

Jonah 3

'Who knows?'

Who knows?

Most of us know the story of David and Bathsheba.

David had become the king of all Israel.

Life had become easy for him.

And one day he found him walking on the roof of his palace late in the evening.

He looked down and saw a beautiful woman.

He liked what he saw and brought her to himself and slept with her.

She became pregnant and David was faced with a problem – she was married to one of his warriors.

And so David dealt with the problem by killing off the husband and marrying Bathsheba.

But God was unhappy and send a prophet to tell David.

The prophet told David that part of God's judgment was that the child would die.

And so it was that after the child was born it became sick.

David went into mourning.

In 2 Samuel 12 he tells us that he prayed diligently to God that God would spare the child's life.

'Who knows?' he said.

'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, and the child may live?'
(2Samuel 12:22)

This phrase – 'Who knows?' – occurs numerous times in the Bible.

Sometimes it is an expression of frustration.

This is how the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes uses it.

'Who knows...?' he says.

'Who knows if the person that inherits the results of your hard work on earth will be wise or a fool?' (Ecclesiastes 2:19).

'Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?' (Ecclesiastes 3:21)

'Who knows how to rightly interpret things?' (Ecclesiastes 8:1)

'Who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life?' (Ecclesiastes 6:11)

'Who knows?'

At other times in the Bible the phrase is an expression of hope.

The person doesn't know how God is going to act.

But he is willing to take a punt.

This is what David was doing with regard to his newborn child.

This is what Mordecai does in the book of Esther.

The Jews are under threat and Mordecai approaches Queen Esther and says to her:

Who knows, perhaps you have come to be Queen for such a time as this?
(Esther 4:14)

And this is how the king of Nineveh uses the phrase in Jonah 3:9.

He says to his fellow Ninevites:

Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.

The King of Nineveh does not know how God is going to act.

And so he takes a punt.

'Who knows?'

'Who knows? There is a vague chance that God may change his mind.

He may not punish us as we deserve.

He may not punish us as he has 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 may not perish.

The 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 the chapter.

So let's go back to the start of the chapter and get some perspective.

The word of the Lord came

The first thing we are told is that the word of the Lord came to Jonah.

This is the second time that the word of the Lord came to Jonah.

When it came the first time he ran away in the opposite direction.

God pursued him in a storm, arranged for him to be swallowed by a large fish, and rescued him.

This second time, Jonah obeys.

He gets up and goes to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord.

He prepares to go to the great city and to call out God's message against it.

To Nineveh

The city

The book of Jonah and other parts of the Bible tell us some important things about the city.

First, it was obviously a large city.

Jonah 4:11 tells us that 120,000 people lived there.

Jonah 3:3 says that it was a large city – a visit took three days.

This probably means that it took three days to observe all the proper ancient protocols.

Verse 3 also says that it was a 'very important city'.

Now a literal translation of this would be '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.

The message

The message that Jonah is to preach is clear – 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.'

The impact of the message is clear...

- God is the God of all the earth.
- God has seen you.
- God has judged you.
- And God will destroy you in forty days.

The response

- Belief

The response is equally clear in the passage.

Look at verse 5.

We are told that the Ninevites 'believe God'.

In other words, they hear the message and believe that it comes from God and that it is true.

- Calling

Now look at verse 8.

We are told that the King issues a decree that all are to 'call urgently on God'.

Having heard God's word...

Having believed God...

They are to call out urgently to God.

- Following up with action

But calling out is not the only action they do.

This act of corporate repentance is thoroughgoing.

Verse 5 tells us that all of them – from the greatest to the least – begin a fast and mourn.

Verse 6 tells us that the King himself humbles himself before God.

He removes his royal robe...

Covers himself with sackcloth...

And sits in ashes mourning at his sinfulness.

But look at verse 8.

Not only are they to turn TO God.

They are also to turn FROM sin.

They are to turn from their evil ways.

They are to turn from violence.

