

IF ONLY THEY HAD KNOWN

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Have you ever regretted a course of action because you later learned something you had not known earlier? At times serious mistakes are made which would have been averted had the truth surfaced (or been accepted) in time. Perhaps the ultimate case of this is described by Paul when he says that, had the rulers understood the gospel, “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8). What a tragedy! There are other examples.

Given the choice of where to take his herds, Abraham’s nephew, Lot, chose the Jordan plain and moved to a town called Sodom (Gen. 13:11-12). If only Lot had known that move would eventuate in the deaths of his wife and his sons-in-law, the loss of his house and, evidently, his wealth, surely he would have chosen differently. But Lot did not know.

Jacob had twelve sons, but favored the one named Joseph (Gen. 37:3). One day Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to see how the others were doing. The other brothers’ growing dislike for Joseph, likely exacerbated by Jacob’s favoritism and Joseph’s dreams, culminated in Joseph’s being thrown in a pit and, later, sold into slavery. Having rid themselves of their nuisance of a brother, the other sons take his coat, dip it in goat blood, and pawn it off to their hapless father, who concludes—just as planned—that Joseph must be dead. Of course, the truth was quite to the contrary and Joseph would eventually rise to prominence in Egypt, with the rest of his alienated family oblivious to it all. If only Jacob had known the sorrow it would bring, surely he would never have sent Joseph to check on his older brothers in Shechem. But Jacob did not know.

After the successful campaign against Jericho, Joshua sent a 3,000 man contingency against the small town of Ai (Josh. 7:2-5). Expecting an easy victory, the Israelites instead found themselves routed by Ai’s inhabitants, who succeeded in killing 36 Israelites. The problem traced to a single soldier named Achan who had stolen from Jericho certain items belonging to God. With sin in the camp, the Lord refused victory to Israel until the matter was cleared up. If only Joshua had known his initial military action against Ai would lead to an embarrassing defeat and the deaths of 36 of his men, surely he would not have ordered the attack. But Joshua did not know.

And what of Sodom? That wicked city was destroyed by God in Genesis 19 for its sins, including homosexuality. Remarkably, centuries later Jesus referred to this city as he rebuked another one called Capernaum. Matthew records His comments: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matt. 11:23-24, ESV). In other words, if only Sodom had known about the Savior and the works of which He was capable, Sodom would have repented and, therefore, avoided destruction. But Sodom did not know. Capernaum *did* know—and that is precisely why Jesus says judgment will come down even harder on her than on Sodom. Capernaum’s greater opportunity heightened divine expectation and increased the guilt of failing to live up to it.

Ignorance is not bliss—especially when it comes to knowledge of the gospel. That a person can live and die in the United States and not know saving truth is explainable on one basis: *he did not want to know it*. With His providing the gospel message, along with the promise of helping us find it if we look (Matt. 7:7), God has taken away the excuse of ignorance. Be sure you do not get to the day of judgment and say, “Lord, if only I had known.”