

Keynotes from Pastor Tim's am Sermon on 20/06/2021

Series – Jonah, the runaway servant

Part 7 – “Does God really change his mind?

Text: Jonah 3 verses 1-10

Scripture references from the ESV or NSV

Jonah 3 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.^b 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^c 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.

Without mystery there is no wonder. When we think about the stars, they are a cause for wonder – billions of balls of flame and gas, set in the vast expanse we call sky, with every one of them held in position for the last 6000 years. There is mystery in all of that – a mystery that causes wonder.

There are mysteries surrounding God that are more wonderful than the universe he created, mysteries that are revealed in the Bible. We are meant to read and grapple with those mysteries until we come to a point of wonder and worship, and of trust and submission. **Jonah 3:10** (above) is one of those mysteries.

God sees everything that takes place in his universe, including the evil that the Ninevites were doing (**Jonah 1:2** see p4). They were acting with ruthless violence

towards other nations and each other and God had determined to finish them off and bring them into the eternal judgement they deserved.

God sent Jonah with a message to warn them of his intention and their response is to repent.

- They accepted that they were evil and God was just in judging them
- They grieved over their sin against God
- They determined that they would stop their violence and, more importantly, actually did stop it
- They hoped that God might show mercy

Their repentance was real, but not the kind of repentance that leads to eternal life.

- When the sailors repented, after God had miraculously saved their lives, they turned **from** their evil ways and **to** God. They committed themselves to him, and became worshippers. (**Jonah 1:16** see p4)
- The Ninevites did **not** turn **to** God, and worship him. Their repentance was short lived and appeared to have been motivated not by love for God, because of his mercy to them, but out of a fear of being destroyed.

We need to be careful, and warn others to be careful. It is possible to make a commitment to Christ just because we want to escape suffering either in this life or in the life to come. This can often happen when a person is ill and afraid of dying. Fear will cause them to make some kind of commitment to Christ, but they have not seen his beauty and come to love him. When they recover, they forget about him and go back to living as they had before.

True repentance is driven not just by fear of judgement, but by a love for Jesus that causes us to treasure him above everything.

If our repentance doesn't lead us to love Christ, then it won't last and it isn't real.

God still took notice of what the Ninevites did. God, who sees everything that takes place in the universe, saw that they stopped their violence (**Jonah 3:10**), and in this verse we also see his response to their repentance.

God fully intended to destroy Nineveh, but when he saw their repentance, he appeared to change his mind, and didn't do what he said he would do. Elsewhere in

the Bible, we read that God doesn't change his mind as humans do. (**Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29** see p4). Yet he did change his mind when it came to the Ninevites.

How can this be? It is part of the mystery of God.

If we can see clearly how two contrasting facts can be held in tension, it will

- help you in your Bible reading, because there are other places where this happens
- take away the dreariness of life going forward, because it will cause you to wonder and worship at the mystery of God
- result in peace when life throws up unexpected challenges because it will reveal to us a God whom we can trust and submit to

Here are three points to help us understand how God doesn't change his mind as we do, yet does appear to change his mind according to how humans (Ninevites or inhabitants of Broadstone!) respond to him.

1. God accommodates himself to our limited understanding.

There are mysteries surrounding God that are beyond our ability to understand.

(**Isaiah 40:28** see p4). An example is the mystery of the Trinity – how can God be one God yet exist as three persons?

These mysteries help us to see the Godness of God (see quote from A W Pink p4).

- A god who you can fully understand and fathom isn't a real god. He is a human invention
- God is unlike anything in the whole of creation and cannot possibly be a human invention.

The God who has revealed himself in ways we cannot grasp and who leaves us grappling with mystery is a completely different being. That God is the real God. Yet although it is beyond us to fully understand God, he is a God who wants us to know him.

God communicates himself to us in terms we can understand

As an example, God speaks of his eye, his mouth, his hand and his arm even though he does not have these in a physical sense because he is spirit. He is accommodating

himself to our limited understanding as physical beings. By using words that are familiar to us, God helps us to understand that he is the God who sees, speaks and acts.

