

An Anchor for the New Year Selected Scripture

Our subject this morning is the *immutability* of God--His enduring, eternal unchangableness. Immutability. This is one of the most fundamental attributes of God, and one of the pillars of biblical theism.

Here's an interesting footnote about this subject: Charles Spurgeon preached and published more than 3,500 sermons in the course of his ministry, and if you go to volume 1 of his sermons and look up the first Spurgeon sermon ever published--you'll find it was a sermon titled "The Immutability of God." That's not a bad starting point for grounding people in biblical theology.

Immutability is one of characteristics of God that sets Him totally apart from the rest of creation: He doesn't change. Both His character and His will are fixed and steady. God is the one true constant in all the universe.

He doesn't waver or equivocate. He isn't subject to fits and mood swings. He doesn't change His mind. He doesn't break His covenants. He doesn't go back on His Word. He is steadfast in every attribute; unchanging in all His perfection, unvacillating in all His judgments; and faithful to all His promises.

In some ways this is one of the easiest-to-grasp and most obvious of all the divine attributes. Just think about it seriously for a moment. Of course God is immutable. He is the sum of all perfection. He is flawless in all His attributes. He could not possibly be any better than He is, so any change in Him would have to be for the worse. And, obviously, that is not possible. In fact, if it were even so much as a *possibility* for God to mutate into something less than He is, He wouldn't be truly perfect in the first place.

Even common sense affirms the immutability of God. Try to propose any theory about change in God and you eliminate the possibility of true perfection. In fact, one sustained theme reverberates through the biblical revelation of God, and it's this: God is perfect in every way. Everything you can possibly say that's true about God underscores his absolute perfection. In the words of Scripture (Psalm 18:30): "This God--his way is perfect." "All his works are right and his ways are just."

That's why instead of speaking about the "attributes" of God, I normally prefer to use the expression "the *perfections* of God," because every one of these characteristics shows how--from whatever perspective you study Him--God is absolutely and consummately perfect. If He changed at all, it would have to be for the worse, because He could not possibly be any *better* than he is. Any serious thinking about the God of Scripture will ultimately lead you to that conclusion.

In fact, the perfection of God is such that finite, imperfect creatures like us cannot possibly comprehend it; we can only stand in awe and acknowledge it. "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever."

That's Romans 11:33-36, and if you grasp what it is saying about the profound supremacy and perfection of God, you will understand why it is utterly impossible to think that God would ever be in a state of flux, transition, growth, or development. He cannot possibly be dithering or vacillating in any of His plans, His judgments, or His own nature. *Sound reason alone* allows no other conclusion: If God were not immutable, He would not be truly perfect.

But we're not left to figure this doctrine out by common sense; *Scripture* is emphatic in its affirmation of the doctrine of divine

immutability. This is one of the most basic truths Scripture teaches about God--and by that I mean that if you don't believe in the immutability of God, whatever *god* you do believe in is not the God of Scripture. **If you don't believe God never changes, then your god is too human.**

Incidentally, this is one of the glaring defects of all pagan religions: their gods are *never* immutable. The minds of pagan gods can always be changed--usually by some form of bribery or coercion. They are moody, fallible, unpredictable, arbitrary, erratic beings with very *human* characteristics.

The God of Scripture is not like that at all. In fact, God condemns people whose thoughts of Him are earthbound and human. Psalm 50:21. God is the One speaking here, and these are words of reprimand: "You thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you." It is a sin--it's a kind of idolatry--to re-imagine God in human terms. To humanize God is to dethrone Him and set an idol in His place.

Hang onto that thought because we'll come back to it. It is positively sinful to remake God in our image. It's an insult to Him to think of Him as if he were human. It's one of the most subtle but sinful tendencies of the fallen human heart--to think thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. He is *not* like us. Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

We can *ponder* the perfection of God but we will never fully *comprehend* it, and if you try to remake God into a lesser being just so you feel you can relate to Him more easily--or like Him better--you are playing a dangerous spiritual game. And multitudes are guilty of that. They conceive of God the way they *want* Him to be rather than the way He has revealed Himself. And have you ever noticed that whenever people concoct the kind of god they want, the result is always pretty much a self-portrait?

