

Who Knows?

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[0 : 01] Almighty God and loving Father, may the words that I speak now be faithful to your words. May you graft them in our hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

And we pray this for the honour and praise of your name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Our friends, most of us here know the story of David and Bathsheba. But just to remind you, David had become king of all Israel.

Life had become relatively easy for him. One day he found himself walking on the roof of a palace late in the evening. He looked down and he saw a beautiful woman.

He liked what he saw and he brought her to himself and slept with her. She became pregnant and David was faced with a problem. After all, she was married to someone else, married to one of his warriors.

So David dealt with the problem by killing off the husband and by marrying Bathsheba. God was unhappy. God therefore sent a prophet to tell David.

[1 : 03] And the prophet told David that as part of God's judgment, the child would die. And so it was that after the child was born, it became sick. David went into mourning.

2 Samuel chapter 12 tells us that he prayed diligently to God that God would spare the child's life. Who knows, he said. Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.

Now, similar language as that used by David is used in the book of Esther. In the book of Esther, we find a group of Jews in Persia. Esther is a beautiful woman who's become queen.

She has been reared by her uncle, a man called Mordecai. Anyway, Mordecai infuriates a member of the king's court. And that member of the king's court plots revenge.

His means of revenge will be to wipe out all Jews with the king's express permission. Anyway, Mordecai gets wind of the plot. He sends a message to Esther. And he urges Esther to be the agent of God's rescue.

[2 : 05] And he says to her this. Do not think that because you are in the king's house, you alone of all Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.

But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows? But that you have come to this royal position for such a time as this. Did you hear those words again?

David used them. Now Mordecai uses them. Two short words, one short question. Who knows? And that question occurs actually numerous times in the Bible.

Sometimes it's an expression of frustration. That's how the writer of Ecclesiastes uses it. Who knows, he says. Who knows whether a person will be wise or foolish? Who knows if the person that inherits the results of your hard work on earth will be wise or a fool?

Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth? Who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days that they pass through like a shadow?

[3 : 10] Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they have gone? Who knows? Now at other times in the Bible, this phrase is an expression of hope. The person really doesn't know what God is going to do.

But they're willing to take a punt. And that I think is what David is doing with regard to his newborn child. Who knows? Maybe God will be merciful. That's what Mordecai is doing in the book of Esther.

And this is how the king of Nineveh uses the phrase in Jonah 3.9. Have a look at it with me. Jonah 3.9. He says to his fellow Ninevites these words, Who knows?

God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. You see, the king of Nineveh does not know how God is going to act.

So he takes a punt. Who knows? He says, who knows? There's a vague chance that God may change his mind. He may not punish us as we deserve. He may not punish us as he promised that he will.

[4 : 09] He may change his mind and turn from his fierce anger and spare us. You know, God may turn and relent and turn so that we might not perish. Who knows? They come, these words, who knows, come at a critical point in the story of Jonah.

And in order to come to grips with them, we need to do a bit more work on this chapter to try and work out how we deal with them. So let's go back to the beginning of the chapter and get some perspective. The first thing we're told is that the word of the Lord came to Jonah.

Now, let me tell you, this is, as you perhaps might remember, the second time that the word of the Lord has come to Jonah. When it came the first time, do you remember what he did?

He turned tail and ran in the opposite direction. God pursued him in a storm and arranged for him to be swallowed by a large fish and rescued him. The second time, you won't be surprised to learn, Jonah obeys.

I would too, I think, in his situation. He gets up, he goes to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. I wouldn't want to be in the fish again. Now, before we press on, I want you to notice something about what Jonah is doing this time.

[5 : 16] Look back at chapter 1, verse 1. Jonah is told, you'll notice, that he is to preach against the great city of Nineveh. But not now.

Look now at what he's told to do. Look at chapter 3, verse 2. God has softened his approach to the Ninevites. Our English versions reflect the original Hebrew version. Now Jonah is to proclaim to, not against to, the great city of Nineveh.

Now, we need to understand Jonah. The book of Jonah and other parts of the Bible tell us some very important things about this particular city of Nineveh. First, it is obviously a large city.

Chapter 4, verse 11 tells us the 120,000 people lived there. In those days, that's a lot of people. Jonah 3, 3 says it's a large city. A visit to it took three days.

