

Turning Down the Greatest Opportunity Ever

Luke 11:29-32

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Like Gideon with the fleece, like Moses with his staff, the Bible is filled with people asking God for a sign of His power. And that's exactly what the Israelites ask of Jesus during His ministry on earth. They had seen him feed the hungry, heal the sick, even raise the dead, but still they asked for a sign. Rather than give them what they want, Jesus pointed the Israelites to two Gentile witnesses who testify to God's glory. When we want a sign from God today, we can be challenged and encouraged by the examples of these Old Testament witnesses.

In the mid-1970s, a young engineer named Steve Sasson invented the world's first digital camera. Once he invented it, he believed the possibilities were endless. So, he secured a patent for it on behalf of his company. He then met with his supervisors and pitched the idea of a new business model based on his invention. They rejected his idea. They turned the opportunity down. They were not impressed.

Adapted from "The Big Question", The Atlantic (4/16/14)

Today, digital cameras are standard equipment. If you're old enough, you remember your favorite camera was a little cardboard box that came preloaded. You took pictures with it—they were grainy and foggy. You took it to the pharmacy where they took 2 months to lose them!

Steve Sasson's company, that had turned down his idea, is called Kodak. Just a few years ago they emerged from bankruptcy and now, for the most part, they produce batteries for electric vehicles.

They missed a great opportunity.

McDonald's decided to sell off a little side restaurant—it was growing, but not deemed important enough for their business plan. They weren't convinced it was worth their investment. So, they sold the sidebar company off; it was called Chipotle.

ibid

Maybe you've gotten your own share of heartburn from Chipotle!

Last year's revenue for them was \$7 billion dollars. I can't imagine McDonald's heartburn over that one.

Now, it's one thing for a corporation to miss a great opportunity and lose a lot of money. It happens to individuals as well.

I came across this article recently about Sean Connery, the British actor who died a few years ago. He turned down the role of Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings trilogy. He read the book by Tolkien, he read the movie script, but he turned it down, saying he really didn't understand it. He wasn't impressed. But they persisted. They wanted him in that role. They offered him \$30 million to do it, and he refused. Then they offered him 15 percent of whatever the box office take would be—now worth half-a-billion.

Adapted from Jack Shepherd, "Sean Connery Turned Down the Role" Games Radar (11/5/20)

He turned down a great opportunity.

You know, it's one thing to turn down a great opportunity and lose a lot of money. It's another thing to turn down a great opportunity and lose eternity. Eternity!

That's exactly what's happening in the Gospel by Luke as the multitudes are now packing arenas, so to speak, to hear Jesus preach.

We are in Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, and Luke writes in verse 29:

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation."

Luke 11:29a

By the way, how's that for a sermon introduction: "You're all a bunch of sinners; your generation is evil."

That's not how it usually works. The average person today who gathers a crowd tries to keep them from going away. Religious leaders stay up at night worrying they might offend someone. Political leaders stay up at night worrying about being re-elected.

Not Jesus. He's not running for re-election. He's not handing out ballots. When it comes to public approval, he's not trying to win; He's delivering a warning.

A few verses later, over in **chapter 12, we're told in verse 1** that so many thousands of people had gathered that they were trampling one another and what does Jesus do? He begins to preach about their hypocrisy.

Jesus wasn't interested in entertaining a crowd, He was interested in offering the greatest opportunity they would ever be offered in life: to become His disciples.

The trouble is most of them are still not impressed! He says to them in **verse 29, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign . . ."**

They want Me to put on a show.

They want a little more fireworks.

They want a guarantee that their investment will pay off.

This is hard to imagine because by now the Lord's name has become a household name. He's fed multitudes more than they could eat.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 300

He's cured lepers, which the rabbis considered incurable because leprosy was a judgment from God, curable only by the hand of God.

He interrupted every funeral He attended by raising the dead. How many times do you have to do that before somebody's impressed?

Thousands of miracles were performed by the Lord. John's Gospel tells us that if everything Jesus did was written down, the world would not be able to contain all the volumes (**John 21:25**).

Which means, *His* generation saw much more than we have even read about.

But still, they say "We want another sign."

Jesus says here at the latter part of **verse 29, I'm not going to give you another sign except the sign of Jonah.**

In other words, I'm not going to do *something*, but I will remind you of *someone*—and that's the prophet Jonah. The sign of Jonah.

Matthew's Gospel account focuses on the sign of Jonah representing the resurrection of Jonah, as it were, in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, suddenly appearing alive.

So also, Jesus will be buried and then suddenly appear alive.

But Luke focuses on a different aspect of Jonah's biography, and that is the preaching from this prophet to the Ninevite nation.

Adapted from [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 422

Notice verse 30:

"For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. ... The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

Luke 11:30 & 32

The emphasis here in Luke's account is that of receiving the Word of God preached through a greater prophet than Jonah.

Dale Ralph Davis, [Luke: The year of the Lord's Favor](#) (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 208

Jesus takes his audience back to the greatest Gentile national revival ever recorded in human history.

