

A God Who Changes His Mind?

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[0 : 0 0] We continue our way through the book of Jonah. I think it's a fascinating and exciting and an encouraging book to us today.

I think it challenges our Aussie pessimistic negativity about the power of God's word today.

So I'm hoping that we will leave this service today with a new confidence that God wants to have his name go out and wants people to know him and that he will work when his word is heard.

So let's pray for that now. Lord God, thank you so much for the word of the gospel, for the word of truth, for the word of scripture through which you speak to us. We pray that, Father, you would speak through it now as we reflect on it so that we might be renewed in our confidence to take your word to your world.

Amen. Friends, in the beginning was the word, the word of the Lord, the word of Yahweh, the rescuing covenant God of Israel.

[1 : 0 9] It was the word of warning, of judgment to come, the word against human wickedness of Assyrians, of Nineveh, in the 8th century before Christ.

And the word of the Lord is moving in Jonah. The word of the Lord comes to the prophet in chapter 1. Jonah, son of Amittai, an Israelite.

And the word of the Lord moves in a kind of a roundabout fashion, initially the wrong direction, but then via sailors, sea and fish. The word of the Lord finds its God-intended destination today.

Now God's word reflects God's heart and character. So where God's word goes, his power and passion goes with the word. And so we've seen that God's desire so far in Jonah has been that the word impacts people or it challenges, it converts people.

We've seen it convert sailors on a boat. Jonah was not even trying to evangelize. And yet on the boat, as he spoke of his mission and of the word of his mission, the word of God, pagan sailors were converted.

[2 : 2 7] God's power was at work. God's power was at work in storm and sea and the miracle of bringing the word of God and the prophet back to dry land and to Nineveh.

So friends, today, when we hit Nineveh, we ought not to be surprised at what the word of God does. It ought not to seem incredulous or impossible, what is about to happen.

Well, let's find out what happens. I think it's exciting. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.

It's almost word for word the commission that Jonah had in chapter 1 that God is starting over with his disobedient prophet Jonah.

God is giving him another chance. It's really another chance. It's not a test. It's actually just the grace of God that he recycles and disciplines and reuses his servants for his purposes.

[3 : 34] And I go to that great city. It's a formidable task for an Israelite to go to the capital city of a pagan nation and bring the word of warning, the word of God.

But Jonah, though before he didn't want to do it, mainly because he was selfish and didn't want to share the mercy of God, now he's been disciplined, now he's been subdued, and he will obey this time.

And it's interesting to see just the way that God puts Jonah on a very, very tight leash. You know, Jonah's told, Go proclaim the proclamation that I, God, give you.

Take my words and take them to Nineveh. I think there's very much a sense in which the eight-word sermon that he will see him preach in a minute is pretty much the exact words that God has given him.

He's on a tight leash. He's not given any opportunity to tweak or to expand upon the word of God or to kind of pitch it differently or to repackage it.

[4 : 39] He's on a very tight leash with God's word. He's to be faithful to the exact word he's been given. It's a great lesson to us. And Jonah obeys. It's wonderful now. So Jonah set out to Nineveh, verse 3, according to the word of the Lord.

So here we see the power of the word of God in that Jonah obeys it. The word of God has its own power to spread itself. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, three days' walk across.

Jonah began to go into the city going a day's walk, and he cried out, Here's the sermon. Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. End of sermon. And the people of Nineveh believed God, and they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

Now, let's just get our context here. Nineveh was one of the main cities of Assyria, at that time the capital of Assyria, a great pagan nation.

[5 : 47] Now where our translation says, I'm going to pick on the translation a little bit here, where it says Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, literally the Hebrew is, Nineveh was great to God.

That's what it says. And the idea is that it was, NRSV is trying to say, it was sort of divinely great, divinely large. So it was exceedingly large. But I think it could also have the meaning of, because when we say great, it can mean big, or it can mean important.

And so, it could also be saying, Nineveh was important to God. Nineveh mattered to God. It was great in God's eyes.

So kind of independent of its physical size, it was important to God. And so here we have a contrast with chapter 1. Both things are true. The wickedness of Nineveh, its evil had come up against God, and it made him angry, chapter 1.

But also, Nineveh is important to God, wicked, yet important to God. And Nineveh was a three-day walk city, which could just mean, yeah, to walk around it, or to walk through the area, it's three days.

[6 : 58] But it could actually be referring to a kind of ancient Near Eastern, a diplomatic process, a three-day process, that when a messenger, or an envoy from another country, or a prophet, came to a city, there'd be a three-day process of, you know, arrival, and announce your message.

