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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer" Clapham on Sunday morning 16th. January, 1972

Hymns: 186, 947, 1108

Reading 2 Samuel 12 (13-23) and Jonah 2 and 3

Text: Jonah 3.9

"WHO CAN TELL?"

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It is not my custom to take a word out of a verse, but this morning and yesterday I could not seem to get my mind comfortably settled upon any subject. Sometimes I looked at this particular doctrine, and then another, and then upon the experience of the Lord's people. I tried to bring myself to speak about a subject, but I could not feel settled; but during a reading at home this morning, I do not know whether it came in the reading or not, but I seemed to feel in my heart a voice saying, "Who can tell?" and this fastened itself upon me. I said, "Lord, I do not know how to preach from anything like this, I do not know what I can bring out of it to be profitable", so I tried to come back to my old subject but could not seem to feel happy about it. So here I am before you with a "Who can tell?"; and there is a lot of truth in this, is there not, that can apply to many things that come into the lives of the Lord's people. It is not in our power to see the end of a matter from the beginning, neither can we visualise the Lord's will in matters of a providential nature particularly, and even in regard to our soul's experience, sometimes we may feel like the Psalmist when he said, "O my God, my soul is cast down within me"; but even so he expostulated with himself and could say, "Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him". I do not know whether anyone may be here feeling something like this, that is to say a matter that seems to bring much questioning, not knowing what the issue may be of this or that, but there is this, "Who can tell?".

As you know, that "Who can tell?" which I have read in the book of Samuel in relation to David has a very, very sad background. There is no need for me to dilate upon that, but you may remember when the prophet visited David and charged the matter home upon him that he was brought to real confession of his sin and the issue in

all probability is in the 51st. Psalm. I doubt not but that many, many of the Lord's dear people, (I know one, I know him very well indeed) have had to walk up and down that Psalm a good many times, and are walking up and down that Psalm now. What a blessing it has been to many, many of the Lord's exercised ones, especially when they have felt the burden of their own sin as before God. You may remember in the case of David how he besought God for the child although the prophet had told him that the child would surely die; yet even so he fasted and wept. But the child died, and in view of the state of his mind when the child was sick, his servants feared to break the news to him; but by their whispering he concluded what had happened and said, "Is the child dead?" and they said, "The child is dead". Then he arose and did eat bread which amazed them; so they said, "While the child was sick you vexed yourself to such a degree that we were afraid to break the news to you; but he said while the child was alive there was a "Who can tell?"

In the text there is also a background to this, "Who can tell?" although it is very, very different from the case of David who said, "Who can tell that the Lord may be gracious unto me and that the child may live". In the case of Jonah he was directed to go to Nineveh to preach against that great city that it would be overthrown because of its wickedness. You know all about Jonah and what he passed through before he did go, but eventually he went; he was cast down into the deep and had to cry unto God out of the fish's belly. Possibly he was the only man that ever did so and yet, more amazing still, he said, "Thou heardest my voice". So Johan did not cry out of the fish's belly in vain. Is it not an amazing thought that a cry going up from the belly of a fish can enter heaven; but it did enter heaven, Jonah said, "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord" - not I gave everything up, I am being tossed about now in the deep, in the midst of the sea, waves and billows are going over me, it is no use trying to pray now, mine is a hopeless case, I have nothing before me but death; and though his soul fainted within him, yet he could say, "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord". It would have been good if Jonah

had remembered the Lord before, for he had departed from the Lord's commandment and his disobedience had brought him into this condition; but he remembered the Lord. Some of you may know something about this. It seems to link itself a little with the case of the poor woman who came to the Lord saying, "Lord help me". The Lord regarded Jonah, he says, "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God". So that as the Lord regarded such an extreme case as this it can bring into the heart of some exercised ones this "Who can tell?". The Lord regarded Jonah when he was in the deep; and you may say "I have been in the deep", - not in the same sense of course - but you may have been in the deep or you may be now, I do not know; but is there this "Who can tell?" in your case?

