Your life will one day stand as a judgment against those who demanded more signs, no matter how religious they may have been. In the end, it will be the lives of the faith-filled which will, by contrast, condemn the lives of the faith-less.

So what are we to do with all this? Two things. I'll be brief and end with this.

First, if you are somebody who is today asking God for more signs, stop doing so. You're not going to get another sign. We have all that we need to believe. The Ninevites had what they needed to believe. This man got swallowed by a whale and spit up alive three days later. When he then gave them the message from God, they believed. Christ has given his life for us out of love. But he's not dead any longer. He rose from the dead! The witnesses are clear. The credentials are sufficient. We must believe and, when we come to believe, we must humbly give thanks for our faith. It is a gift.

Second, we must understand our role in relationship to others who do not yet believe. We don't have to conjure up tricks or even fancy words to illicit faith in others. The sign has already been given and it is sufficient. Our job is not to convince, or coerce, or persuade. It is certainly not to manipulate. Our job is simply to testify, to bear witness, to share with others what it is that God has done in our world and in our lives. We just tell the story, our story. And we love the people we tell it to. And we pray for those same people. We do it all with humility because no person we meet is less worthy of God's love and salvation than we are.

God wanted ever last Ninevite to be saved. Jonah couldn't believe it, but it was true. In the same way, Christ loves the people you can't imagine he loves. And when one such person gets to the end of his or her rope, like some of us were once at the end of our rope, then God will be there waiting. If in that moment there is somebody there to tell them good news, there is a chance, by the grace of God, that they will come to believe it and be saved.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 11:29-32 again. Pay close attention. What stands out to you here?

2. Why is Jesus upset so with this generation? He calls them evil! What is evil about them?
3. What is the 'sign of Jonah' and why will that be the only sign that is given? Is that enough to believe?
4. Do you ever find yourself asking God for more evidence of his love, or of even of his very existence, before you believe? Is Jesus saying here that we should not do that?
5. Are there people in the world who simply do not want to believe to the point that it doesn't matter what sign or evidence they would be given, they will still not believe? If so, how does a person get to that point of hard-heartedness or spiritual blindness?
6. Jesus says that the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba will rise up in judgment against those who demand another sign. What does he mean by this? How is this relevant to us?
7. Is faith itself a gift? If you are a person of faith, how was your faith a gift?
8. What is one thing you believe Christ is teaching you through this scripture and message? What in your life would change if you accepted his teaching?

### Table to Table Question

*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why do we believe Jesus is our Lord and our Savior?  
What has convinced us?