



Catalog No. 1586

Genesis 6:6-7

24th Message

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August 8, 2010

# DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Yesterday I had the great pleasure of conducting a wedding here at PBCC. It was with great confidence in the couple's suitability for marriage to one another that I performed the ceremony. Nevertheless, twice during the service I gave them the opportunity to change their minds. Twice I asked them, "Will you take this woman to be your wedded wife? Will you take this man to be your wedded husband?" I asked it first immediately before asking "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" I asked it again immediately before the exchange of vows, just in case my wedding sermon on "living together" had given them second thoughts. On either occasion they could have said, "No, I've made a terrible mistake." Up until a certain point there was still time for them to back out. There would have been much awkwardness; many people would have been bewildered, disappointed, upset. But there came a certain point in the ceremony when this was no longer possible. When the couple exchanged vows and rings they became bound together by covenant. When I pronounced them husband and wife, I solemnly declared, "Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder." They were now one in God's sight. It was an irrevocable step: married in the sight of both God and the state. Unfortunately the state no longer considers such vows irrevocable. It has become increasingly easy for married couples to change their mind.

We've recently seen some high profile changes of mind. A few years ago Britney Spears took just a few hours to realize she had made a terrible mistake after getting married the first time. At the other end of the spectrum, a couple married for forty years have announced that they have changed their minds: Al and Tipper Gore who ten years ago shared such a passionate kiss at the Democratic National Convention in 2000, a warm embrace watched by just a few million people. Even more recently we've had the saga of Bristol Palin and Levi Johnston and their on-again, off-again engagement.

In yesterday's wedding, after the exchange of vows and rings, James sang *Great is Thy faithfulness*, expressing the couple's gratitude for God's faithfulness to them. Today we have just sung that same song as the conclusion of a song set that was carefully put together. We started by singing *Father, Long Before Creation*: "Though the world may change its fashion, yet our God is e'er the same." Then we sang *Forever*: "his love endures forever... forever God is faithful." Finally we came to this hymn we all know and love so well:

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 has been Thou forever wilt be.

But now we come to the verses for today's sermon and they seem to throw that verse out of the window. Twice in two verses we read that God was sorry that he had done something. Regretting that he had made man on the earth he announced that he would remove man from the earth. To us, being sorry and deciding to undo what you have done implies more than a mere shadow of turning. It's a

180-degree turn, a complete reversal. How can we then sing, "There is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not... As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be"?

If you were here last week, you will recall that last week's text was so full of problems, so beset with dragons, that I punted on one of them: this problem of God being sorry and changing his mind. Today I'm catching the punt and I'll attempt to run with it. Can God change his mind? Does God change his mind?

We saw that Gen 6:1-8 comprises two parallel panels of identical three-part structure.

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|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Earth's view (6:1-4) | 2. Heaven's view (6:5-8) |
| a. The sons of God (2)  | a. The LORD (5-6)        |
| i. see that...good      | i. sees that...evil      |
| ii. take                | ii. regrets              |
| b. The LORD speaks (3)  | b. The LORD speaks (7)   |
| c. The Nephilim (4)     | c. Noah (8)              |

In each panel someone sees and acts, then the Lord speaks, and finally a person or group of people is described. In the first panel (6:1-4) the sons of God see that the daughters of man are good (beautiful) and they take them. In the second panel (6:5-8) the Lord sees that man's evil is great, and he is sorry that he has made man. The first panel presents the Nephilim, the second presents Noah. We saw that this structure highlights two contrasts: how the sons of God see versus how the Lord sees, and the Nephilim versus Noah. Today we focus our attention on the second panel, and especially on the Lord's regret.

**The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen 6:5-8 ESV)**

The Lord's evaluation is the polar opposite of that of the sons of God. They saw good, specifically that the daughters of man were good (beautiful). The Lord saw evil, specifically the evil of mankind. He intended the multiplication of man on the earth, enabled by his blessing and in fulfillment of his command, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." This indeed happened but it brought with it a multiplication of evil. The evil was comprehensive: *every* intention, *only* evil, *all* the time. Evil had permeated every part of man's being: his intentions, his thoughts, his heart.

The sons of God responded to their evaluation of good by taking whomever they chose. The Lord responded to his evaluation of evil with pained sorrow: he was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. In case we missed the point, it is reiterated in the Lord's speech: "I am sorry that I have made them."

What sense can we make of this response of the Lord's, both here and elsewhere in the Bible? First, a few general comments.