It does not become us to settle or decide matters upon premature conclusions, this "Who can tell?" may often be very timely in the experience of the Lord's people when we do not know what the will of the Lord may be in certain matters either in providence or in grace. In my reading this morning, as you must have noticed, and which has been confirmed by the hymn, there was a "Who can tell?". The Lord did not regard David's prayer in this matter that the child might be spared, the child died; but there was this "Who can tell?". There is a "Who can tell?" in my subject, and in this case the city was spared. In this perhaps the sovereignty of God may be observed. It is not always the Lord's purpose to answer prayer as one naturally might wish Him to. I believe that there has often been earnest prayer that life may be spared but it has not been the Lord's purpose; and yet until the Lord's will is revealed there is this "Who can tell?". I remember very well a case at Mayfield many years ago in Mr. Sawyer's days, when some parents in his congregation lost a devoted daughter at the age of twelve years notwithstanding their many, many prayers. The parents were distracted, and Mr. Sawyer went to see them, but it so affected him that he said, "I hope never to have such an experience again". This has been more than once when

children have been taken. The same thing applied to a very devoted child of John Warburton's; the child showed such affection to her father, but while he was away at Brighton the dear child died. What can we say to things like this? It is good when one can fall into the Lord's hands in a right way, not with a callous indifference, but with a spirit of grace, and can say, "The will of the Lord be done". I have read of good John Newton when he went to visit some parents who had lost a child that he said to them that it was good for them that this affliction had come upon them, this great sorrow, for he felt it was a sign that the Lord had not forsaken them. Evidently they had been in a very backsliding state.

I want now to come more particularly to the point in hand, "Who can tell?". This indicates in the first place a condition of doubt and uncertainty about things. It is described in the hymn we have sung,

"I'll not despair, for who can tell?"

This may sometimes hold one on in the face of much difficulty, doubt, fear, darkness, and bondage, - I mean spiritually speaking. I know it can relate to providence sometimes, but I would like to speak of it from a spiritual aspect, in what one may pass through in their own soul's experience. This "Who can tell?" indicates doubt and uncertainty. It is not quite a despairing condition, neither is it a matter of certainty and assurance; but I feel sure that many of the Lord's living family are just here with regard to their own case. "Who can tell if the Lord will be gracious unto me?" Sometimes perhaps things look very, very dark, they always have at times with the Lord's people, very dark indeed, for we read about those who walk in darkness and have no light. This can be painful; it is a painful path when there is a veil over the heart and a painful uncertainty in one's own feelings, concerning their state. O what will become of me if I should die? I remember this myself, in my young days, when I was taken with an attack of haemorrhage on a particular Sunday morning, I thought I was going to die, I was filled with terror at the thought of dying; yet even so it was not long before there was a "Who can tell?", for, in a very short time, in some measure at least, the Lord appeared, and dispersed

the black cloud.

I wonder whether there is anyone here who is feeling in a state of spiritual darkness, and though you pray and wait and watch, it seems to little purpose, I would not say to no purpose, but you may feel it is to very little purpose. Yet sometimes this seems to hang about you, "Who can tell?", and this may sometimes help one to wait on and not give up or cast everything away. Who can tell but yet the Lord may be gracious unto me, or as we have it in the subject here, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent?". It can be possible that one in such a case feels that the Lord is against them, is more like an enemy than a friend, and one may be ready to conclude something like Jacob did when things went very, very heavy with him in his family trials, when he said that it would bring down his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave. That was a premature conclusion with Jacob, but even so with some here there may be much questioning about matters and we can hardly express the conflict which one may pass through, the questionings, the temptations, the opposition, and the battles that may have to be fought inwardly in passing through things; perhaps nobody else knows anything about the matter, but notwithstanding all the questioning in the mind and however low we may sink, if that one is a child of God there is this "Who can tell?". We cannot determine the Lord's purpose in things, some of the Lord's children may feel to be under a sense of condemnation; the law of God stands against them like a glittering sword ready to strike them dead; and divine justice seems almost to crush them, for they know that they have sinned and come short of the glory of God; but one day something just trickles in, it may be a word or a promise, something comes with a little impression upon the heart; and what is the result of this? It is a "Who can tell?".