It is clear that the Ninevites have truly heard and believed, isn't it?

Their belief is true belief – you can see it in their actions.

They have truly understood that they are accountable to God.

They have truly understood that he is holy and that they stand under him.

They know that they have transgressed.

They know that he will judge.

And they know that his judgment is to be feared.

But more than that, they know that their only help is in him.

This is real belief.

Real sorrow.

Real fear.

Real change.

Thinking about us

The God with whom we have to do

Before returning to the book of Jonah, I want to take a small diversion to think about us a bit.

You see, I think we often forget what the Ninevites grasped so clearly.

We often forget that the God we deal with is the same God that they dealt with...

That this God also has a word for us.

Let me explain.

You see, the Bible's picture of God is that he is the God who made the world.

As Jonah 1:9 says, he is the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

He is the God who made me.

And he is the God who made you.

We are his creation.

But more than that, he is a God who is holy and righteous.

He is pure.

And he therefore hates sin.

God is God.

God is holy.

God hates sin.

And God cannot stand it when people practice sin.

Those who do sin sit under his judgment.

And because God cannot tolerate sinfulness, his judgment will be fierce and hot.

For our God is a consuming fire.

Our perilous situation

- **If we are not Christian**

At this point I want us to stop for a moment and examine ourselves.

I want us to realise our situation when faced with this holy God.

You see, I know that some of us here are not Christians.

Well, let me tell you that the Bible is clear about your situation.

God is your maker.

And he demands that you recognise this about him.

And if you do not, then you will be overthrown.

It may not be in forty days, but it will surely be.

God is too pure to look upon sin and rebellion.

And he is therefore too pure to look upon you and receive you into his presence.

And so, if you continue to reject him and ignore him and live independently from him, then the day will come when he will shut you out of his presence forever.

He will bar you from everything that is good and wholesome.

And you will face God's fierce anger.

All this will be yours if you do not repent.

- **If we are Christian**

However, I need to stop here and have a word to those who are Christian.

You see, those of us who are Christian supposedly know God.

We supposedly know the God who is holy and pure and who has loved us in Jesus.

However, let me be frank.

Many of us have long ago ceased to view him with any fear.

We take him for granted as our friend.

Our tame God, who is no longer pure and no longer holy.

Our lives and our attitudes betray us, don't they.

For as we look around, we so often see Christians who are proud, self confident, and self assured.

But Christians who are so often greedy – hanging on to their wealth or their property.

Or Christians who are covetous – looking with lust at what others have and being jealous.

Or Christians who are full of sexual sin.

Hanging on to lust.

Or 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 – idols of money, career, success, relationships, or a variety of other modern gods.

Or Christians who spend most of their time fleeing from God's clear commands.

But the worst sin of all is that we claim to be Christian and yet disregard God and his word and his nature.

If this is you, then let me warn you – there IS a God.

And that God is holy.

There is a heaven.

And there is a hell.

So hear God's word now.

And turn away from sin.

And turn to God.

The nature of repentance

Now, whether you are Christian or not, let me urge you to remember the nature of repentance.

Remember what the Ninevites have taught us.

For the Ninevites show us what true repentance is like.

And they show us that the nature of repentance is to hear the word of God.

To see that it is God that you are dealing with.

To see yourself as guilty.

And to see yourself as under his judgment.

And having seen this, to reflect this in your actions.

To fear God.

To know the awfulness of your sin.

To be grieved by it.

To cry over how you've hurt God.

And to turn away from your sin with a vengeance.

To be determined that it will never happen again.

To be absolutely rigorous.

To reach into every aspect of your life and to change habits...

Change actions...

Change attitudes...

And to make yourself responsible and accountable.

This is the nature of true repentance.

Who knows?

A cry of desperation

Having said this, I want you to come back to the book of Jonah with me.

I want you to imagine the situation in Nineveh.

Here they are.

They had been going about life as though it were self contained.