Firstly, the narrator intends us to hear this word loud and clear. Repeating a statement near-verbatim, first in narrative then in dialog, or vice versa, is one of the ways Hebrew narrative expresses emphasis. So, we can't just brush this under the carpet. It's front and center. However we translate the verb, God did it, he was conscious that he did it, and the narrator wants us to know that he did it.

Secondly, we can't make the problem go away by translating the verb in a gentler way. It is a very difficult verb to translate into English. We don't have any English word that comes close to corresponding to the Hebrew. Here the English versions offer several different translations: the Lord *was sorry* (NASB, NRSV, ESV), he *regretted* (TNIV, HCSB, JPS, NET), he *was grieved* (NIV), that he had made man on the earth. KJV uses the quaint and now unintelligible "it *repented* the Lord." Elsewhere the verb is translated as "repent," "relent," "change one's mind," or "have pity." No matter how we translate the verb we have a problem. There is no gentler way to translate this verb.

Thirdly, this is not a new problem. These verses about the Lord changing his mind have been in the Hebrew scriptures since they were put together. On the one hand, the Hebrew Bible says very clearly that the Lord does not change his mind. For example, Balaam said to Balak, the king of Moab who hired him to prophesy against Israel,

**"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?" (Num 23:19)**

Samuel said to Saul, when announcing that the Lord was going to remove him as king over Israel,

**"And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or *have regret* (change his mind), for he is not a man, that he should *have regret* (change his mind)." (1 Sam 15:29)**

And yet elsewhere the Hebrew Bible says very clearly that the Lord did change his mind, using exactly the same verb. This seeming contradiction is especially striking in the case of Samuel's interaction with Saul, because twice in that same chapter we're told that the Lord did change his mind, that he was sorry that he had made Saul king (1 Sam 15:11, 35). Again we're told twice for emphasis, this time the other way around: first in dialog (v 11) then in narrative (v 35). The compilers of the Hebrew Bible evidently had no problem with these seemingly contradictory statements being cheek by jowl. Such statements are an integral part of the message of sacred Scripture. They evidently were less of a problem to the ancient compilers of the text than they are to some modern readers.

Can God change his mind? Does God change his mind? There have been several approaches to try to resolve this problem.

One approach is to say that this is simply an anthropomorphic way of speaking. It is certainly true that we are limited to speaking anthropomorphically about God. We are limited to human concepts and language in our attempt to comprehend God and to say anything about him. Theologians have found that it is often easier to say what God is not than to say what he is: at the core of all these negative statements lies the same statement made by Balaam and Samuel: God is not a man. We are like the pot trying to understand the potter and what he is doing. Yet God has revealed something of himself to us, he has made us capable of receiving that revelation,

and he has given us his Spirit to give us understanding. Part of this self-revelation that God wants us to know is that he doesn't change his mind yet he does change his mind. So, despite our limitation of being pots not the potter we need to press ahead and try to comprehend this behavior of God.

A second approach is to distinguish between different levels of commitment on God's part, differentiating between his decrees and his announcements. Some have proposed that when he decrees that he will do something he will not change his mind, but when he merely announces that he will do something he can change his mind. I don't find this very satisfying. It's as if God has his fingers crossed behind his back when making an announcement and not when making a decree.

A third approach, one that has gained popularity in recent years, leads to what is called "open theism." Open theism wrestles with the tension between divine sovereignty and human free will. Where classical orthodoxy believes that God knows the future, indeed has determined the future, open theism states that God does not know the future; the future has not yet been determined. Instead, his behavior is contingent upon the response of humans. Wrestling with divine sovereignty and human free will is an age-old problem. Both are clearly stated in Scripture. But I am uncomfortable with open theism because it seems to make God less than God.

I find that none of these three approaches really helps us understand what is going on here. They are too abstract, too philosophical. It is too easy to debate these three approaches in a cold classroom setting, intellectually engaged by not existentially engaged, treating this as a matter for the mind with no engagement by the heart. I find it most helpful to approach the problem from a different direction, to think of it in terms of what God is up to in the world, of what the potter is doing with the pot. Why did God make the world and why did he make humans? What does he intend the world to be and what does he intend humans to be? It's within these questions that we have to ask the question of God changing his mind.