God calls an Israelite prophet to deliver a rather short message of warning and judgment and deliverance to the Ninevite nation.

They had been enemies of the Israelites for centuries. The very thought of Nineveh brought fear to every Jewish heart.

The Ninevite nation was a demon-worshipping, perverted, brutal nation.

They bragged of their cruelty toward defeated nations. They boasted of stretching live prisoners out with ropes so that they could be skinned alive more easily.

Archaeological findings in this region found a Ninevite king boasting with these words: “I flayed the skin from nobles who rebelled against me; I burned their children. I captured many troops alive and dismembered them.”

James Bruckner, *NIV Application Bible: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Zondervan, 2004), p. 28

It was their custom to impale their captives on long poles and then set them on fire—a practice Nero would adopt centuries later for Christians—impaling them, covering them with tar and lighting them on fire.

My wife and I have stood in the British Museum in London and looked at the hinges from the gates of Nineveh—metal hinges carved with the images of their brutality toward captives.

No wonder Jonah decided to resign from being a prophet and move to Tarshish, located on the coast of Spain, considered the most western spot of the known world.

Jonah literally went as far away from Nineveh as he could possibly go—where he could live out the rest of his life in peace.

And no wonder then that Jesus is a greater prophet.

Jonah wanted these cruel people to die, Jesus was willing to die a cruel death.

Jonah preached for 40 days and wanted to quit; Jesus preached for three years and refused to quit.

Jonah hated these vile sinners, Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners.

At the end of his ministry, Jonah told God, “I did not want You to be merciful to them”; at the end of Jesus’ ministry, He said, “Father forgive them.”

“Jonah never wept over Nineveh; Jesus wept over Jerusalem.” John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke* (Kregel, 2005), p. 172

Jesus is the greater prophet.

But let me tell you: His day of mercy will end. Jesus says as much here to this multitude, “I’m going to call to the witness stand on judgment day these Ninevites to testify that you had a greater opportunity to believe than they did. They repented and you would not.”

That rings true for everyone to this day; imagine God calling to the witness stand to testify to your condemnation a group of converted demon-worshippers who will point a finger at you and say you are guilty of turning down the Savior even though you had all these signs; you had all this evidence.

The Ninevites believed after hearing a brief message from a prophet, but Israel—and maybe you today—refuse to

listen to the word of the greater prophet, the Son of God, the Messiah.

Well, this wasn't what this huge crowd was expecting to hear.

The religious leaders would have been infuriated to hear Jesus say the Ninevites are getting into the kingdom, but they aren't! How offensive could He be?

But the Lord isn't finished offending them. That's just His first point: He is a greater *prophet* than Jonah.

Now, He says that He's the greater *king*.

Jesus now calls another person to the witness stand to testify against Israel's unbelief and, I believe, against everyone who hears this message today.

Notice verse 31:

"The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."

Luke 11:31

Jesus is the greater Prophet, and now here, He's the greater (wiser) King.

Jesus takes His audience back to an event that is described in **1 Kings 4**.

We're shown that Solomon's wisdom was the gift of God, **verse 29 says:**

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

1 Kings 4:29-30

At this point in time, Egypt had the great university system, the center of publishing and scholarship in the ancient world.

Solomon's wisdom exceeded the libraries of the ancient world. He was undoubtedly gifted by God with a photographic memory and an insatiable appetite to learn.

Of course, he had the wealth to fund his expeditions. His weekly paycheck, in today's economy would have been around \$200 million dollars a year. He was the world's first billionaire.

And a brilliant one at that.

We're told here in **verse 32** that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and composed 1,005 songs.

God only preserved for us in Scripture around 800 of Solomon's proverbs—there were 2,000 more on the tip of Solomon's tongue.

We don't have but a half-dozen of his songs; imagine the fact that he wrote 1,000 more!

But what we do have in Scripture is enough to prove he was indeed gifted with wisdom and discernment.

Verse 33 in I Kings 4 tells us that:

He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.

I Kings 4:33a

This phrase refers to the categorical ranking from ancient days that placed cedar trees at the top level and hyssop on the lowest level; in other words, Solomon's botanical knowledge went across the entire botanical range.

Verse 33 goes on to record that:

He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

I Kings 4:33-34a

Solomon can be considered not only the founder of Hebrew wisdom, but of Hebrew science.

It's tragic that Solomon would be so gifted by God, so well versed in so many subjects, but eventually fail in life.

It's one thing to fail a test in botany or geometry, it's another thing to fail in what matters most in life.

Like the elementary school boy I read about recently who was trying rather heroically to pass his science test. He

obviously hadn't studied for it or even listened in class. One question on the test asked the student to briefly describe the three basic parts of the body: the answer should have been: head, limbs, and torso. I know that because I looked it up!

But he wrote, "The three parts of the body are the brainery, the thorax and the abominable cavity. Then he tried to sound scientific by adding: the brainery contains the brain; the thorax contains the lungs and other living things; and the abominable cavity contains the bowels—of which there are five: *a, e, i, o* and *u*.