I think that probably means it took three days to observe the proper ancient protocols and so on. Now, a literal translation, sorry, verse 3 also tells us it's a very important city.

[6 : 20] And a literal translation of this would be, it is a great city to God. In other words, what matters about Nineveh is not its size. What matters is that it is great to God or important to God.

It is a city God is concerned about. It is great to God. The message that Jonah is to preach is 40 days and Nineveh will be overturned. And I think the impact of the message is clear, isn't it?

It's a very short sermon, very short prophecy, but it's clear in its impact, isn't it? God is the God of all the earth. God has seen you. God has judged you.

And God is going to destroy you in 40 days. The response is equally clear. Look at verse 5. We're told that the Ninevites believed God.

In other words, you see, they hear the message. They believe that it comes from God and that it's true. Now look at verse 8. We're told that the king issues a decree that all are to call urgently on God.

[7 : 24] You see, having heard God's word, having believed God, they are now to call out urgently to him. But calling out is not the only action that they do. Their act of corporate repentance is thoroughgoing.

Verse 5 tells us that all of them, from the greatest to the least, begin to fast and mourn. You see, this is a corporate, wide, thorough repentance. Verse 6 tells us the king himself humbles himself before God.

That is, he removes his royal robe. He covers himself with sackcloth, an ancient way of mourning. He sits in ashes and mourning at his own sinfulness. Now look at verse 8. Not only are they to turn to God, but they are also to turn from sin.

They're to turn from their evil ways. They're to turn from violence. It's clear, isn't it, that the Ninevites have truly heard and believed. Their belief is true belief, isn't it?

How do you know that? Well, because you can see it in their actions. They've truly understood they are accountable to God. They've truly understood God's holy. They stand under his judgment.

[8 : 33] They know they have transgressed. They know he will judge. They know that his judgment is to be feared. But more than that, they know that their only help is in him.

Friends, this is real belief, real sorrow, real fear and real change. This is genuine repentance. Now, before returning to Jonah, I want to just take a small diversion to think about us for a moment.

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

And this God has a word for us as well. Let me explain. You see, the Bible's picture of God is that he's a God who made the world. As Jonah 1 verse 9 says, He's the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

He is the God who made me and he's the God who made you. We are his creation. But more than that, he's a God who's holy and righteous. He's pure.

[9 : 39] He therefore hates sin. God is holy. God is God. God hates sin. And God cannot stand it when people practice sin.

Those who do so sit under his judgment. And because God cannot tolerate sinfulness, his judgment will be fierce and hot. You see, our God is a consuming fire.

Words that are said both in Old and New Testaments. At this point, let's examine ourselves, friends. I want us to realize our situation when we are faced with this holy God.

See, I know that there are some of you here today who are not yet Christians. Let me tell you, if that's your situation, if you're not yet a Christian, that the Bible is clear about your situation.

God is your maker. And God demands that you recognize this about him. And if you do not, then you will be overthrown.

[10 : 41] It may not be in 40 days. But it surely will be. You see, God is too pure to look upon sin and rebellion. He's therefore too pure to look upon you and to receive you into his presence because he cannot.

He's holy. He cannot abide sin. So if you continue to reject him and ignore him and live independently from him, the day will come when he will have to shut you out of his presence forever.

He will bar you from everything that is good and wholesome. That is him and his presence. And you'll face his fierce anger. This will be yours if you do not repent. But now to those of you who are Christians.

See, those of you who are Christians supposedly know God. We supposedly know that God is holy and pure and he's loved us in Jesus. Let me just be frank.

Many of us, I think, have long ago ceased to view God with any sort of fear. We take God for granted as a friend.

[11 : 48] Our tame God, who's no longer pure and no longer holy. And often our lives and our attitudes betray that this is how we think. Don't they? For us, we look around.

We often see Christians who are proud and self-confident and self-assured. Or Christians who are often greedy, hanging on to their wealth and their property. Or Christians who are covetous, looking with lust at those who have more than they have and being jealous of them.

Or Christians, perhaps, who are full of sexual sin, hanging on to lust, disobeying God's clear word on sexual relationships. Or we see Christians who are short-tempered or liars or cheats.

Christians who hang on to other gods, whether they be of money, career, success, relationships, or any of the other diverse variety of modern deities. Or Christians who spend most of their time fleeing from God's clear commands.

