

Who Knows?

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- [0 : 00] Amen. Well friends, most of you know the story of David and Bathsheba. David, you remember, had become king of all Israel and life had become easy for him. And one day he found himself walking on the roof of his palace late in the afternoon or perhaps early evening. And he looked down and he saw this beautiful woman. And he liked what he saw. And so he brought her to himself and he slept with her and she became pregnant. And David was faced with a problem. You see, she was married to one of his elite warriors. And so David dealt with the problem by killing off the husband and then by marrying Bathsheba. And God was unhappy, as you can understand. And he sent a prophet to tell David that he was unhappy. And the prophet told David that as part of God's judgment on him, that child would die.
- [1 : 23] And so it was that after the child was born, it became very sick. Sick to the point of death. And David went into mourning. He prayed that perhaps God might not let this child die. And in 2 Samuel chapter 12, he tells us that he prayed diligently that God would spare the child's life. And these are the words he used. He said, Who knows? Who knows? Who knows? Who knows? Whether the Lord will be gracious to me and the child may live. Now, similar language to this is used in the book of Esther. You see, in the book of Esther, we meet a group of Jews in Persia. And Esther is a beautiful Jewish woman who has become queen. And she's been reared by her uncle, a man called Mordecai. And anyway, Mordecai infuriates a member, a high class member of the king's court. And he plots revenge. And his means of revenge is to not just wipe out Mordecai, but to wipe out all of the Jews. And to do so with the king's express permission.
- [2 : 25] Anyway, Mordecai gets wind of the plot. And what he does is he says, well, he sends a messenger to Esther. And he urges Esther to be the agent of rescue for God's people. And the sting in the tail is this. He says this. Mordecai says, Do not think that because you're in the king's house, you alone of all Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, then relief and deliverance for the Jews will come from another place. But you and your family's family will perish. And who knows? But that you have come to the royal position for a time such as this. Friends, did you hear the words again? David used them. Mordecai used them. Two short words. One short question. Who knows? Now that question occurs, interestingly enough, numerous times in the Bible. Sometimes it's the expression of intense frustration. That's how the writer of Ecclesiastes used it.
- [3 : 26] He says, Who knows? Who knows if a person that inherits the result of your work, your hard work on earth will be wise or a fool? Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of a beast goes down into the earth?

Who knows how rightly to interpret things? Who knows what is good for a man while he lives a few days of his life? Who knows? And at other times in the Bible though, this term, who knows, is an expression of great hope.

You see, the person doesn't know what on earth God is going to do, but he's willing to take, or she is willing to take a punt. That's what David, I think, is doing with the newborn child. That's what Mordecai does in the book of Esther.

And this is how I think the king of Nineveh uses the phrase in chapter 3, verse 9. Look at it with me. The king turns around and he looks to his fellow Ninevites. You know, he's heard this message and he says to them, Who knows?

God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. Now, the king of Nineveh has got no idea at this point how God's going to act.

[4 : 33] And so he takes a punt. Sort of in one sense he's saying, look, who knows? Who knows? There may be this vague chance that this God who's responsible for this might change his mind.

That is, he might not do as he's promised or as we deserve. He may not punish us as he's promised he will. He may change his mind and turn from his fierce anger and spare us.

God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we might not perish. The words, who knows, at this point, come at a critical point in the story of Jonah.

And in order to come to grips with him, we have to do a bit of background work. So let's go back to the start of the chapter and let's see if we can get some perspective. So Jonah and page number, if you're looking for, well, you shouldn't really need to look up page numbers, but anyway, 753 is where we're up to.

But he's much better off looking for it without the page numbers in my view. But anyway, there we go. Now, the first thing that we're told is the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Now, this is, let me tell you, the second time.

[5 : 35] Now, it's quite unusual, isn't it? You'd think that once you've stuffed it up as a prophet, that might be the end. But God shows his surprising generosity toward Jonah in that he calls him a second time. When it came the first time, what did he do?

He ran away in the opposite direction. God pursued him in a storm, arranged for him to be swallowed by a large fish, rescued him. The second time, Jonah obeys. That's my suspicion is you'd want to do.

And he gets up and he goes to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. And he prepares to go to this great city and proclaim the message of God to it. Now, I need to let you into a little secret about verse 2.

I'll read you verse 2. It reads like this. Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. Now, most of, there's just something in that text that I should make you aware about.