You know, the second day, you would let it get through the city, and the third day, you exchange gifts and get a response. Jonah doesn't follow that exactly, but it could be another way of saying, in effect, Nineveh is important to God, a three-day diplomatic city, an important city, a capital city, a strategic city to God.

And so Jonah is sent to this strategic place. And Jonah's obedient, he walks in a full day's walk. He doesn't just shout it outside the city walls, but he goes right, you know, into the city to an extent.

And he obediently shares God's word. I'll share the sermon again. Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. It's only five words in the Hebrew.

A five-word sermon. Now you can imagine, that's such a simple, straight sermon, would have been quickly spread through the city, that this prophet has said, you know, 40 days more, we'll be overthrown.

[8 : 25] You can imagine, just spreads like wildfire. I think that's part of how the repentance came so quickly. I mean, we're all kind of sermon experts at Holy Trinity, let's be honest.

How would you rate this sermon? It's short, that's good. It's straight to the point. It's relevant. I would wonder if some of us might feel that Jonah's sermon is a touch on the negative side.

I mean, what do you think? 40 days and you'll be overthrown. 40 days and you'll be destroyed. Do you think that is a positive sermon or a negative sermon? It's hard to work out.

You know, because it could be saying, you've got 40 days. You've got 40 days to be saved. That's actually a gracious rescue opportunity sermon.

It could just be saying, you know, Nineveh, you have existed for hundreds, maybe, you know, a thousand years. You are the greatest city in Assyria. You're dead.

[9 : 24] So could this be negative? What do you think? It actually depends on your situation with God, your relationship with God, whether you see it as just a message of judgment that's irreversible or whether you see it as an opportunity for salvation.

I have the same tension in my own experience of talking to my non-Christian friends because I like, in a sense, to tell people about judgment day.

When I take funerals and I talk to families, I try and talk about judgment day. When you die, you face the day of judgment, a day of reckoning, of accountability.

It's one of the most clear teachings of the Bible, what happens after death, that, you know, you in effect, you will hit judgment day. And after judgment day, if you don't, if you're not forgiven, and if you've done evil and you're not forgiven through Jesus, if you haven't had your sins washed away by his blood, you face an eternity apart from God, you face hell.

And so, I've had people feedback to me, that's too heavy, that's too negative. But I don't relish the fact that there is a hell. I don't, it's because hell is so awful, because judgment is so awful, that I lovingly want to warn people.

[10 : 45] I would imagine that if I was not a Christian, I would want to be told about the day of judgment. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't that be a loving thing to do? Now the Ninevites, they take it positively.

They take it in, well, they take it as their judgment, sure, but they, they see it as an opportunity to call on God. And so the people proclaim a fast, and we'll see in a minute what the king does.

Oh, let's read it now. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, and that could have just been, when the, when the sermon, when the word of the Lord reached the king of Nineveh, the, the five words, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

And that was a very, in the ancient world, that was a cultural way of expressing public sorrow, public contrition, public shame. Then the king had a proclamation made in Nineveh by the decree of the king, and his nobles, no human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything.

They shall not feed, they shall not drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways, and from the violence that is in their hands.

[12 : 06] And here's the key line, And who knows, God may relent and change his mind. He may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish. It's a pretty full-on display of repentance.

It's a pretty full-on display of sorrow against your own evil, your own sin, of feeling that God is angry at you, and that you do deserve judgment, and you're sorry about it.

Now some people, many scholars, find this display quite incredulous, quite hard to believe, to the point that they, scholars will conclude that, you know, Jonah's sort of pretty much a fantasy book.

But I think we need to remember, friends, a couple of things about Nineveh. Nineveh's not like Melbourne. Melbourne's a secular city. Nineveh is a religious city.

It's a pagan religious city. And pagans, by their very nature, are, you know, very superstitious, very religious. I mean, even secular Sydney, I mean, the visit of the Pope shows you how close religion is under the surface anyway, even in a secular city.

[13 : 20] But leaving that aside, Nineveh was a city that would have many prophets coming to it all the time. We know from some other historical records that in 763 BC, under King Ashadon III, there was a total solar eclipse.

This is around the same time that Jonah may have come. We don't know whether it was before or after, but the 8th century. And they would have interpreted a solar eclipse as being a warning or an omen of judgment from God or from the gods.

They would have been worried about their status before God or the gods. And we know it was a time where there was some, after the solar eclipse, there was flooding and famine. And so you can imagine, Nineveh would have been something of a magnet for prophets coming to give their spin on the signs of the times and trying to tell Nineveh their interpretation on the signs of the times.

And I would imagine that such prophets generally tell people what they want to hear. So they'd probably tell Nineveh, yes, there is something bad foreboding, but all you have to do is X, Y, Z, this and that, and then you'll be right with the gods.