But the worst of all these sins is that we, is when we claim to be Christians, yet disregard God and his word and his nature.

[12 : 50] Friends, let me warn you, if this is you, there is a God. And he is holy. And there is a heaven and there is a hell.

So hear God's word now. And turn away from sin and turn to God. Now, whether you're Christian or not, let me urge you to remember the nature of repentance.

Remember what the Ninevites have taught us in their repentance in this chapter. For the Ninevites show us what true repentance is really like. And they show us the nature of repentance is to hear the word of God.

And to see that it is God that you are dealing with. And to see yourself as guilty before him. And to see yourself as under his judgment. And having seen this, to reflect that knowledge in your actions.

What would you do if you really believed that? You would fear God. You would know the awfulness of your sin. You'd be grieved by it. And you'd cry over how you've hurt God.

[13 : 49] And you'd turn away from your sin with a vengeance. And you'd be determined to never let it happen again. To be absolutely rigorous. To reach into every aspect of your life.

And change habits. Actions. Attitudes. To make yourself responsible and accountable. That's the nature of repentance, isn't it? A very good example here in this chapter.

Having said that, let's go back to Jonah. I want you to imagine the situation in Nineveh. Here they are. They've been going about life as though it were self-contained.

They've been marrying, giving in marriage, having children, rearing children, going about daily work. Generally just living life like everyone else. And all of a sudden this man from this small virtually unknown country just slips into the city.

And he starts standing up in their marketplaces. And he roams around telling them that there is a God to whom they're responsible. And they believe. They repent.

[14 : 51] And they think, strike, we've had it. If there's such a God. And if he does punish sin. Then what hope have we got?

But then the king takes leadership. He clutches out at a straw. In hope against hope he utters those words in verse 9.

Who knows? That's a desperate cry, isn't it? Who knows? Who knows if there is a God who's just and holy that can accept sinners and rebels?

Who knows? Who knows? Who knows? If a God, if there is a God who's, if this God who has spoken his word and judged us will listen? Who knows if our destruction can be turned back?

Who knows? Friends, I think that's the cry of our world, isn't it? Who knows if there's a God who hears? Who knows? Who knows? Who knows? Who knows if there's a God who cares? Who knows if there's a way to be right with this God?

[15 : 51] Who knows if there's a place to flee from the coming wrath? Who knows if there's a way I can meet God in friendship? Who knows if I can have a clean conscience when I do? Who knows? This is the cry of our world.

It's a desperate cry of hope. A stab in the dark, a cry into the void. Now let me let you into a little secret.

You see, well may the king of Nineveh cry. Who knows? But the book of Jonah tells us that someone did. You see, Jonah knew, didn't he?

Jonah knew, didn't he? After all, he too had been a rebel from God. God's word had come to him and he'd turn tail and run. But God had reached out to him and in an act of great mercy and kindness, come to him again in Jonah 3.1.

Did you notice that little word in Jonah 3.1? Can you see it? The word is second. You see, God came to him a second time.

[16 : 57] Jonah had no right to think that God would ever come to him again, tell him to speak his word. But God came to him a second time. He acted in great mercy and kindness and allowed this man to continue being, bearing his word, speaking his word, being his prophet.

Now look at Jonah 4.2. Look at what Jonah says to God. He prayed to the Lord. Now listen to it in the light of the king's cry in chapter 3.

He prayed to the Lord and he said, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That's why I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Can you hear his words? For I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God. I knew that you were slow to anger. I knew that you are a one who abounds in chesed and relents from sending calamity.

I knew. The words that he spoke are echoes of the passage we looked at a couple of weeks ago, Exodus 34. Jonah C. has experienced himself God's rescue despite his disobedience.

[18 : 11] He's experienced God's steadfast love in being called again a second time to bear God's word. And he knows his theology. See, the king of Nineveh may well ask who knows, but he has staring him in the face.

Someone who has none of his doubts. For Jonah knows. And friends, Jonah is not the only one who knows, is he? In fact, if Jonah can say, I know, then we Christians can say we know with much greater confidence, can't we?

For like Jonah, we know it from theology. For God has told us that he sent his one and only son into the world so that we might not perish but have eternal life. He has said in his word that because of God's great love put forward in his son, dying for us, we can be justified.

