

## Pray

## Reading

I'm going to read Jonah chapter 3 verses 1-10 for context, but our focus will be on verse 10. This is the word of God.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."

3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

6 The word reached the KING of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

*10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

(Jonah 3:1–10)

## Intro

Does God ever change his mind?

Changing OUR minds is just a part of everyday life, isn't it? We might even say it's an essential part of growing up and maturing. When my wife Lee was a kid she thought that thunder was the sound of the angels ten-pin bowling. She's changed her mind about that. I used to think salad was the worst thing ever, now I just think it's unpleasant. You see: we grow, we mature, we change.

In fact, if someone said that they NEVER change their mind about anything, we'd worry about them wouldn't we?

So does GOD ever change HIS mind?

With the book of Jonah as our starting point, I want us to consider three things.

Firstly, the evidence that God DOES change his mind.

Secondly, the evidence that God does NOT change his mind.

Thirdly, how do we hold those two things together?

## Firstly, what's the evidence that God **DOES** seem to change his mind?

Look at Jonah chapter 3 verse 4. The message that God gives to Jonah to preach is this:

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh **SHALL BE** overthrown!"

(Jonah 3:4)

But then, we read in verse 10:

*10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God **RELENTED** of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

(Jonah 3:10)

So does God change his mind? Sounds a bit like it.

Or consider Exodus chapter 32.

You'll remember, Moses has just been given the ten commandments, he is returning to the Israelite camp, and he finds them worshipping and serving a golden calf.

9 And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.  
10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."  
(Exodus 32:9-10)

But Moses then implores God to turn from bringing disaster on his people. And in verse 14 we read:

14 ...the Lord *relented* from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.  
(Exodus 32:14)

See? The Lord *relented*. Sounds a lot like what happened to the Ninevites, and it sounds a lot like God changes his mind, doesn't it?

God plans to do one thing, but then he sees the people repent, or he hears Moses' pleading, and he thinks better of what he was going to do.

Now the Hebrew word translated "relented" ("nacham") is the same one you see in Jonah, and it's the same one you see in 1st Samuel, where God speaks of "regretting" making Saul king.

11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments."

(1 Samuel 15:11)

35 ...the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

(1 Samuel 15:35b)

And you see the same thing in Genesis chapter 6.

...the Lord *regretted* that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

(Genesis 6:6)

So pretty open and shut case, wouldn't you say? The LORD apparently relents, the LORD regrets, and therefore the LORD changes his mind.

Or does He?



## **That's our second heading: the evidence that God DOES NOT in fact change his mind.**

The Christian author Greg Koukl has a catchphrase: "Never read a Bible verse". Odd thing for a Christian to say, you might think. But what he means is: "Never read a Bible verse *in isolation*, without considering what other verses say."

And when we do that, we see verses like Malachi chapter 3 verse 6, which says,

6 "...I the Lord do NOT change..."  
(Malachi 3:6a)

Well THAT doesn't sound like God changes his mind. Or look at James chapter 1 which says:

17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights,

*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

(James 1:17)

Or remember Hebrews 13:8:

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

(Hebrews 13:8)

Or take that passage we quoted earlier, from 1st Samuel. We saw those two verses which say that God regretted making Saul King. But guess what the Bible says immediately in between those two verses? It says this:

29 ...the Glory of Israel will NOT lie or have regret, for he is NOT a man, that he should have regret.

(1 Samuel 15:29)

The same Hebrew word “nacham” is used for “regret” in all three verses. “God regretted” and yet “God does NOT regret.”

Could it be that the writer of First Samuel forgot - TWICE - what he had written just a few verses before, thus contradicting himself? Or is there something else going on?

What does it mean when WE say we regret things? It means we say or do something, and then with the benefit of hindsight, we think, “I wish I hadn’t done that. If I knew back then what I know now, I would never have said done that.”

Similarly, when we say we’ve changed our minds about something, it means that we were once mistaken about something, but now we know better.

Is God like that? Does he learn things from people and circumstances as he goes along?

Does he look back at things he's done in the past and say, "If only I'd known back then what I know now."

One of the distinguishing marks in the Bible between false gods, and the living God is that the living God - unlike the idols - knows what will happen in the future.

For example, in Isaiah chapter 46, it says, there IS no other God, and He is the only One who declares

the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done...  
(Isaiah 46:10)

Psalm 139 says:

Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.  
(Psalm 139:4)

In First John chapter 3 verse 20, it says that God “knows everything.”

(1 John 3:20b)

So if God knows everything, and knows the future before it happens, does it make sense to say that he changes his mind, or regrets things, the way we do? Why would he need to? Does he learn things today that he did not know yesterday? No.

So why does it say in Jonah chapter 3:

*10 When God SAW what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster...*

(Jonah 3:10)

...as if God is “reacting” to new information that he didn’t already have? Why IS God described like that?

Well, that takes us to our third heading...

## **How do we hold these things together?**

I'm going to suggest three things to bear in mind. And then I want to say something about why this is such good news.