God had no need to create either the world or humans. He dwelt in eternal glory, completely fulfilled within the community of the Godhead. Yet he chose, for his good pleasure, to create a cosmos, the heavens and the earth, which he then filled with life. What was his purpose for the earth? What was his purpose for humanity? In the short-term the earth is a home for the various forms of life, and especially for the human. In the short-term the human is God's visible representative on earth, the image in his temple. God displays his glory in the heavens, but he did not make his presence directly visible in the world; instead he made it indirectly visible through the human whom he placed in the world as his representative. This is the story of creation, a story that we'll find is not yet complete. God has further purposes in mind.

Within the story of creation there is now a second story, the story of redemption as God acts to reverse the Fall and curse arising from human disobedience. He announced an ongoing conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent that would result in a final showdown. God moves this story along. We have to read his seeming changes of heart within the context of this unfolding drama of redemption.

God intended humanity to multiply on the earth; he wanted to fill the earth with his representatives. But this brought with it a multiplication of human evil on the earth. Humanity was no longer serving the purpose for which God had created it. The seed of the

serpent had multiplied until God would tolerate it no longer. I don't really have a good explanation for why God allows evil in the world. The Bible gives us very little explanation of that. Instead what the Bible focuses on is what God is doing about evil, what he is doing to remove evil from the world. Several times in these early chapters of Genesis we see that God acts to restrain evil: there is a limit beyond which he will not allow evil to progress. Here in Gen 6:5-7 human evil had reached that limit. So God said, "Enough!" He determined to wipe the slate clean, wiping humanity off the earth. Yet God's purposes for the world and for humanity remained the same. Therefore he preserved Noah and a sampling of life so as to start a new creation on a renewed earth. After the Flood he commissioned Noah to be a new Adam, to go forth under his blessing and "be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." Did this wiping clean and starting over with Noah solve the problem? No. God knew that human sin was as much of a problem after the Flood as before (compare 6:5 and 8:21), but God bound himself to keep creation going while he continued to pursue his unchanging purposes for the world and for humanity.

The next really significant change of mind is when the Israelites were at Mt Sinai after their exodus from Egypt. Just forty days after promising to obey all God's commandments, the Israelites were worshipping the golden calf, while Moses was on top of the mountain receiving detailed instructions about the tabernacle so God could dwell with his people (Exod 32). Provoked to anger, the Lord said to Moses, "Stand aside while I wipe them out, then I'll begin again with you." Moses had the audacity to plead with God, urging him to remember his purposes, his promises to Abraham, urging him to change his mind and relent from this disaster. The Lord did change his mind. Moses made another request, "teach me your ways so I may know you...show me your glory." And God did: he revealed himself to Moses, proclaiming,

**"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exod 34:6-7)**

That's who the Lord is. His love abounds, not because of his people's faithfulness but because of his faithfulness. He forgives sin. This is why he changes his mind. It's fundamental to his character. I think this blew Moses away: he "bowed to the ground at once and worshiped" (34:8). This self-revelation of God's character now became central to Israel's understanding of the Lord. Less than a year later Israel again rebelled against the Lord after ten of the twelve spies brought back a negative report of the land (Num 14). Again the Lord told Moses to stand aside so he could wipe the people out then begin again with him. Again Moses urged him to forgive, to change his mind. Moses now had an extra argument: he reminded the Lord that he himself had revealed that this was his character, to forgive sin, to change his mind. Why did God change his mind on these two occasions? Because his purposes for Israel had not changed! He changed his mind because his purposes were changeless.

Why did God change his mind when he rejected Saul as king? Again, because his purposes had not changed. It was never God's intention that his people have a king like Saul. The people wanted a king like all the other nations, a king like Saul, head and shoulders taller than anyone else. God allowed them to have such a king. But after tolerating Saul's faithless disobedience for a while God said "Enough!" He changed his mind and removed Saul as king. Why? Because he had made a mistake? No, because he had a purpose in mind for the king and that purpose remained unchanging. Saul nev-

er fulfilled that purpose. He never could because he was the people's choice, not God's choice, a king after the people's heart, not God's heart. So God's change of mind was really an expression of his faithfulness to his intentions for the king.

My final example of God's change of mind is the book of Jonah, where the verb occurs three times. When Jonah, God's reluctant prophet, pronounced divine judgment upon Nineveh for its evil, the king of Nineveh called for nation-wide fasting and repentance:

**"Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up (turn from) their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent (change his mind) and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." (Jon 3:9b-10)**

God heard this cry:

**When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented (changed his mind) and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. (3:11)**

This change of mind made Jonah mad. In an angry sulk he told God why he had tried to run away: he knew that this was what God would do. He knew that this was God's character, that he would change his mind.