So, see there it says, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. What's really intriguing, and even the English versions pick it up, is that earlier he'd been told to proclaim a message against this city.

[6 : 37] That is a message of judgment. Now it's simply a message to this city. It's one little, fine little word in Hebrew, but I suspect it's intentional here. That he's missed out on the chance to proclaim strongly against this city.

Now it's much more a message directed to the city. Anyway, so now have a look at what happens. The book of Jonah and other parts of the Bible tell us some important things about this city, this city Nineveh.

First, it's obviously a large city. Jonah chapter 4 verse 11 says that there are 120,000 people that live there. And Jonah chapter 3 verse 3 says it is a large city. Can you see it there?

So Jonah set out to go to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city. Now, I'm not exactly sure what it means when it says, you know, it took three days.

It may be that it took three days to observe all the ancient protocols that you needed to do. You know, have the relevant, you know, greetings and meetings with people and finally get through the city. It may mean it took three days to sort of get from one side to the other of its environs.

[7 : 39] We don't really know. But we do know it was a very large city. Now, it also says it's an exceedingly large city. And back in chapter, in verse 2, it's a very important city.

So, or a great city. Now, a literal translation of this at one point could be a great city to God. In other words, and that's probably what's behind an exceedingly great city.

But a literal translation would be a great city to God. In other words, I think what is being said here is this city matters to God. It is important to him. What matters about Nineveh is not its size.

What matters is that it's great to God. In other words, it's important to God. It's a city God is concerned about. There's another way to translate it, but it's my suspicion that that's what this means.

The message that Nineveh is, that Jonah is to preach, is very clear. Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned. It's a very short sermon. We don't know if it was longer, actually, in the carrying out, but it's fairly straightforward, isn't it, and plain.

[8 : 41] The impact of the message is clear, I think. What's being communicated is there is a God who's the God of all the earth. He's seen you, he's judged you, and he's going to destroy you. That is very plain.

Now, the response, I think, is equally clear in this passage. Look at verse 5. It reads like this. And the people of Nineveh believed God.

They proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. Now, to believe God means exactly that. They hear the message. They believe that it comes from God.

They believe that it's true, and they act like it. Now, look at verse 8. Verse 8 says, Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God.

All shall turn from their evil ways, and from the violence that is in their hands. Now, we're told here, you see, that the king issues this decree. And it's a decree to call urgently upon God.

[9 : 38] In other words, what he's saying, having heard from God is this, having heard from God, having believed God, you are to call out urgently to God. But calling out is not the only action they do.

You see, this act of corporate repentance is, I mean, this is thorough going, isn't it? This is really full of repentance. Verse 5 tells us that all of them, from the least to the greatest begin this fast, and they mourn.

And verse 6 tells us that the king himself humbles himself before God. He removes his royal robe. He covers himself with sackcloth. He sits in ashes, mourning his sinfulness.

And then verse 8 again, not only are they to turn to God, they're to turn from sin. They're to turn from their evil ways. They're to turn from violence. It's clear, you see, when you look at this, these Ninevites, they've truly heard, haven't they?

They have truly believed. You can see it. It's physical. You know, you can see it in their actions. This is true belief. They have truly understood. They are accountable to God. They've truly understood there is a God who is holy and that they stand before him.

[10 : 44] They know they've transgressed. They know he will judge. They know his judgment is something to be feared and to be bowed before. More than that, they know their only help is in this God.

God, this is real belief, friends. This is real sorrow, real fear, real change, real repentance. Now, before turning, you know, pushing further on in Jonah, I want us just to take a small diversion.

You see, I think that we often forget what the Ninevites grasped so clearly. You see, we often forget that the God we deal with is the very same God that they deal with.

We have become so familiar with God that we don't really cotton on to this. You see, the Bible's picture of God is that he's the God who made the earth. As Jonah 1 verse 9 says, he's the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

He's the God, therefore, who made you and me. He's the God who made all of us. We are his creation. And more than that, he's a God who's holy and righteous. He's pure.

[11 : 44] He hates sin. God is God. God is holy. God hates sin. And God cannot stand it when people practice sin. Those who sin sit under God's judgment.

And because God cannot tolerate sinfulness, his judgment will be fierce and hot. It's the act of pushing sin away from him and punishing it. Our God, you see, as even the New Testament says, so don't think it's just an Old Testament thing, is a consuming fire.

He hates sin. And at that point, I want us to think and examine ourselves for a moment. You see, I want us to realise again our situation when faced with this holy God.