**The first thing to say is this. When we say that God does not change his mind, that does not mean that there are no changes in the way he relates to particular people - and the reason for that, of course, is because PEOPLE change.**

For example, Scripture makes it clear that God is angry with the Ninevites, and then Scripture says God has compassion on them. But notice what has changed in between those two statements. God's attitude to human sin has not changed. His character has not changed. His plan to save the Ninevites has not changed.

What HAS changed is the Ninevites behaviour, and as a result, God's response to them.

He now looks at them with compassion, not because HE has changed, but because they have.

**The second thing to say is this.**

**When the biblical text suggests that God has CHANGED in some way, it's often because the Bible is using what's called "phenomenological" language.**

Phenomenological language describes things as they "appear to be" from a human perspective. From the perspective of the Ninevites, it appears that God was about to destroy them, but then changed his mind.

That IS an accurate way of describing things phenomenologically, from THEIR perspective, even though from God's perspective, he never changed his mind about the situation at all - because He KNEW they would repent.



So, you might say, why does the Bible use phenomenological language at all? Isn't it misleading?

Well, actually we use phenomenological language all the time, and nobody feels misled by it.

When a weatherman on TV says the sun will RISE at 7am tomorrow morning, we know he's not literally saying that the sun itself RISES while the earth stays still. He's not making any claims about the earth being the centre of the solar system. He's using phenomenological language, and we recognise it as such.

You might say, well why doesn't the weatherman speak about this in a strictly scientific way? Well he could. But to do that he'd have to say something like this. He'd have to say: "This morning at 7am, the earth will have rotated to such a degree that our particular region of the planet will be exposed to the sun's rays." That WOULD be strictly scientifically accurate; but it would also be really, really annoying and long-winded.

So we hear this kind of phenomenological language all the time, it's a kind of shorthand, and we're careful not to read too much into it.

**Another reason Scripture speaks of God "changing his mind" is because it's using what we call "anthropomorphic" language.**

That means that God describes himself in human terms, as having human characteristics, so that humans can more readily understand him.

We were walking past a boat that was in dry dock a couple of years ago, and my little daughter called out to the boat, "Good morning boat! I hope you're having a nice rest!" Now, does the boat have ears that it could hear her? No. Does a boat NEED to rest, like we do? No. My daughter was imagining the boat as having human characteristics, in order to relate to it.

We do this all the time with PETS, of course. And it happens all the time in books and movies: in movies, as you know, bugs talk to each other in English, toys have vibrant inner lives, and anthropomorphized cars have eyes rather than headlights.

Mickey Mouse would be a prime example of anthropomorphism, and we go with it. We know that mice don't talk, or wear shorts. We know they don't pilot steamboats. We know they don't oversee corporations with a net worth of \$120 billion, not unless they're significantly over-achieving. But we go with it, because it enables us to relate to the mouse in a way we wouldn't otherwise.

A similar thing is going on in Scripture. God the Father is not a human being. We know that. And yet, God uses "human" imagery to describe himself in order to help us relate to him.

He's described as having eyes, and hands, and feet. He says that he redeems Israel with "a powerful arm". Does God the Father have an arm? No. I was listening to a moving passage from Hosea chapter 11 this morning which talked about the LORD's love for Israel - it said: "*I bent down to them and fed them.*" Anthropomorphism.

Similarly, when it says that God remembered Rachel, does that mean that he had somehow forgotten her? No.

When it says that God "regretted" or "relented" or "changed his mind", does that mean that like a human being, he suddenly gained information he didn't previously have? No. Anthropomorphism.

In his grace, God presents himself to us in ways that are intuitive and natural to us, so we can relate to him.

When I'm trying to speak to my kids, I don't use complex, technical jargon - however accurate it might be.

Verbally as well as physically, I come down to their level, so that I can look them in the eye, so that I can communicate more clearly.

And that, of course, is a tiny and imperfect picture of what God does with us. Not just in the language he uses, but also in the incarnation itself.

In the incarnation, God came down to us, took on human flesh so that we could understand him better, so that humans could literally “grasp” him better. As Jesus says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

In that sense, **Jesus is the ultimate anthropomorphism.** The word anthropomorphism comes from the Greek word “anthro” meaning “man”, and “morphe” meaning form. Literally: God “takes the form of a man”.

And not only does he take on himself human FLESH. He takes on himself the terrible weight of every human SIN,

and bears the punishment for it so that we would not have to.

As we've seen, one of the big questions the book of Jonah poses is this: does God break his promise? How can God PROMISE judgement on the Ninevites, but then RELENT from judging them?

And the answer is: the cross.

God promises to "overthrow" Ninevah. Well at the cross, Ninevah WAS overthrown. The promised judgement WAS truly and finally delivered. Because their substitute, Jesus Christ, was overthrown in their place.

And because in the time of Jonah God knew that His Son WOULD one day take their condemnation for them, God was justly able to RELENT of the judgement he had promised at that time.

Ninevah deserved to be overthrown because of its sin.  
WE deserve to be overthrown for our sin too.

But Jesus Christ has been overthrown instead, in our place. So that we could receive, with the Ninevites, God's compassion.