At least he can spell!

Solomon would've gotten straight A's in school. His observational skills were nearly miraculous; if you study the record of his biography in Scripture you will learn that he was proficient in natural history, botany, ornithology, astronomy, geometry, music, architecture, and engineering.

He built reservoirs, gardens, parks, palaces, and of course, the golden temple to the glory of God, in Jerusalem.

For a season in his life—perhaps several decades—dignitaries from around the world came to sit at his feet and listen to his lectures.

Jesus points out one event in Solomon's life; one day a rather surprising visitor arrives: the Queen of the South, or the Queen of Sheba.

She's heard the reports of his wisdom but remained skeptical. She doubted

anybody could be that wealthy and wise and discerning all at the same time.

So, she travels more than 1,500 miles from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to see for herself.

I Kings chapter 10 and verse 1 tells us that she came to ***test him with hard questions***. Don't miss the connection.

This is exactly what the Jewish leaders have been doing to Jesus—testing Him with hard questions.

Adapted from Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew* (Crossway, 2013), p. 343

Oh, but He is even a wiser King; unlike Solomon, Jesus never strayed from the truth; He never failed to follow the will of His Father; He never became distracted by wealth or the world; and His kingdom isn't temporary, it is eternal.

Now, back in I Kings 10 the visit of this queen is described, here at verse 2:

She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones. And when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. And Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, ... there was no more breath in her. And she

said to the king, "The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it."

I Kings 10:2-7a

From her later, parting words to Solomon, Bible scholars have wondered if she professed faith in the true and living God. Well according to Jesus' announcement here, there is no reason to wonder.

Jesus tells this massive crowd—primarily composed of Jewish people—that He is going to call two witnesses to the stand at the final judgment: the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba.

Don't miss the fact that both witnesses who testify to the Messiah's wisdom and glory are Gentiles.

These Gentiles had seen the opportunity of a lifetime and seized it; the Jewish people had seen it and were refusing it.

No more signs are needed, no more miracles are needed, the demon worshipping Ninevites and a pagan queen from the Southlands had turned to God with far less evidence than Jesus had given this multitude, and by the way, far less evidence than He has given you and me.

These Gentile unbelievers didn't have access to a Bible; you do. They didn't have record of the Messiah's birth; you do. They didn't have the Gospel of Luke

which revealed His deity; you do. They didn't have eyewitness accounts of Christ's work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead; you do.

They didn't have believers around them testifying to the truth of the God's Word; you do. They didn't have churches and Sunday schools and biblical resources on every corner; you do. They didn't have 2000 years of church history to evidence the work of God's Spirit; but you do.

Adapted from Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 300

What more do you need?

Jesus says here, *You reject Me—the greater prophet, the wiser King—there's really nothing more to say.* “God,” one author wrote, “is effectively reduced to silence.”

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 1* (Crossway, 1998), p. 426

If I could apply this text to the multitude listening to the words of Christ today, **the message to the unbeliever is this:** you don't need a sign; you don't need more evidence; you have His Word.

The word of the greatest prophet, the wisdom of the wisest King; oh listen, don't reject the greatest opportunity you will ever have in life, the opportunity to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

That decision leads to an eternal destination!

The message to the believer here is straightforward as well: this strikes me as a reminder that we don't need anything more from the Lord either.

We have His Word. We have all we need to follow what we already know. Let's obey what we've already learned.

Let's trust Him today, as we follow Him into tomorrow.

I close with an illustration of how one decision led to a direction in life that is still bearing fruit to this day.

In the last century, an evangelist was offered the opportunity to take over a popular Gospel Radio program called *Songs in the Night*. Since the cost of keeping the program on air was rather high, he decided to forgo part of his own salary to help pay the costs for radio time.

It didn't seem to make much sense financially, but he had a desire to preach the gospel and so he took the opportunity to do so.

The young evangelist then approached a well-known Gospel singer and asked him to sing on his program and lead a live on-air choir as well. He initially declined—there were other offers for his time and a busy career in front of him. It would get in the way; it didn't seem to make significant sense. It was kind of like trading everything in for a digital camera before the digital age had begun.

Frankly, it didn't seem like that impressive of an opportunity.

But after praying about it and contemplating the opportunity, he agreed to help put a choir together made up of people in nearby churches.

Before long, they were on the air. It started small, but their sacrifice—these early decisions—changed the course of their lives and ministries forever.

This musician said later in his autobiography entitled, *Then Sings My Soul*, “It was the humble beginning of an unbelievable journey.”

The young evangelist was Billy Graham, and the gospel singer was George Beverly Shea.

George Beverly Shea with Fred Bauer, [Then Sings My Soul](#) (Fleming Revell, 1968)

A decision in life, an opportunity with eternal dividends.

What decisions are you making today? As an unbeliever, you don't need a sign: I invite you to call upon the Lord—wherever you are right now—to believe His word is the truth.

As a believer, you don't need a sign. Just follow the Word of your Shepherd; choose to walk with Him today.

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