You know, I know that some of us here are not Christians. Well, let me tell you that the Bible is clear about your situation. And for those of us who are Christians, we know when this came to us.

God is your maker. If you do not, even if you don't believe it, God is your maker. And he demands that you recognise this about him. And if you do not, then you will be overthrown.

[12 : 50] It may not be in 40 days, let me tell you, but it will be. It will be. God is too pure to look upon sin and rebellion. He is therefore too pure to look upon you and receive you into his presence without something happening.

So if you continue to reject God and ignore him and live independently from him, then the day will come when he will shut you out of his presence forever to do anything else with the need to cease to be God.

God will bar those who do not acknowledge him from everything that is good and wholesome. And if you don't acknowledge him, you will face his fierce anger.

And all of this will be yours if you do not repent. Now those are hard words, aren't they? But I need to say them because that's really what the Bible as a whole says. But before I develop it some more, let's stop and reflect on our own situation.

You see, we in this room, except for those of you I've already talked to who are not Christians, most of us call ourselves Christians. That is, we are people who say, we know God.

[13 : 57] We supposedly know the God who is holy and who is pure and who has loved us in Jesus. However, if I can at this point, let me be frank. I think many of us, and I know that in times in my life this is true of me, many of us have long ago ceased to view God with any sort of fear.

We take him for granted. He's our friend, our colleague, our associate, our tame God who is no longer pure and no longer holy. Our lives and our attitudes, I often think, betray that amongst Christians.

Christians, for as we look around, we often see Christians who are proud, self-confident, self-assured, Christians who are often greedy, who hang on to their wealth and their property, or Christians who are covetous, that is, who look with lust at what others have and are jealous about it, or Christians who are full of sexual sin, or they hang on to their lust, or disobey God's clear word about sexual relationships, or we see Christians who are short-tempered, or liars, or cheats, or Christians who hang on to other gods, whether they be idols of money, or career, or success, or relationships, or a variety of other modern deities, or Christians who spend their time fleeing from God's clear commands and really just don't worry about them too much.

And the worst sin of all, I think, is when we claim to be Christians and yet disregard God and his word and his nature. If that is you, and if that's you tonight, and if you're a Christian, then let me warn you of what you already know, that perhaps have slipped your mind.

And that is that there is a God, friends. And that God is holy. And there is a heaven. And there is a hell. And there is a clear word from God about this. And God's clear word for you now is turn away from sin.

[15 : 42] And turn to God. Now, whether you're Christian or not Christian, let me urge you to remember the nature of repentance. Remember what the Ninevites teach us something potent here, don't they?

The Ninevites show us what true repentance is like. They show us the nature of repentance. It's to hear the word of God, to see that it's God you're dealing with, not just a sort of, not just a one-off statement, but to see that there's a God behind what is being said, and to see yourself as guilty before him, and to see yourself as standing under his judgment, and having seen that, to reflect it in your actions, to fear God, to know the awfulness of your sin, and to be grieved by it, and to cry about how you've hurt God, and to turn away from your sin with a vengeance, to be determined, this is never going to happen again, to be absolutely rigorous, to reach into every aspect of your life and your being, and to change habits, and to change attitudes, and to change actions, and to make yourself responsible and accountable.

That, friends, is true repentance. It is energetic. It is heartfelt. It changes things. It is not the same after as it was before.

That's repentance. So, we're going to come back to that right at the end, but at the moment, I want you to come again to the book of Jonah, and I want you to imagine the situation in Jonah.

Here they are. You know, they've been going about life just sort of as per usual. They've been going through life as though it was self-contained. They've been marrying and giving in marriage, having children, rearing children, going about their daily work, generally living life, having a good time, and all of a sudden, there's this sort of strange man that appears in there, from this virtually unknown city, slips in the back door to their city, and he starts standing up in their marketplaces.

[17 : 39] And, you know, here he is, and he roams around telling us, telling people, look, there's a God to whom you're responsible to. And the incredible thing happens. You can, you know, I wonder often what Jonah thought about it.

The incredible thing is they believe. They repent. They think, we've had it. If there's a God like that, if he does punish sin, what hope have we got?

And then the king takes on this leadership, and he clutches out at this straw, and he says, in hope against hope, the words of verse 9, he says, who knows? It's a desperate, plaintive cry, isn't it?