"Who can tell if God will turn and repent?". This does not mean that God repents in the sense that His people do, and as David did because of his dreadful sin; but when we read of repentance as referring to God it really means His divine compassion. His compassion. Repentance with God is compassion; He is moved with compassion; we have some very beautiful instances in the New Testament of the Lord Jesus being moved with compassion, so here God

had threatened the destruction of this wicked city and in all probability it would have been fulfilled, but upon their repentance it was averted, God turned from His fierce anger, the king repented and gave solemn instructions to all his people, from the least to the greatest, to turn from their evil way, that man and beast should be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily unto God; and God repented of the evil, that is to say, He changed the course of events, and the wicked city was spared for a season, although it was eventually destroyed, yet for the time God had regard to them, He saw their works, He saw them humble themselves before Him and the solemn judgment was averted, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent?"

This "Who can tell?" has another feature about it and that is of encouragement. It can be very encouraging to a troubled one, especially when there is a ray of light in the darkness, this gives rise to a "Who can tell?". Then you may perhaps read a case where God has heard and answered prayer sometimes in very striking instances as we know it is recorded in the Scriptures, and something in the heart says, "Who can tell if God will return and manifest His mercy", although at the time it may seem that He is against you. The devil can exploit this to try and bring one to despair; if he could he would. I was thinking about the dying thief; as you know he was a robber and a murderer, and there he was hanging in agony on the cross dying an agonising death, such a death as it must be. But before he died a change came over him and he said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom". And did the Lord say 'What, a wretch like you! what sort of a life have you lived? You deserve all you have got and hell after'. No, He was moved with compassion and the reply was expressive, He said to this poor dying thief, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise", not with the devil in hell. May not this case bring up in the heart a "Who can tell if the Lord will be gracious unto me?".

"Who can tell?". He is a prayer-answering God, and He will not fail of His word and promise. Sometimes this "Who can tell?" springs up a little. I am preaching out of my own book; I am drawing up a little water out of my own cistern. I remember when I was reading the Scriptures one night, and what I felt for the

first time in reading Psalm 31. A ray of light seemed to come, and I had a feeling that the time would come when the Lord would appear. There was a "Who can tell?". I wonder if in your experience you know anything about a "Who can tell?". You may have been reading the Scriptures prayerfully quietly, and something has come into the heart with a little feeling, and there is a "Who can tell?". Sometimes this has come in in the ordinances of the Lord's house, the preaching of the Gospel, when you have felt some help in hearing, this has lifted you up a little has it not so that the burden has not been quite so heavy; a ray of light has come in and there has been this "Who can tell if God will turn and repent?". Although it does not convey assurance it raises a hope. We find the Psalmist saying in Psalm 39.7 "And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee". O what sweet encouragements there are for exercised souls. I do not know any Scripture which says that praying souls brought down before God, sensible of their condition, praying for mercy, will ever sink into hell. I do not know of any case. But perhaps one will say, "Yes, but that does not satisfy me". I do not wish it to satisfy you; I would wish for you to have a positive religion, that is to feel that you have received something from the Lord so that you can put your finger on it and say, "If I am not sadly deceived I believe the Lord gave me that; at least He gave me some comfort from it, and it raised up in my heart a 'Who can tell?'." There is something like this in the prophecy by Joel where the prophet exhorted the people to repent and to weep and mourn over their sins before God, for "Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him".

Have you got a "Who can tell?" Sometimes this can be very objective. Where is your hope fixed? Sometimes when our brethren pray they refer to the blood. We read of the children of Israel when in Egypt that the Lord said to them "When I see the blood I will pass over you". Many poor trembling ones have had a "Who can tell if the Lord will look upon me, pardon my sins, and deliver me from the destruction I deserve?". "When I see the blood".

You will never sink into hell with your faith directed to a once crucified Christ. There is no way to hell that way. It seems to me that God is very sovereign in His ways of dealing with people. I have seen short accounts of quite a number of the Lord's people when they apply to come into the homes, and in some cases things are very clear in their experience, so that it can be said "I have no doubt about this case". But there are some who leave us with a "Who can tell?", there does not appear to be quite that clear teaching yet there is something that gives you a hope that they fear God, and you can feel they are suitable; but even so there is nothing to rise above a "Who can tell?". After all, dear friends, we shall go through life more or less with a "Who can tell?", but when we come to the end and are found to be right in the sight of God, when we die and leave time for eternity and see Him as He is, there will never, never be a "Who can tell?" again. Amen.