Or you could imagine other prophets coming to say, it's okay, you're going to have peace in your time, don't worry about that, the gods are happy with you. You know, telling them what they want to hear. But then Jonah walks into Nineveh and he doesn't sound like any of that.

[14 : 48] Jonah comes into King Ashadan's prophecy processing department with a five-word sermon, 40 days, you'll be overthrown, end of sermon. No way of getting out of it, no comfort, comfort message, no peace message.

Jonah's message would have stood out among the pantheon of prophetic interpretations of what's going on to their country and city. It would have been given a wide hearing.

I think this is why Jonah wasn't allowed to modify the message. It's when we modify God's word, even though we're very well-meaning, we try and make God's word more palatable, more understanding, more better packaged.

And by doing so, we actually water it down. And if Jonah had kind of repackaged his message, it would have been indistinctive and maybe would have been lost in the noise of the prophets.

But because he had been faithful to God's word, his message stood out. In stark contrast to the religions that were present, his word was distinct.

[15 : 58] And if you think about it, friends, the message of the Bible to our world today is a distinct message. There is nothing like the Christian gospel, the word of scripture today.

I mean, let me summarize what I think to you that the gospel is or one way to express the gospel. We are made in God's image, but because we try to be our own little gods, to rebel against God, God is angry, has fierce anger against us, and we cannot save ourselves.

There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. And because of God's love, the Lord Jesus painfully absorbed God's fierce anger, and now we can be saved only through Jesus, only through faith and repentance in Jesus, not from our own efforts or our own good works.

And so the Bible says a day of judgment is coming for everyone. Everyone will give an account to God, but there is no way you can win on that day by your own good works because we're all rebels. The only way to win on the day of judgment is to have faith in Jesus, to be washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Now friends, that message is not palatable. That message is offensive to tell people that they are rebels. They have committed treason against God and they cannot fix it.

[17 : 20] That is an unpalatable message. But I think it's precisely how distinct Christianity is that makes it stand out.

And it produces, by the power of God, repentance, faith, tears, stunning repentance because it's a stunning message.

The Anglican Church worldwide, the Anglican Communion, is falling apart over this very issue. How much should the church repackage its Bible to make it palatable?

And there are many that are trying to say we need to kind of get out the scissors and black out some bits of the Bible and underline and emphasize other bits of the Bible.

But friends, we do not have that freedom. And as soon as we do that, we will lose our distinctiveness and the power of God's word is muted. Our world is telling us, here's the message of the world.

[18 : 21] You're okay. Nothing wrong with you. And if you're not okay, you can fix it yourself with a few quick tricks and tips. Jesus comes along and says, the kingdom of God is near.

Repent and believe the good news. Those two things are so different, friends. We stand out. And that's what I think by the power of God in his word produces the repentance of the king of Nineveh.

And I think there are three aspects. I don't think we're very good at repentance today, by the way. We are not good at confessing to God our sin. We're not good at feeling in our heart God is angry at our sin.

How often have we shed tears over our sinfulness, over our evil that we do? We don't do that in Australia. And yet it's what the Ninevites did.

The pagan Ninevites did after a five-word sermon. And there are three aspects to what the king of Nineveh does. He shows public contrition. He calls for prayer to God.

[19 : 27] And he says, turn from your evil ways. So public contrition, prayer to God, and turning, stop doing what you're doing wrong. Now we are very good at taking what, taking God's things and doing two out of three.

Near enough is good enough. So there are plenty of people who agree that they should stop doing evil and they feel some sorrow for it but they will not cry to God for mercy.

So they leave out the prayer to God and they're trying to fix it themselves. There are other people who cry out to God for mercy in their life but they aren't willing to stop or turn from what they're doing wrong.

and so they only got that one. And there are people I think who do pray to God for mercy and do try and repent of it but they aren't willing to go public with their contrition or their make clear to the world.

They aren't willing to be counted with God's people. They aren't willing to be seen to be a Christian. They're trying to do all of this in secret or in private. But there's no such thing as a private Christian. To become a Christian is a public noticeable act.

[20 : 41] Friends, let's learn from the repentance of pagans. Let's model that in our own lives and let's pray for that as we try and share the word of God with those around us.

And the king of Nineveh has this great hope which is actually very biblical. Who knows, God may relent and change his mind. He may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish.

The king's pretty much almost quoting Joel chapter 2. In Joel chapter 2 there's the same words. In Joel chapter 2 verse 14 who knows whether God will turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him.

But the context of Joel 2 is this. It's God's promise of hope. He says, Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning.

Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And we'll hear that again in chapter 4 of Jonah.

[21 : 44] And God is God who abounds with steadfast love and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent. So actually the spirit of the Old Testament prophets of Joel is that God loves to change from his intention of judgment when people repent.