Too many evangelicals have dethroned the true God of Scripture in their hearts and replaced him with an imaginary friend of their own making. Don't do that. If you have shallow thoughts about God, or if you worship a manageable deity who is the product of your own imagination, your thinking about God needs an overhaul. Perhaps your religion is the first thing you need to repent of.

And for the very same reason, it is crucial not to allow reason, philosophy, or human speculation govern our thinking about God. That means even though it seems *reasonable* to acknowledge the immutability of God, the real question--the ultimate question, as in every point of theology--is, What does the Bible say about it? And as I said, the Bible is *emphatic* about the immutability of God. Here are some sample texts:

Malachi 3:6--God speaking--says, "I the LORD do not change." Pretty straightforward, right? James 1:17 speaks of God as "The Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." That pictures God as the source of all true light--and it's interesting that the feature James highlights is the utter lack of any variation or fluctuation in God. He's not like the moon, which merely reflects light and as the solar system turns a shadow is cast across its face. He's not even like the sun, which traverses the sky and causes whatever it shines on to cast some kind of shadow, and those shadows shrink or grow as the earth turns.

There is no such phenomenon with God. There is no variation with Him, no dark side, no shadow cast by turning. That is a powerful affirmation of God's immutability.

Psalms 102:25-27 is a hymn of praise about God's immutability. It says:

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

26 They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,

27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.

Hebrews 1 quotes that psalm and applies it to Christ. So it turns out this hymn is actually an inspired song of praise to the Son of God from His eternal Father. It's a little window for us to see Trinitarian praise from one member of the Godhead to another. And it is also one of the great proofs of the deity of Christ, because He is not only Creator of this world, but He also possesses these attributes that belong to God alone: eternality and immutability. And the writer of Hebrews repeats that idea again in chapter 13, verse 8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Here's another text: Numbers 23:19 says: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind." That's an important text. Remember that thought I told you to hang onto earlier? It is a serious sin to humanize God.

This text (Numbers 23:19) says *change* is a particularly human characteristic. You and I are mutable--*pathologically* mutable. We're subject to shifting opinions and changing trends. We're not always faithful to our New Year's resolutions, much less our commitments to one another. We hem and haw and equivocate and blow hot and cold. But God is not like that at all. In fact, listen to A. W. Tozer on this. He wrote:

The immutability of God appears in its most perfect beauty when viewed against the mutability of men. In God no change is possible; in men change is impossible to escape. Neither the man is fixed nor his world, but he and it are in constant flux. Both we and the world we live in are in a perpetual state of transition--and the laws of moral and physical and spiritual entropy dictate that when left to ourselves we tend to go from bad to worse. So God's immutability is one of the fundamental things that differentiates Him from us. He *doesn't* change His mind. He doesn't go back on His word. He doesn't say one thing and then

do another. He doesn't make idle threats. *All* men and women do those things, but not God. "Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar."

God is not like us, and one of the most obvious differences is this: He is immutable. He is not subject to change of any kind--including second-guessing, regret, reappraisal, self-doubt, or disappointment. He doesn't have a "plan B," nor has He ever needed one.

Here are a few more texts that affirm God's immutability: Isaiah 31:2: "He does not call back his words." Isaiah 40:28: "He does not faint or grow weary." Romans 11:29: "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Psalm 33:11 says His decree is unalterable and His plan unchanged from the very start: "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations." Hebrews 6:17 says His promises and His purpose are immutable. Romans 11:34 and 1 Corinthians 2:16 both say that God can't learn anything He doesn't already know. And those verses echo a string of other, similar verses in Job and Isaiah: "Who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" Job 23:13: "He is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does."