Who knows? Who knows, he's saying, if there's a God who's just and holy that can accept sinners and rebels? Who knows if there's a God who's just and holy who can forgive sin? Who knows if there's a God, if this God who's spoken this word to us and judged us, well, he might listen to us.

Who knows if the destruction he's sending, well, perhaps it might be turned back. Who knows? Now, friends, I reckon that's the cry of our world, isn't it? Who knows if there's a God who hears?

[18 : 43] Who knows if there's a God who cares? Who knows if there's a way to be right with that God? Who knows if there's a place to flee from the coming wrath? Who knows if there's a way that I can meet with God in friendship?

Who knows if there's a way that I can have a clean conscience before him? Who knows? Friends, I think that's the cry of our world. With every religious person in this world, that's what it is.

And it's a cry of desperate hope. It's almost for some people a stab in the dark, a cry into the void. Who knows? Perhaps, perhaps, maybe, there is such a being.

Let me let you into this little secret. The king of Nineveh may cry out, Who knows? But the book of Jonah tells us there is someone who did.

There is someone who did. Jonah knew, didn't he? After all, he too had been a rebel against God, hadn't he? God's word had come to him and he'd run. God had reached out to him and in this act of great mercy and kindness, God had come to him again in Jonah chapter 3 verse 1 and he'd called him a second time.

[19 : 56] You see, he'd acted in great mercy and kindness. He'd allowed Jonah to bear his word again. Now, with that in mind, turn to Jonah chapter 4 verse 2. It's a one-liner but it is just absolutely staggering.

Look at what it says. Look at what Jonah says. He says, He prayed to the Lord and he said, O Lord, is this not what I said while I was still in my country?

This is why, that is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning for I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing.

Now, you thought he ran, didn't you? Because he didn't like doing what God commanded. That is true. But why'd he run? Because he knew this very thing was going to happen. He knew it before he even started.

He knew that God might do the surprising thing and forgive people and he will not have it and he would not want it. He knows. I knew that you were a gracious God.

[20 : 54] I knew you were merciful and slow to anger. I knew you abounded in steadfast love and relented from disaster. These words, remember, are from Exodus. Remember we looked at them last week? Jonah has experienced God's rescue despite his disobedience.

He's experienced God's steadfast love in being called again to bear God's word. He knows his theology. At this point, he's a good Jewish man. And the king of Nineveh may ask, who knows?

But he's been in the presence of someone. As he says, who knows? He's in the presence of someone who does know. Jonah's theology at this point is solid. He knows.

The king of Nineveh may ask, who knows? But Jonah knows. And Jonah's not the only one who knows, is he? You see, in fact, if Jonah can say he knows that God is like this, then we who are Christians can say it with a much, much, much greater confidence.

For Jonah, like Jonah, we know it from theology, don't we? You see, for God has told us and we know it because we became Christians this way, that God sent his only, one and only son into the world so that we might not perish but have eternal life.

[22 : 03] He said in his word that because of his great love he has put forward his son to die for us. He said in his word that he's done this even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins. We know, don't we, friends?

He has said that in this one great act he will forgive sin and turn away anger at our sinfulness. However, like Jonah, we don't just know from theology, we know from experience.

If you are Christian, you know for even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, this God made us alive together with Christ. This God saved us by grace.

He raised us up with Christ. He seated us with him in the heavenly places. He showed us the immeasurable riches of grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Friends, as Christians, we don't cry into the dark when we hear about our sinfulness, do we?

We don't cry into the dark. We don't say, oh, perhaps God, you might forgive me. No, we know. We know what God will do. When faced with God's holiness and judgement, we don't go scuttling back to home and say, who knows, maybe God might forgive me.

[23 : 08] No, we know, don't we? We know there is a, and friends, let me tell you, there is a world out there who doesn't know and have a plaintive cry that they are throwing out into the wind and some of them yet have not put the question on their lips and let it fall.

Some of them, we're told in the Bible, have suppressed it in unrighteousness but deep in the heart of every human being lies a wondering, lingering, plaintive question.

Who knows? And my friends, we know. We know. And we can tell them that God delights to have mercy. We know that if they trust in Jesus, then God will accept them as his child.

The king of Nineveh might have thought he's clutching out at straws but Jonah knew he wasn't. and we know he wasn't. And if they call out to Jesus, they won't know they're clutching us.

They won't be clutching at straws either for salvation is available in Jesus. Salvation belongs to God, we learnt last week. Friendship with God and forgiveness with God and forgiveness is possible.