**"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents (changes his mind) from sending calamity." (Jon 4:2)**

Jonah had an orthodox theology but it hadn't impacted him experientially. In his head he knew that this is who God is, but it hadn't reached his heart. This understanding of God as a God who changes his mind had not transformed him.

Jonah is a fascinating book. For me, the really big question is "Why is Jonah in the Bible?" It's really a very odd book. The pagan sailors cried out to God and were saved. The people of Nineveh cried out to God and turned from their evil; they repented. They found that God turned from his evil, the calamity he intended to bring upon them; he changed his mind. How much more, then, should God's own people Israel turn from their evil ways and find that God would change his mind! They would find God ready to forgive, because it's in his nature to forgive. Jonah found this nature objectionable. But all the other prophets realized that Israel's only hope lay in having a God like this. For example, Joel urged the people,

**"Even now," declares the LORD,  
"return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting and weeping and mourning."**

**Rend your heart  
and not your garments.  
Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and abounding in love,  
and he relents (changes his mind) from sending calamity.  
Who knows? He may turn and relent (change his mind)  
and leave behind a blessing. (Joel 2:12-14)**

Micah concludes with these words, read as our call to worship:

**Who is a God like you,  
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression  
of the remnant of his inheritance?  
You do not stay angry forever  
but delight to show mercy.  
You will again have compassion on us;  
you will tread our sins underfoot**

and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.  
 You will be faithful to Jacob,  
 and show love to Abraham,  
 as you pledged on oath to our ancestors  
 in days long ago. (Mic 7:18-20)

At the end of a book full of denouncing Israel and Judah for a litany of sins, warning of impending judgment, Micah ends by saying that Israel's great hope, her only hope, is to have a God who changes his mind. And so he bursts into praise, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." Notice how he ties in this forgiving nature of God to his faithfulness to Abraham and Jacob. God had purposes for his people that he had expressed in his promises to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3). Because God was faithful to his purposes he would change his mind and forgive his people's sin. Forgiveness implies changing one's mind. Faithfulness implies not changing one's mind. Micah saw no contradiction here. Quite the opposite! He saw that this was Israel's only hope. God would change his mind because he is faithful. This faithfulness to his purposes we call his righteousness. He will fulfill his purposes for creation, for humanity, for his people.

When I see that this is the emphasis of the prophets—of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Joel, and others; when I see that all of the prophets hung onto this character of God's—all except Jonah who found it offensive—it gives me a completely different way of looking at God changing his mind. Now I place myself into that story. I trace it on from how God behaved to Israel in the Old Testament to how he behaves in the New Testament age. I see that this is what God has done to me: he has changed his mind.

The penalty for sin is death, but God has changed his mind. He no longer looks on us as our sins deserve. He looks on us through the Lord Jesus Christ, and he gives us life. Why does he do this? Not because of anything in me, but because of his faithfulness to his purposes, to what he is doing with the world and with humanity. He has created this world for a particular purpose. He has created humanity for a particular purpose. The sinfulness of humanity will not stand in the way of him fulfilling his purposes. This requires him to change his mind. My very life depends upon it.

Yes, God changes his mind. He changes his mind because his purposes are changeless. I don't know how to formulate that in a robust philosophical package. But this is not a debate to have in the cold confines of a classroom. What I know is that my life depends on God being this way. I can find it offensive, like Jonah, or my only hope, like Micah. I take comfort in the faithfulness of God, in his righteousness: that he created the world for a purpose and he created humans for a purpose. Israel could simultaneously say that the Lord is not a man that he should change his mind, but then hold on to the fact that the Lord does change his mind! I do the same thing.

I am a pot, the Lord is the potter. When the pot ruins itself, at a certain point the Lord says "Enough!"—he changes his mind and ruins it. But when the ruined pot knows it's ruined and cries out to the potter, the potter again changes his mind: he sets to work to rebuild the pot into a beautiful vessel filled with his glory. God does this to complete the story of redemption, and beyond that to complete the story of creation: to make this world a fit place to fill with his glory, and to make us his people to dwell in his presence bathed in his everlasting glory.

It is because God changes his mind that I can sing of his mercy and grace, both of which require him doing just that. Mercy: he doesn't give me what I deserve. Grace: he gives me what I don't deserve. Like Moses I respond in worship: "Dissolved by thy goodness I fall to the ground and weep to the praise of the mercy I've found." Any debate about God changing his mind is to be conducted not in a dry classroom but on one's knees in worship. God changes his mind because he doesn't change his mind!

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