

Did God Change His Mind?

Question: What does "God repented" mean in Jonah 3:10? How can God repent?

Answer: Jonah 3:10 (KJV) says, "And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not."

Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh, saying that God would bring judgment upon them in 40 days. But when the Ninevites repented, God halted the judgment.

Does that mean that God changed His mind? No, because 1 Samuel 15:29 says, "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind." Why then, does the verse say "God repented"?

The New American Standard Version gives a better translation of Jonah 3:10, using "relent" instead of "repent." "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them and He did not do it."

The Lord had told Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you" (Jonah 3:2). We know what Jonah preached: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). However, the Bible doesn't disclose the entire message that God told Jonah to proclaim. Normally when God told His prophets that judgment was coming, He told them if the people receiving judgment would repent, He would stop the judgment.

When God told a nation that He was going to bring judgment, He made it conditional—that He would ease the judgment if they would repent. God told the prophet Jeremiah, "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it." (Jeremiah 18:7-8)

This same condition applied to the people of Nineveh. Even though Jonah pronounced judgment, if they would repent then God would relent. Jonah went through the streets of Nineveh crying out, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). When they repented of their evil deeds, Jonah became extremely upset because he wanted God to punish them. But the Lord relented of the judgment that He was going to bring upon Nineveh because they humbled themselves and turned away from their sins.