

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Always

The Immutability of God

We are dependent people. We depend on people to keep their word. We count on getting paid on payday. We expect Walmart to be open whatever time of the day or night we run out of something. Children assume that they will have beds and meals and clothing. When people fail to come through for us it testifies to the unpredictability of a fallen world. It also testifies to a universal standard of “rightness” that is common to all humans. The very existence of such a standard connects created beings to their creator—the one Who has revealed Himself as changeless.

The biblical doctrine of the immutability (or indefectibility) of God states that God, in His character, is changeless. Theologians have pointed out that any change in God would be either improvement or degradation. If He can get better He is not yet perfect. If He could get worse He would no longer be perfect.

But we do change. We change our opinions. We change in health and appearance. We have dramatic, unexplainable, sometimes damaging swings in our moods. There is the contrast that demonstrates why we are creatures in need of redeeming.

Definition

The doctrine that God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet he does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations. –Wayne Grudem

Two views in recent years, *process theology* (Charles Hartshorne) and its cousin *open theism* (Greg Boyd), have challenged the historic doctrine of the immutability of God. These systems say that God has “decided to make some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions^a.” In other words, God plays off of our actions. But is that entirely true? Certainly He calls us to pray and works His plan by using means, but does He change when we act? Does He need us to act so He can get His work done? There is a significant difference between God building human action into His sovereign plan and God learning and growing from humans.

Puritan divine Stephen Charnock pointed out the futility of prayer to such a being who is in a state of flux:

What comfort would it be to pray to a god that, like the chameleon, changed color every moment? Who would put up a petition to an earthly prince that was so mutable as to grant a petition one day, and deny it another?

What does the Bible say? We should never duck the hard texts that appear to contradict clearer ones. Consider some texts that make God look changeable:

The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. Genesis 6:6

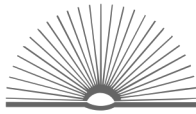
The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.” Exodus 32:9-10

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. Jonah 3:10

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” 1 Samuel 15:10-11

Through all of these texts God remained unchanged in His character and His plans. Just as He uses physical human features to describe Himself (eyes, hands, arms...), so He uses human emotions to describe Himself (these are called *anthropomorphisms*). Beneath all the

^a From the home page of the Open Theism Information Site, <http://www.opentheism.info/> accessed 5-16-2012.



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anthropomorphic texts there lies the God who wishes to reveal Himself to us. In destroying the world He showed His unchanging grace to Noah. In threatening the destruction of Israel He drew out a confession of His immutability from Moses. In bringing down Saul He uncovered his set purpose to raise up a king after His own heart. In turning away the destruction of Nineveh He revealed unchanging mercy and His determined plan to spare repentant sinners.

Helpfully placed shortly after the verse about the Lord's sorrow over Saul's kingship, Samuel taught Saul about the immutability of God:

So Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you. Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind." 1 Samuel 15:28-29

Charles Haddon Spurgeon outlined what we mean when we say that God is immutable:

- God never changes in His essence. Even taking on human flesh did not move the nature of God. In fact it demonstrated His nature.
- God never changes in His attributes. He is not developing His character.
- God never changes His plans. Spurgeon said, "There are no furrows on his eternal brow."
- God never changes His promises. He always keeps His word.
- God never changes His threatenings. He must punish evil.
- God never changes the objects of His love. His people shall be saved.

What this does not mean:

- Immutability should not be confused with immobility. He moves, but He always moves in keeping with His character.
- It should not be confused with impassion. As a person He has emotions and displays them.
- It should not be confused with unreachability.

Biblical statements that communicate God's immutability:

The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He. Deuteronomy 32:4

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Numbers 23:19

Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind. 1 Samuel 15:29

The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation. Psalm 33:11

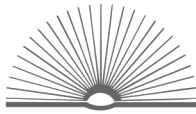
He has weakened my strength in the way; He has shortened my days. I say, "O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, Your years are throughout all generations. Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end." Psalm 102:23-27 (cf. Hebrews 1:10-12)

The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. *They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.* Lamentations 3:22-23

For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. Malachi 3:6

In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. Hebrews 6:17-18

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. James 1:17



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Why the immutability of God makes a difference in your life:

1. It warns you that you do have to change. You are not self-sufficient or complete. Your thoughts and actions demonstrate your need of a Redeemer.
2. It comforts you when all around your soul gives way. Your emotions and circumstances swing from one extreme to another. There is a place of safety and stability.
3. It motivates you to pray. The irony here is that the only hope for change here is the person Who does not change.
4. It assures you that God will save His people. He will not change His mind about the work of His Son. He will finish what He began.

Henry Lyte wrote a hymn that expresses the comfort found in our immutable God:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

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