So the *fact* of divine immutability is clear and emphatic in Scripture. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. In Him "there is no variation or shadow due to change." According to Hebrews 6:17-18, His *faithfulness* is guaranteed by His immutability. Even His *names* underscore the truth of His immutability: Exodus 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM." God is the eternal "I AM." He is not changing into someone different, or morphing into someone else, or growing into something better, or transforming into something greater. By definition, that would be impossible.

He is "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end"--eternally unchanging and utterly perfect in every way.

Two dozen or more texts in Scripture refer to God as a "Rock." Isaiah 26:4: "The LORD GOD is an everlasting rock." That speaks of

security, a permanent place of refuge, and trustworthiness. The idea of immutability is more or less built into the expression.

Now, that's only a metaphor. God, of course, is not a literal rock. Furthermore, to be *immutable* is not to be *inert*. God doesn't change his mind, his character, or His eternal purpose. But the operations and the outworking of His will and decrees certainly do change. He acts and He interacts with His creatures, and for reasons that may be unknown to us (but reasons that are always perfectly consistent with His eternally unchanging will) He may show mercy in one case and wrath in another.

He is not passive or remote; He is actively involved with and cares for His creation. He may (from time to time) bring either His wrath or His compassion more or less to the forefront in His dealings with sinful men. From our perspective, He may *seem* to grow angry. Scripture uses language like that. Lamentations 4:11: "The LORD gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations." We frequently find similar expressions, such as in Psalm 78:4, which says the Israelites "grieved" God in the desert. Or 2 Kings 22:17, where God warns that His wrath is about to "be kindled." But we're not to imagine that God's affections rise and fall involuntarily like human emotions. His wrath against sin and His joy in the outworking of redemption are steadfast, perfect affections, like all the other attributes of God.

That's what we mean when we say God is *impassible*: he can't be surprised, disappointed, or injured, and His affections aren't uncontrolled passions, like human feelings usually are.

Impassibility is a huge subject. It's related to the doctrine of immutability, but we don't have time to explore it in depth this morning. I wrote an article about it, which you can download on the Web. It's titled "God without Mood Swings," and you can find it with any search engine.

But the point this morning is this: Don't ever imagine that God is subject to temper tantrums or fits of passion. His affections are as steadfast and unwavering as all His attributes.

This doctrine of divine immutability is such a foundational truth that you wouldn't think anyone who seriously claims to be a Christian could possibly deny it. But that's not the case. One of the most spiritually deadly and anti-biblical developments in the world of theology over the past century is a view known as *Process Theology*. The basic idea is that God Himself is in process, constantly shifting--becoming something other than what he used to be. And one of the key arguments, of course, is the old canard that the God of the Old Testament is different from the New Testament God. The idea is that in the Old Testament YHWH was more stern, more destructive, more intolerant than the more gracious and kindly God Jesus spoke about in the New Testament.

Of course that is pure poppycock, and if you study the Scriptures, you'll discover that the Old Testament, by sheer weight of volume, actually has much more to say about the mercy and lovingkindness of God than the New Testament does. It's a theme that permeates the Old Testament. Psalm 145:9: "The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made." First Chronicles 16:34: "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!"

Think of what that verse is saying: His steadfast love endures forever! Not only is the theme of that Old Testament verse all about the tender mercies of God; the whole point of it is yet another affirmation of the principle of divine immutability. And I only gave that one reference, but the fact is, that very same phrase, "he is good: for his steadfast love endures forever" is a frequent refrain in the psalms. As a matter of fact, the expression "his steadfast love endures forever" appears in every single verse of Psalm 136--26 verses total! Each verse ends with that same phrase ("his steadfast

love endures forever"). So don't pretend that the lovingkindness of God is a theme you don't really hear in the Old Testament.

And don't pretend that the New Testament is only about mercy and kindness, without any note of judgment. Jesus alone had more to say about hell than the entire Old Testament. And when Paul preached in Athens, he characterized the Old Testament dispensation as "The times of ignorance God overlooked"--a time when God more or less was slow to judge the sins of gentile nations. "But now," Paul says in Acts 17:30: "but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

So don't tell me that the God of the New Testament is more laid back and tolerant (a God of mercy) compared to the wrathful version of YHWH we encounter in the Old Testament. People who hold that opinion haven't read the book of Revelation, I guess.