God loves to relent or as it says here, change his mind to show mercy. And that's exactly what happens. So the writer of Jonah says, when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it.

God now I would be very tentative to speak about God changing his mind if it was not here in the word of God because God is not capricious, he knows what he's doing, he has a plan, he does not kind of mix and match change plans halfway through that kind of thing.

God is more constant than that, God is solid. So what's going on? Well clearly I think, it's quite simple really, God has planned to invoke repentance so that he can show mercy.

God has planned to give a warning that is contingent on the response and God knows what he will do either way. We've got a great text in Jeremiah 18 which speaks about God's strategy of warning.

[23 : 18] God says in Jeremiah 18 verse 7 at one moment I may declare concerning a nation or kingdom that I will pluck up, break down and destroy it.

But if that nation, says God, concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. So it's God's way of lovingly spreading his word of warning to produce repentance, to produce salvation.

When people don't repent, he follows through on that initial word. When they do repent, he follows his sort of deeper plan of showing mercy to those who will call on his name.

Friends, what this chapter shows us is that not that God is capricious, but that God's word works. God's word has the intended effect that he wants to produce.

And so God's word works. It achieves its desired result. And its desired result clearly here is faith and repentance. Friends, let me encourage you.

[24 : 27] I think we're probably strong or good at faith, trust, belief in Jesus, but we're not so good at repentance. Let me encourage you to work on, you know, don't be afraid to reflect on how sinful you have been.

Don't be afraid to confess sin to God. Even though it feels kind of gross and it feels awful to think that you deserve God's judgment, you deserve hell, it will bring you to that place where you can then walk with God and grasp his mercy in such a deeper way.

It's such a good thing to have repentance. It's what the apostle Paul calls godly sorrow. So let me conclude. This is what's happening in the book of Jonah.

The word of God comes to Jonah a second time, the word of God. Jonah takes God's word or God's words and brings them to the Ninevites.

The Ninevites hear God's word through Jonah's words. God is a God who reveals himself through his word and God's word will achieve whatever it sets out to do.

[25 : 44] God's word has power to reach its destination and has power to reach the destination and achieve God's intended result. The right response to the word of God is to believe God with conviction and to repent with conviction.

And God loves to show mercy. He loves to show mercy to those who repent when they hear his word and when they believe in him when they hear his word.

So we could summarize the book of Jonah in this way. We have three chapters so far. Chapter one, God's word has power to produce belief and repentance in bystanders, in the sailors.

Chapter two, God's word has power to rebuke and challenge the messenger of the word. That's you and me. Chapter three, God's word has power to draw forth true faith and repentance to God's chosen hearers of his word.

You see, friends, I don't want you to give in to the scholarly, inept argument that Jonah is a fantasy book because a city could not repent like that.

[27 : 04] That reveals in the scholar and maybe in us that we presuppose that the word of God is impotent and the word of God is weak and the word of God cannot produce real change.

Friends, what do you expect to happen when you read the word of God, when you meditate on God's word? What do you expect to happen when you share God's word, when you read it with a friend or when you give them a Bible or a gospel?

What do you expect to happen? Nothing? Do you expect just rejection every time? What do you pray for? When you pray for the word of God to impact people?

Are you praying for the word of God to produce repentance and true faith? Friends, that is now what I am praying because I've been thinking and meditating on Jonah 3.

I'm encouraging us to expect faith and repentance to flow out of wherever the word of God is read and heard. I pray that you will share the word of God with people, maybe with trepidation, but with confidence, with hopefulness that God's word will act powerfully.

[28 : 19] I want you to be positive when you share the word of God, not defeatist, not pessimistic. Friends, I want you to have conviction that God's power is with his word and to think and to think like the pagan Ninevites did.

Who knows? God may relent and show mercy and change his mind and turn from the fierce anger he has on his world and he may show mercy as people come to an encounter with the word of God.

So why don't we pray for that confidence now? Heavenly Father, we do thank you so much for your word, for your word about your son to your world.

Thank you, Father, that you care for your world, that you care for cities and for people groups around the world. We confess, Father, that because of our selfish rebellion against you, we deserve your fierce anger and to perish.

We thank you for turning your fierce anger toward and against your son, the Lord Jesus, and thank you that he went through that on the cross so that we could be forgiven.

[29 : 36] Lord God, produce in us true belief and trust in Jesus and also produce in us public contrition, godly sorrow and genuine repentance.

repentance. Father, bring your word through us to many in the power of the Holy Spirit to achieve your intended result. And, Father, help us to repent of not trusting your word to produce fruit.

Help us to believe that your word will produce fruit sixty, even a hundredfold. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.