He has said in his word that he has sent his son even when we were dead in trespasses and sins. He has said that this one act in his son will forgive sin and turn away anger at our sinfulness.

But we not only know it theologically, we know it experientially, don't we? For we know that even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God made us alive together with Christ, saved us by grace, raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places.

[19 : 39] He showed us the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness in Christ Jesus. You see, we Christians don't cry into the dark when we hear about our sinfulness, do we?

Notice it when we said it in Luther's, when Luther rejoices in it, in that prayer we said just 15 minutes ago. We don't cry into the dark saying, who knows?

When faced with God's holiness and judgment, we don't go scuttling back to our homes and say, who knows? Maybe God might forgive me. No, we know. Now, for those of you who are not yet Christians, let me therefore urge you to stop wondering who knows, for we all want to say to you, those of us who are Christians, we know.

We can tell you that God delights to have mercy and that if you trust in Jesus, God will accept you as his child. The king of Nineveh may have thought he was clutching at straws, but Jonah knew he wasn't.

And we know he wasn't. And if you call upon Jesus, you won't be clutching at straws either.

[20 : 52] For salvation is available in Jesus. Salvation and forgiveness are possible. Friendship with God is possible.

Now, let me stress this for us who are Christians here at Holy Trinity. Friends, there is a world out there asking this plaintive question.

And some of them have not yet let the question fall from their lips. Some of them 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.

And we know that if they trust in Jesus, then God will accept them as his child. The king of Nineveh may have thought he was clutching at straws, but Jonah knew he wasn't.

[21 : 56] And we know he wasn't. And if they call out to Jesus, they won't be disappointed. For salvation is available in him. Friendship with God and forgiveness is possible.

Friends, that's why I believe we at Holy Trinity should be planting churches and planting congregations and doing as much of it as we possibly can. That's why my tears sometimes well up in my eyes when I see buildings filled with Chinese people that have come from raw atheism to Christian faith.

And why, hopefully, yours well up with tears when you read that little booklet we put in the newsletter about Christian ministry, about ministry among our Chinese congregations and the numbers of them that are turning to Christ.

So that's why when I see wonderful older Christians dying well, I cry at their funerals. Or when I see growing numbers of young families with children here at Holy Trinity, children that weren't here seven or eight years ago.

Friends, there is a world out there that does not know Jesus and God's amazing love and grace. But we know, and it is our job to tell the world what we know.

[23 : 21] Under God, we are bound to do whatever we can so that others might hear. That's why we've been looking at property matters and why we'll discuss them together this week.

We're not just doing it because we want to play with property. We're doing it because we want the world to know Jesus and we want to find the best way to do it with all the resources God has given us. We know and we want others to know.

But I want to finish up with just one more comment for us. I want to speak to all of you who have heard God's word today and realize that things are not all that they could be between you and God.

Have you heard God's word today and realized that there are things that are wrong in your life? Well, if this is you, then I want to urge you to watch how the Ninevites responded.

They repented. That is, they heard God's word. They believed it and they turned to God and they turned from their evil.

[24 : 27] They underwent an orientation, a change in orientation and a change in action. That is, they changed their attitudes but they also changed their actions.

Friends, that's what repentance is all about. Repentance is not a hard thing to understand. It's about change. So if you today have been convicted of sin, then I want to urge you to do the following.

One, turn to Jesus. We know from God's word that he will abundantly pardon you because of what Jesus has done. So turn to Jesus. Two, resolve to change.

That is, tell God and tell someone else. Perhaps asking them to help you and pray for you. And three, actually begin to put the changes into effect.

Change habits if you need. Exclude yourself from things if you need. But make the change. So turn to Jesus. Resolve to change. And begin to put the changes into effect.

[25 : 38] Change habits if necessary. But make sure you do something. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that because of Jesus, we know that you are God who is gracious and kind, abounding in steadfast love, overflowing with a readiness to forgive.

Thank you that we know that we can be justified through what you have done in your son and through faith in him. Father, please examine us.

See if there is any wicked way in us. Help us to turn to Jesus. Help us to resolve to change. And help us to be truly repentant and to put the things, the changes that we have resolved to do into place.

Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name and for your honour and glory. Amen. Amen.