If we only had the fact that God doesn't change his mind (**Numbers 23:19** see p4), and not what **Jonah 3:10** (above) tells us then we could never have any confidence that God will:

- respond to us with mercy when we repent of sin
- deal justly with those who continue with violence towards us
- answer our prayers so there would be no point in praying

When you come across apparently contrasting verses, ask if this is where God is accommodating himself to us.

2. God really does respond to our response to him

God is a just God and could not let the sins of Nineveh go unpunished. He does not make idle threats (**Numbers 23:19** see p4) and Jonah's warning from God (**v4** above) was real. The Ninevites heard the message, believed it and repented and God responded by **not** doing what he had threatened.

God's response to Nineveh's repentance was a real response of his grace and mercy. Even before he sent Jonah to Nineveh, God had promised to respond to repentant nations with mercy. (**Jeremiah 18:7-8** see p4). To ignore Nineveh's repentance and still carry out his threat would have utterly unjust, acting against his own character and the promise he had already made.

If Nineveh had failed to repent, then God would have been perfectly just in judging them. By ignoring his message, they would have been accountable for their own destruction.

God's response of turning from his judgement when sinners repent is a real response, but we must bear in mind that

3. God sovereignly governs every detail of life on earth, including human responses

We read this consistently through the Bible (see p4 for a few of the many verses) and can see that God both

- governs all human actions according to his own eternal purpose and at the same time
- responds to human actions with real justice and mercy.

These two truths don't fit together and leave us wondering how this can be.

- Does God govern every human action, including the repentance of Nineveh?
- Did God truly respond to Nineveh when they repented, so that they were not overthrown?

The answer to both of these is yes and here we are faced with the mystery of providence.

God governs all things by his own wise counsel. At the same time, humans make choices for which they are accountable and of which God takes note and responds appropriately.

We have to learn to live with the mystery, though we will benefit by delving into it as deeply as possible. When we have got as far as we can get, there are two ways to live with the mystery that still remains.

a) **Wonder and worship** – when confronted by mystery, people respond in one of three ways, saying:

- it makes no sense and so must be untrue. However, in other areas of life we are happy to accept that there are things we don't understand. The theory of relativity is one example!! OR
- it makes no sense; therefore I must try to make it make sense. However, when people emphasise God's governance of all things above human responsibility to act or human responsibility above God's governance, the element of mystery is lost, leading to the loss of wonder and worship. (See p4 for quote from A W Pink). OR
- it makes no sense, but that is what the Bible teaches. This is the right response leading to an awareness that our God is a God of mystery, however deeply we dig into his word. We will stand in awe and worship him.

When we are willing to live with mystery, it will cause us to worship God for

- His grace to respond to human actions with mercy or justice

- His wise governance of the world, including his plan to save us
- His complexity which means we cannot comprehend him and all we can do is wonder

b) Trust and submission – God is true to his promises as we have seen. He will be true to his word in this too:

- He will return to this earth and everyone who has rejected Jesus will be sentenced to eternal death
- He will return to this earth and everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will inherit eternal life

If we heed the warning and turn from our sin, trusting in Jesus to save us, then we will inherit eternal life.

We have a God who does what he says he will do.

As we take time to dig deep into our Bibles, trying to fathom the depths of God, we will find the dreariness of life disappears in the light of the God we discover revealed there. Using the minds God has given us to wrestle with the truths we read, we will come to a place of awe and wonder, a place that brings us joy.

We will start to see God for who he is – the God of mystery who can be trusted absolutely.

Jonah 1:2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

Jonah 1:16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

Numbers 23:19 God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.

Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

1 Samuel 15:29 And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”

Isaiah 40:28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. (NIV)

A W Pink If God were not a mystery, he would not be God to us.

Jeremiah 18:7-8 ⁷If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed,⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

God sovereignly governs every detail – scripture references:

Numbers 23:19 (above)

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Jeremiah 10:23 I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.

Isaiah 46:8-11 Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors,⁹ remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose', ¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

A W Pink Modern theology has invented a god that finite human minds can understand, whose ways are pleasing to man, a god concerning whom there is no mystery. How different is the God of scripture. Of him it is said his ways are beyond finding out.