But that's the idea of Process theology--God is changing. He is becoming more kindly and more sophisticated. He's more tolerant of sin and more friendly to other belief systems. He's not like the God who ordered the wholesale destruction of the Amalekites. He's becoming more and more like the ACLU or Greenpeace.

Process theology was a development in the extreme liberal end of the theological spectrum. Most of you have probably never heard of Process Theology. But I'm fairly certain a lot of you have heard of Open Theism. This is the toned-down, evangelicalized Arminian-flavored version of Process Theology. Like Process Theology, Open Theism flatly rejects the truth that God is immutable.

Open Theists believe that God doesn't know the future with absolute accuracy. The future is still "Open"--even in the mind of God.

So, of course, by that view, God is constantly learning and discovering new things every day as the future unfolds and He finds out where things are going. The god of Open Theism

discovers future events the same way we do: by watching them unfold. Not only is the god of Open Theism neither sovereign nor omniscient, He cannot possibly be immutable. He is literally changing all the time--constantly learning, growing, developing--just like the God of Process Theology.

Openness doctrine is in effect a wholesale denial of the immutability of God, and Open theists are very candid about that. They have no problem setting aside the classic view of God, who is unchanging and eternally the same. They *want* to have a god who is uncertain, vacillating, undecided about what He is going to do, constantly juggling contingency plans. They *want* to humanize God. They think that makes God more approachable.

Open Theism's teachings are beginning to filter into churches everywhere, and you see these ideas nowadays being set forth and defended by people who are openly challenging the classical, biblical view of God but who want to claim they are thoroughly evangelical.

Just this week, there was an article attacking the immutability of God on the blog of Tony Jones, former National Coordinator of Emergent Village. He wrote, "God Is Not Unchanging. . . . The Christ event was nothing less tha[n] a 180-degree change in God."

So there's that same old myth, repeated again: the New Testament God is different from YHWH of the Old Testament. That (of course) flatly contradicts what the New Testament says about Christ: "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature--" and He is "the same yesterday and today and forever."

While I was studying this week, I read a large stack of really *good* material on the unchangeableness of God, and I also read three key books arguing for Open Theism. And one thing that jumped out at me is that all of them brought up 1 Samuel 15, which is the passage I want to look at with you for the remainder

of our time this morning. And I was glad to see them deal with this passage, because it is admittedly a difficult one, and it ought to provoke us to think very carefully about what Scripture means when it says "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?"

Although (as I said) the immutability of God is a truth that seems self-evident, and it's a doctrine that is repeatedly and emphatically asserted in the Bible from beginning to end, it turns out this is not such an easy doctrine after all. Because God Himself *does* sometimes make statements that express "regret." Genesis 6:6, for example, says, "The LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart."

Also, here in 1 Samuel 15:11, God Himself says, "I regret that I have made Saul king."

And it turns out that God *does* occasionally relent after threatening judgment. In Exodus 32, for example, after the incident where the Israelites made a golden calf, God threatened to consume the whole nation with fire and start over with Moses. But Moses interceded and Exodus 32:14 says, "the LORD *relented* from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." In Jonah 3, after telling Jonah--after **compelling** a *reluctant* Jonah--to preach this very specific warning to that evil city, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"; Jonah 3:10 says, "God *relented* of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."

So God *does* at times alter His course of action in a dramatic way. If you take the Bible at face value, without carefully considering the full context of *all* Scripture, it is tempting to conclude that God *does* sometimes resort to plan B.

And our passage is a classic example of this. In your bulletin, I have highlighted three verses from this text that I want to consider with you. In verse 11, God tells Samuel, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed

my commandments." But then in verse 29, Samuel tells Saul, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." By the way, Samuel uses the very same Hebrew word for "regret" that God used in verse 11. So God says, "I regret"; Samuel says, "[God] will not have regret . . . He is not a man that He should [regret anything.]" And then look at the last sentence in the chapter, at the end of verse 35: "And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel."