They had been marrying, giving in marriage, having children, rearing children, going about their daily work, and generally living life.

All of a sudden this man from a small, virtually unknown country slips in to their city.

He starts standing up in their marketplaces.

And he roams around telling them that there is a God to whom they are responsible.

And they believe.

They repent.

And they think...

We've had it.

If there is 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 the words of verse 9.

'Who knows?'

It is a desperate cry isn't it?

'Who knows?'

Who knows if a God who is just and holy can accept sinners and rebels?

Who knows if a God who is just and holy can forgive sins?

Who knows if a God who has spoken his word and judged us will listen?

Who knows if our destruction can be turned back?

Who knows?

This is the cry of our world, isn't it?

Who knows if there is a God who hears?

Who knows if there is a God who cares?

Who knows if there is a way to be right with God?

Who knows?

It is a cry of desperate hope.

A stab in the dark.

A cry into the void.

Someone knows

But let me let you into a secret.

The king of Nineveh may cry, 'Who knows?'

But the book of Jonah tells us that someone did know.

Jonah knew, didn't he?

After all, he too had been a rebel against God.

God's word had come to him and he had run.

But God had reached out to him.

And in an act of great mercy and kindness, God had come again to him in Jonah 3:1.

Did any of you notice the little word there in Jonah 3:1?

The word is 'second'.

You see, God came a SECOND time.

He did not leave Jonah on the shelf.

He acted in great mercy and kindness.

He allowed Jonah to bear his word again.

And now look at Jonah 4:2.

Look at what Jonah says,

'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.'

Hear his words:

For I knew that you are a gracious God...

I knew that you are merciful and slow to anger.

And I knew that you abound in steadfast love and relent from disaster.

The words he echoes are from Exodus 34:6-8.

Jonah has experienced God's rescue despite his disobedience.

He has experienced God's steadfast love in being called again to bear God's word.

And he knows his theology.

The King of Nineveh may ask, 'Who knows?' but he has in his presence someone who has none of his doubts.

For Jonah knows.

But Jonah is not the only one who knows, is he?

If fact, if Jonah can say he knows, then we who are Christians can say we know with much greater confidence.

Like Jonah, we know 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 he made put forward his Son to die for us.

He has said in his word that he has done this even when we were dead in our trespasses.

He has said that this one great act will forgive sin and turn away his anger at our sinfulness.

However, like Jonah, we also know from experience, don't we.

For we know that even when we were dead in our trespasses, this God made us alive together with Christ.

This God saved us by grace.

He raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places.

He showed immeasurable riches of grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

As Christians we don't cry into the dark when we hear about our sinfulness.

For us there is no 'Who knows?'

When faced with God's holiness and judgment, we don't go scuttling back to our homes saying, 'Who knows? Maybe God will forgive?'

For we know.

Now for those of you who are not Christian, let me urge you to stop wondering 'Who knows?'

For we know.

And we can tell you that God delights to have mercy.

That if you trust in Jesus then 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 out to Jesus, you won't be either.

For salvation is available in Jesus.

Friendship with God and forgiveness is possible.

Returning to repentance

Okay, having said all of this, I'd like to return to those of you who have heard God's word tonight and have realised that things are not all that they could be between you and God.

Have you heard God's word tonight and realised that there are things that are wrong.

Then let me urge you to watch how the Ninevites responded.

They repented.

That is, they heard God's word.

They believed it.

They turned TO God.

And they turned FROM their evil.

That is, they underwent a change in orientation and action.

They changed their attitudes.

But they also changed their actions.

This is what repentance is all about.

It is about change.

So, if you have been convicted of sin tonight, let me urge you to do the following:

1. Turn to Jesus. We know from God's word that he will abundantly pardon you because of what Jesus has done.
2. Resolve to change. Tell God and tell someone else, asking them to help you and pray for you.
3. Actually put those changes into effect. Change your habits if necessary.