

## Luke 11:29-32 home group study questions

*By Phil Bailey*

**Theme:** Asking Jesus for more signs betrays a hard heart and those who refuse to repent at his preaching will be condemned

**Aim:** have confidence in Jesus' words; hear, obey and speak them.

**Summary:**

In v.29, Jesus responds to the demand for a sign back in v.16. He exposes the real reason behind that request: his generation is wicked. Their doubt, scepticism or unbelief is not due to a lack of evidence supporting Jesus' claim to be the Son of Man (Daniel 7), in and through whom God's kingdom is advancing on earth. It's due to hardness of heart. So Jesus will give not further sign except the sign of Jonah. Matthew (12:40) includes some additional words of Jesus here, which make clear that the sign is the resurrection. However, Luke omits these words (deliberately, I assume), making it harder to tell what he wants us to understand by 'the sign'. The main options seem to be:

a) Luke is still implying the resurrection, which would make sense of v.30, where Jesus says he *will* (future) be a sign. The problem with this view is the parallels with Solomon and Jonah in vv.31-32, which focus very much on their *words* as the thing which the Queen and Nineveh responded to.

b) the sign is parallel to Jonah's whole ministry. So just as Jonah 'returned to life' from the fish's belly, preached the word and the gentiles in Nineveh repented in droves, so Jesus would be raised, preach through his apostles from Pentecost onwards and gentiles across the world would repent and believe. The combination of Jesus' ministry and the gentiles' response would be the sign to Israel – and a sign that they stood condemned unless they, likewise, repented. The problem with this view is that Jesus clearly says in v.30 that Jonah himself was the sign *to* the Ninevites – they were not part of the sign, but the recipients of it. Likewise, Jesus says that *he* is the sign to his generation – he doesn't say that any others are involved.

c) the sign is Jesus and his preaching, just as in vv.31-32, where the common denominators are that the Queen and the Ninevites respond simply to men who spoke God's words. This view is not entirely straightforward either, because it begs the question of how Jesus *will* be this in the future, per v.30? He's already preaching and the tax collectors, sinners and Roman centurions of his generation are repenting! I'm not sure I have a really strong answer, but it could be that Jesus' preaching ministry is not yet complete. So it's only when it reaches its climax in Jerusalem that the sign is complete (note that in chapter 20, he is challenged by all the leading Jewish teaching authorities – the chief priests, teachers of the law, elders and Sadducees – and shows himself to be the true and faithful teacher of Israel).

In reality, Luke could want us to understand more than one thing by 'the sign.' I think it very unlikely that we should dismiss the resurrection completely, because that is clearly the sign in Matthew and the resurrection also validates Jesus' teaching ministry. However, Luke's deliberate exclusion of Jesus' words about the 3 days and nights make me think he also wants us to have option c), above, clearly in view.

The main application is that Jesus' teaching and, by extension, God's words to us in Scripture are enough for a strong and confident faith. Unbelievers should carefully examine their own hearts. If they have looked into the evidence supporting the reliability of Scripture (and particularly the gospels) as faithful records of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and teaching, but they are still unconvinced, the problem is with their hearts, not the Bible. Like the doubters of Jesus' day, they probably don't want to believe because Jesus is not the kind of Messiah they would like.

For believers, the main application is to have confidence in Scripture as all the testimony we need that Jesus is the Son of Man, before whom everyone should repent and believe. We should keep preaching the message of Scripture faithfully in our churches and sharing it with our neighbours. We shouldn't be discouraged or look for something more (e.g. regular signs and wonders today) when people don't repent. We shouldn't immediately assume that we live in a hard-hearted generation either. The problem may be, in part, that they aren't hearing the word because we're not bold enough in speaking it (and speaking it particularly to those on the margins of society, who Scripture presents as the most likely to respond). It could be that we're not faithful enough in turning from idols and embracing suffering (cf. Harrison Mungai's sermon on 1 Thess 1 on Sunday 18 June), so that our lives are not a very compelling witness either. But if this is the case, we can take heart from Jesus' words in v.28: we will be *blessed* when we hear and obey his words more fully. In laying down our lives in this

world, it's easy to think we will find only misery. But Jesus promises that we will find blessing and save our lives (9:24). If we keep praying for faith to believe this and keep taking baby steps further out of our comfort zones, we will find his words to be true.

#### Questions:

- 1) Does anything stop you being fully persuaded that Scripture is God's Word, sufficient for faith in Jesus?

*If this is the case for anyone in the group, it may be best explored further in 1-2-1 conversation, but there may be testimonies or book/podcast/YouTube recommendations the group can share that will help them see Scripture is trustworthy.*

- 2) How do Jesus words make sense of the world around us and our own lives? How is this proof of the truthfulness of Scripture?

*N.B. It has rightly been said that God is the only fit witness to himself. No one else is uncreated and eternal like God, so ultimately no one but God is able to understand him fully or tell us what he is like. That means there is no higher authority on God than the Bible. Nothing else, whether history, science or philosophy can ultimately prove or disprove what God says about himself. So things like historical evidence outside of Scripture for Jesus and the resurrection are useful, but lack final authority. We depend on the words of Scripture and the conviction of the Holy Spirit for final confidence in what God has said and done. This being so, we would also expect the words of Scripture to make sense of the world around us and the human condition in a way that nothing else can.*

- 3) Where might we need to recover full confidence in Scripture (and the Holy Spirit) as sufficient to bring people to faith in Jesus? That could be as individuals or as a church.

*N.B. it would probably be unhelpful at this point to get side-tracked by debates about whether Scripture teaches 6-day, young earth creationism! Genesis was written to a largely pre-scientific people, primarily to convey theological truths about God, the world and humanity. It was not written primarily as a scientific textbook to answer the questions of 21<sup>st</sup> Century biologists or physicists! That's not to say the world wasn't created in six 24-hour periods, which is possibly the most straightforward way to understand the time-frame of Genesis 1-2. But providing a timeframe is not the main point of Genesis 1-2 and nor is literal 6 day creation the only possible interpretation! More importantly, it is not necessary to interpret Genesis so literally for one to believe Scripture's testimony about Jesus – which is what Luke 11:29-30 is driving at.*

- 4) In the sermon, Phil examined some possible explanations for the widespread unbelief of our own generation. It could be partly because many Christians in the UK are slow to believe Luke 11:28 – that we will be *blessed* when we hear and obey the word of God fully. So we are not always a very bold or compelling witness to society, because we fear stepping out of our comfort zone. To what extent is this us?

What promises do we need to take hold of if we are to live and speak more sacrificially as compelling witnesses to Jesus?