So what are we to make of all *that*, in light of the biblical teaching that there is no variableness and no shadow of turning with God, but he is the same yesterday, today, and forever? Either Samuel was wrong to tell Saul God doesn't regret anything; or he meant something very specific in this one case--that God might change his mind about *some* things, but he wasn't going to relent on his decision to depose Saul. (That's the interpretation favored by most of the Open Theists.) Or the third possibility is that Scripture is using a deliberate figure of speech when it says God regretted making Saul King. And I'll tell you now, that's what I believe is the only possible conclusion from this text and others like it. This is a simple figure of speech, and it is *purposely* juxtaposed next to a reaffirmation of what the Bible consistently teaches about God: He isn't vacillating or uncertain about anything. He doesn't make mistakes. He doesn't go back on His word. He knows precisely what he is doing and He always does it with careful purpose.

And then we have these three or four instances in the Bible where God is described as changing His mind or relenting. Those texts are the equivalent of other texts that speak of God as if He had human body parts--"the right arm of the Lord," "the Lord's face," "the mouth of the Lord." We know not to take expressions like that literally, because Scripture says "God is Spirit" (John 4:24), and Jesus said in Luke 24:39 "a spirit does not have flesh and bones." Those expressions are called *anthropomorphisms*--figures

of speech that ascribe a human form to God. They are figurative expressions, accommodated to our way of speaking because the reality of God is frankly far beyond our capacity to understand without figurative language.

I have two gorgeous grandchildren, and I don't speak to them the same way I speak to my adult children. I pepper my speech with baby talk. Darlene is even worse about that than I am. We all do that with infants, as a way of connecting with them on their level.

God similarly does that with us, and when Scripture speaks of the hand of God or the eyes of the Lord, we are not to imagine that He has literal hands and eyes. We're told plainly he doesn't. He is pure spirit.

Likewise, when Scripture tells us God "relented" in the very same context where we are told plainly that He *doesn't* relent because He isn't human, we need to understand that this is figurative language--describing the operations of God to us in familiar human terms, not literally teaching that He is arbitrary or vacillating. In this case, the figure of speech is powerful, because it underscores the shocking force of God's judgment against Saul. The Lord utterly rejected Saul from the throne of Israel.

And in the case of Israel at Sinai and Jonah in Nineveh, the language highlights the amazing mercy of God toward people who truly deserved harsh judgment.

But in no case did God literally alter his original plan or call an audible, and that is easy to demonstrate from the biblical record. Jonah knew very well that God *never* intended to destroy Nineveh, and he says so in Jonah 4:2. In fact, Jonah was *angry* that God wanted to show mercy to Nineveh. That's why Jonah fled in the first place and had to get a whale-ride back to where he was supposed to be. And when the city repented and God showed them mercy, Jonah complained to God about it (Jonah 4:2): "I

knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

Far from being proof that God *changes*, Jonah saw the gracious reprieve God gave Nineveh as proof that God was exactly what Jonah knew Him to be. And the prophecy of Nineveh's destruction--like all of God's threats--carried an unspoken condition.

In Ezekiel 33:14-15; God says: "Though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die." So all of God's threats are qualified by that promise, and when God rescinded the threat of destruction from Nineveh, it was not because *God* changed, but because the Ninevites repented.

Same thing with Exodus 32, where God withheld the threat of destruction from Israel because Moses interceded on their behalf. God didn't change *His* mind; Moses stepped in as their intercessor, and God honored that. In effect, He accepted Moses' personal grief as a symbol of the nation's repentance.

Here in 1 Samuel 15, the situation is somewhat more complex. Twice in the narrative we're told that God regretted making Saul king. Once, right between those two statements, we're told that God never regrets anything, because He is not a man. In the time we have left this morning, let's try to untangle this.