How do you receive the compassion of God? Verse 5, just as the Ninevites did, with repentance and faith.

5 ...the people of Nineveh *believed* God [that's FAITH: trusting and therefore obeying God]. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth... [That's repentance - expressing remorse for sin and turning away from it.]  
(Jonah 3:5)

Have YOU done that yet? We've been talking about God changing his mind; have you changed YOUR mind toward God? That is what repentance is. Turn to him, so that he

would have compassion on you and relent of his judgement on you.

So. It IS true to say that God NEVER changes his MIND, if by that we mean that he learns new information that he hasn't had before.

But we can go further. It's not just that God never changes his MIND. God never changes, PERIOD.

Theologians call it God's "immutability": the idea that God is unchangeable in His essence, His nature, and His perfections.

**And this is where we get to the question of why this is such good news.**

Here are three reasons before my time is up.

**Firstly, this is good news because it means God's PERSON, God's being, is unchangeable.**



By comparison, every human being we have ever loved WILL change.

They are subject to the second law of thermodynamics: they grow older, they pass away, and the fact that we cannot stop this from happening can feel devastating.

Recently I was watching a short skit from a comedy show, but it turned out to be very poignant. It was all about how people and places change, and how you can't go back to the way things were.

A man goes into a train station. At the counter, he holds up a photo for the ticket agent and says, "This is a bit of a strange question, but can you tell me how to get there?"

The ticket agent looks at the photo and she says: "Oh yes, that's Millport [a place in Scotland]. What you've got to do is get the train to a place called Largs, then you get the ferry . . ." And the man says: "No, I know how to get

to Millport. But can you tell me how to get to there?" And he points to the photo again.

He says: "I took that photo when I was about 16; that's me there. That summer was amazing. Hanging out with friends all day, not worrying about tomorrow, just laughing, having a great time, jumping off the pier, swimming around, and it was like summer seemed to go on forever." And then he goes quiet. And he says: "I don't want to be here anymore. I want to be there. So can you tell me . . . how do I get there?"

And she looks at him and says, "You can't do that. I'm sorry."

So he says, "Ah, just give me a return to Largs then."

We often LONG, don't we, for the way things WERE.

And into that longing comes the reality that your God IS the the SAME today as he was yesterday, and he will be so forever.

Your friends may betray you, your husband or wife may leave you, your pastor may be taken away, your home or career turned upside down - everything may change, and everything does, but God - and only God - does not.

There ARE people and places to which you long to return. You want to know how to get *there*. Do you realise: that nostalgic yearning for the way it used to be has been put into your heart so that you would fly to the One who IS just the same today as He always was.

**Secondly, it's good news because his CHARACTER is unchangeable.**

There is no "before" or "after" with God, as there is with us. There's no, "He used to be like that, but now He's like this." There's no such thing as "the Old Testament God"

and “the New Testament God.” He doesn’t wake up one morning and decide to no longer be loving or just or kind.

His power, His wisdom, His love, his grace and mercy are perfect, and therefore they are unchangeable, because if they were to change, they would no longer be perfect and he would no longer be God.

No good thing that we cherish in God will ever diminish in the slightest. And so we can always depend upon Him.

**Thirdly and finally, this is good news because it means God’s PLANS and PROMISES to you are unchangeable.**

WE change our plans all the time, and often we blame “unforeseen circumstances”. But no circumstance is unforeseen for God, and therefore his plans are always perfectly carried out.

Psalm 33 says:

The counsel of the Lord stands forever,  
the plans of his heart to all generations.  
(Psalm 33:11)

He does not misjudge his plans. He does not run out of time or energy or resources to complete them. He never reconsiders them.

There are no discoveries He can make about you, that will change his plans to redeem you, if you are in Christ.

You think to yourself, no I've let him down too many times now, there's no hope for me. But his plans to do you good through ALL circumstances will never change by a single degree.

His promises, too, are unbreakable. They are ALWAYS fulfilled.

As some of you know, my father has Alzheimer's, and that means of course that he is forgetting things. Do you

know, he used to smoke 30 cigarettes a day, but he no longer does because he has forgotten that he's been a smoker all his life.

And that made me wonder. My Dad has been a CHRISTIAN all his life. Will he forget Jesus? And if he does, will he no longer be a Christian? Will he no longer be saved?

The immutability of God's promises means that even if my father forgets Jesus, Jesus will never forget my father.

He does not forget his promises. He does not rethink them, or renegotiate them, or renege on them.

My name from the palms of his hands  
eternity will not erase;  
Impressed on his heart it remains  
in marks of indelible grace.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father

There is NO shadow of turning with Thee  
Thou changest NOT, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou HAST been, Thou FOREVER will be.

**AMEN.**

**Let's pray.**

Unresting, unhasting and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might...  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but nought changeth thee.

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is  
sinking sand. When darkness veils His lovely face, I rest on  
His unchanging grace; In every high and stormy gale, My  
Anchor holds within the veil.

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.  
26 They will perish, but you will remain;

they will all wear out like a garment.

You will change them like a robe, and they will pass  
away,

27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.