[24 : 21] Friends, if I might say this is why I believe, we talked about evangelism last week, well let me go the next step, this is why I believe in church planting. That's why my tears well up in my eyes when I see two, I was at our joint Mandarin and bilingual service this afternoon and it's only after two months being here that my eyes are no longer filled with tears in the same way as they did in the first few weeks.

You see, these are two congregations full of Chinese people who have come to know Jesus. Friends, let me tell you the story of a Chinese friend from Perth, we'll call him Charlie. Charlie was the husband of a wife who'd been evangelised by Heather and his wife had come to know Christ and he walked into our lounge room one night, the first time I ever met him and he was, he stood tall, he carried himself well, his English was fluent, he was confident, he had won prizes back in China and it's no mean feat for translation work.

He knew what he was on about, he knew why he'd come to Australia, he knew he'd come to succeed, he knew that he was going to succeed, he knew he was smart, he knew he was intelligent and I, in my sinfulness, thought he was beyond hope.

I thought, oh, this guy's too hard. But fortunately, his wife didn't think that way and his friends didn't think that way and he sort of gradually sat in on a Bible study group that Heather was running and then he watched and gradually he joined in and then he raised questions with his Chinese friends and finally the day came.

Now I'll tell you, because it's just so poignant, he turned up to me at church one Sunday night just like this and after church he cornered me at supper, he said, Andrew, I want to tell you something.

[26 : 20] He said, I want to tell you I've become a Christian and the tears literally streamed down his face. He said, Andrew, I am 39 years old.

Why hasn't anyone told me about this before? Why has not anyone told me this is the greatest news I have ever heard? Why haven't I been told?

Friends, that's why I'm committed to planting churches and to evangelism because these things are an effective way to reach the lost. It's been demonstrated that church planting is a way of shouting to the lost.

We know, we know, we know there's a God who hears. We know there's a God who cares. We know there's a way to be right with God. We know there's a place to flee from the coming wrath.

We know that there's a way you can meet God in friendship. We know there's a way you can have a clean conscience when you do. We know. You see, that's what we want to say to our world, isn't it?

[27 : 23] We know. We know. Now having said all this, I'd like to return to those of you who have heard God's word to you tonight and realised, perhaps you might remember back earlier on our sermon, that things are not all that they could be between you and God.

Have you heard God's word tonight and realised that things are not alright, that some things are wrong, either because you're not related to him or you are related to him and it doesn't look like it, then let me urge you to watch how the Ninevites responded.

It's repentance with a vengeance, isn't it? They repented. They heard God's word, they believed it, they turned to God, they turned from evil and they underwent a change in orientation and in action.

They changed their attitudes but they also changed their actions. And friends, that's what repentance is all about. We read about it in that passage in 2 Corinthians. If you want to know what the link is, go back and read it sometime. It's all about repentance.

Repentance is about change. So friends, if at any point in tonight's sermon you've been convinced of and convicted of sin, then I wonder if I can urge you to do three things. One, turn to Jesus.

[28 : 36] We know from God's word that he will abundantly pardon you because of what Jesus has done. Turn to Jesus. Two, resolve to change.

Tell God and tell someone else and ask them to help you and pray for you and to make yourself accountable to them. Tell someone else. Resolve to change. And three, actually begin to put those changes into effect.

Change your habits if necessary. Stop visiting places if necessary. Stop using the internet if necessary or whatever it might be for you. put some things into effect.

So three things. Turn to Jesus. Two, resolve to change. And three, put the changes into effect and find a way to do it and people to help you do it. That would be a good way to start down the track these Ninevites have got into.

That's repentance that's sort of heartfelt and deep. So let me pray for us in that. Father, we thank you for your great generosity to us in Jesus.

[29 : 48] Thank you that though you are holy and we are sinful in Jesus, you have brought us to yourself. Father, forgive us for the things that are not right in life, some of those things that we sometimes think are trivial or not to be worried about, some of those things that are habitual, whatever they are, Father.

Some of those things that we know are wrong and are large things in our lives, whatever those things are, Father, we bring them to you. We bring them to you through your Son, Jesus.

And we ask that you would forgive us. We ask that you'll abundantly pardon and we thank you that your word promises you will.

And Father, we pray that you'd give us hearts and dispositions to resolve to change and to put these things into effect and that you'd fill us with your Spirit that these things might be able to be done.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.