By the way, if you want a fuller look at 1 Samuel 15, I preached through this chapter once before, dealing with a totally different difficulty: how do we understand and justify God's command to commit a wholesale act of genocide against the Amalekites?

This is one of the harshest, most violent episodes in all the Bible. God orders Saul to exterminate the entire race of Amalekites--even women, children, and livestock were to be summarily destroyed.

And the narrative culminates with Samuel, the priest, grabbing a sword and seizing Agag, the Amalekite king, and (verse 33): "Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD." In other words, he literally butchered this guy as an act of worship. And he did it to fulfill the Lord's command after Saul had sinned by showing Agag mercy. How do we reconcile *that* with the truth that God is merciful and full of lovingkindness?

Since I've preached through this passage in another context, I'm not going to cover that same ground again this morning. You can download that mp3 from the Web if you want to hear it. But the short answer is that the Amalekites truly deserved this judgment, and God has full authority to administer His judgments by any means He chooses.

In this case, he wanted to make a graphic statement through a decisive and bloody military victory against a nation that had treacherously ambushed Israel when they were virtually defenseless in the wilderness. The Amalekites also posed a significant terrorist threat to Israel's future, as subsequent events in the Old Testament show. We recoil at the thought of genocide--and rightly so when it comes at the hands of evil or self-willed tyrants. But this wasn't a wanton act of human aggression. This was an act of judgment mandated by God--and it's His prerogative to judge.

Also, the destruction of Agag and the Amalekites is illustrative of how ruthlessly God wants us to deal with the sin in our lives. John MacArthur has a great sermon on *that*, called "Hacking Agag to pieces." Download that one while you are downloading things.

But this morning we are concerned with the *other* great difficulty of this passage, and it's the question of what to make of these statements that seem to contradict. How do we reconcile this in a reasonable way that does justice to Scripture and takes the text seriously?

Remember that Saul was the people's choice as King in the first place. He was never God's choice. The Lord conceded to the Israelites' demand for a king--even though it wasn't God's timing. Samuel was really the last and best of the judges--spiritual and military leaders who had led Israel during that dark time when (in the words of Judges 21:25) "here was no king in Israel. [And] Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" But the people wanted a *king* instead of Samuel because they wanted to be like the other nations. Monarchy was fashionable, and the Israelites, who had never had a king, felt very unstylish. So they cornered Samuel and demanded a king. And in 1 Samuel 8:7, "The LORD said to Samuel, 'Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.'"

God's plan involved a king--ultimately a long line of Kings that would culminate in the greatest King of all time--the Messiah. But now was not the time to institute the monarchy. It's possible, perhaps even likely, that David, God's choice for the throne, was not even born yet when Saul became king.

So God's willingness to put Saul on the throne of Israel fulfilled a specific purpose: it was a lesson to the Israelites about the folly of demanding their own choices rather than obeying the law.

Therefore when God deposed Saul, this wasn't a sudden change of mind. It wasn't a change of mind at all from God's perspective; it was the culmination and the vindication of everything God had said from the beginning. And the only change that took place from the time Saul was anointed until the day he was deposed was a change in Saul.

That part of the story begins here in 1 Samuel 15, when Samuel received that command from the Lord about the extermination of the Amalekites. He immediately conveys the

message to Saul (v. 1), and he urges Saul to harken carefully to the Lord's instructions.

Saul, who by this time had grown spiritually careless (that's putting it lightly; he had basically turned his back on the Lord) and he was intoxicated with his own power and reputation, rendered only partial obedience to the Lord's command. He spared the Amalekite King, Agag, and he kept the very best of the livestock (verse 9), destroying only what was worthless anyway.

So God informs Samuel about Saul's failure to obey. Verse 11 gives us God's exact words: "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." Samuel understood exactly what that meant: The people's king had blown his final opportunity. Saul was to be deposed.

In verses 12-31, there is this back-and-forth dialogue between Samuel and Saul. Saul keeps insisting (vv. 13, 20) that he *did* obey the Lord (which was a lie); or (v. 15) at least he *intended* to obey the Lord and honor Him with a sacrifice of these animals. Plus, he subtly tries to lay the blame on the people (vv. 15, 21). Finally, he admits in verse 24 that he has sinned, but even that supposed confession is another blame-shifting lie. Look at the end of verse 24: "because I feared the people and obeyed their voice."

Saul didn't fear the people; he was just self-willed. He wasn't truly repentant; he was just sorry he got caught, and he was desperate to hang onto his throne. So he begs Samuel to pronounce him forgiven, and when Samuel turns to go, Saul even grabs his robe and tears it (v. 27).

Samuel uses that torn robe as an object lesson for the prophecy he is about to deliver, and at this point he affirms the immutability of God (v. 28): "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." God will not change His mind. The judgment is

final, and Samuel's declaration of the immutability of God is the terminal punctuation for the pronouncement of judgment.

Samuel then kills Agag (v. 33), and he and Saul go their separate ways (v. 34). The closing verse then reiterates what God said in verse 11. It is a profound, stunning, sobering expression of God's displeasure with Saul in the strongest possible language. It does not negate the truth of verse 28, and it *cannot* negate that truth. To interpret it as a literal statement that God thought he had made a mistake would be to make God a liar.

Now our time is gone and all I have given you are bullet points without any kind of outline. You know that's not my normal style, so let me quickly give you a three-point outline of the practical benefits of this doctrine of divine immutability.

1. IT IS A REASON FOR THE WICKED TO FEAR.

That was Samuel's point here in verse 29. Saul, seeking a kind of flippant forgiveness for his weak-hearted half-obedience makes a half-hearted and very weak confession that is really no confession at all. Samuel cites the doctrine of divine immutability to make it clear that God's judgment, like all His decrees, was final, irrevocable, and settled forever. That ought to have struck fear into his heart--though Saul's subsequent history shows it only hardened his heart.

But the truth that God is immutable *ought* to evoke a holy fear in the hearts of the wicked. It debunks the notion of those who claim God is now tolerant and not harsh, the way we see Him in certain Old Testament accounts like this one. Because God *doesn't* change, sinners need to see that *they* are the ones who must change. They should seek His face, repent, and ask for mercy.

So God's immutability is a reason for the wicked to fear.

2. IT'S A REASON FOR THE REDEEMED TO BE COMFORTED.

God's immutability guarantees that He will honor all His promises and fulfill the work of conforming us perfectly to the image of Christ. Most of the explicit statements about divine immutability are given expressly to comfort the elect. I have time to cite only one, and it's the one I began with, Malachi 3:6: "I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed." The parallel passage is one we sing about all the time, Lamentations 3:22-23: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

So divine immutability is a reason for the wicked to fear; a reason for the redeemed to be comforted. And

3. IT'S A REASON FOR ALL CREATION TO GLORIFY GOD.

Everything in the universe other than God is subject to change. Psalm 102 reminds us that everything other than God was also created by Him and owes him honor and praise. Psalm 102:25: "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end."

Remember, there is Messianic significance in that psalm. It's about Christ. And Philippians 2:10-11 tells us that one day, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

I'm convinced if you truly lay hold of the truth of God's immutability, you will bow and embrace Him as Lord and Savior.

If we can help you understand the gospel better, we want to do that. After the close of the service this morning, there will be some men and women in the prayer room, through these double doors to your left. They can show you from Scripture how to find

forgiveness for sins. If you're a believer and would like to join our church, they can get you started in that process. Or if you have any other spiritual needs and don't know where to turn for help, please see one of us immediately after the service in the prayer room. We'd love to meet you and offer any help we can possibly give.

Now, bow with me for a closing prayer,

Father, your word assures us that even when we are faithless, You remain faithful. You cannot deny yourself; you will not break your promises or change your mind. You are a rock and an anchor for us in a fallen world that offers no security whatsoever. Fill our hearts with faith; give us grace to be steadfast in a way that befits your children. And may we thus be a testimony to your truth in a world of turmoil--for the glory of Christ.