

- I. Session 85: The Immutability of God Part 2: Does God repent?
- a. Purpose: In this session we shall consider objections to the doctrine of the immutability of God from verses that mentions God repenting so that we would see how to respond to them and finally draw implications for our lives from the truth that God is unchanging.
 - b. Reminder of the definition of the immutability of God:
 - i. Essentially this doctrine means that God does not change.
 - ii. Note: There are differences and slight nuances concerning the definition of the immutability of God among theologians, even Evangelical ones as we see below.
 - iii. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue: “God’s immutability is his perfect unchangeability in his essence, character, purpose, and promises.”¹
 - iv. John Feinberg: It is “the belief that God does not change in his person (being and attributes), will (decree), or purposes.”²
 - v. Wayne Grudem: “God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.”³
 - c. Recall in the last session we saw verses in which God does not change His mind
 - i. *“The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek.””* (Psalm 110:4)
 - ii. *“For this the earth shall mourn And the heavens above be dark, Because I have spoken, I have purposed, And I will not change My mind, nor will I turn from it.”* (Jeremiah 4:28)
 - d. Yet there are verses in the Bible that also describes God changing His mind
 - i. Examples of God changing His mind in Scripture often use verbs that are translated as “regretted,” “sorry” or “repented.”
 - ii. *“The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”* (Genesis 6:6)
 1. This verse takes prior to Noah’s flood.
 2. It also explains why Noah’s flood happened.
 - iii. *““I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night.”* (1 Samuel 15:11)
 1. This verse is spoken by the Lord.
 2. It describes God’s rejection of Saul as king.
 3. 1 Samuel 15:35 also states *“And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.”*
 - iv. *“Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of*

¹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 169.

² John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 270.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 163.

which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.” 14 So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” (Exodus 32:12-14)

1. Prior to this passage the Hebrews sinned against God by building the golden calf and God has said He will destroy them in **verse 10**.
 2. **Verses 12-13** record the words of Moses’ prayer to God for mercy for the Hebrews.
 3. Note Moses’ prayer includes an appeal to God for Him to change His mind: *“Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind” (v.12)*
 4. **Verses 14** then record *“the Lord changed His mind.”*
- e. Why we don’t believe God truly changes His mind
- i. Last session we have looked at various passages in its context that demonstrate God does not change His mind.
 - ii. Also other attributes of God makes a compelling argument that God does not truly change His Mind.
 1. We have already seen that God is all knowing; if God is all knowing He does not need to truly change His mind for He already know in His mind what will happen and what He will do.
 2. We have already seen the sovereignty of God; if God is sovereign and in control, He does not need to truly change His mind for His decree in His mind will be carried out.
- f. How do we explain God changing His mind? Answer #1: Realize there’s not a contradiction but rather something deeper is going on
- i. Point: Even within the immediate context of some of these passages that mentioned God changes, there are hints that God doesn’t change as we shall see in the following examples. In other words, the author intends us to slow down before arriving at the conclusion that God does change.
 - ii. **1 Samuel 15:11** and **1 Samuel 15:35**
 1. Within this very chapter which mentioned God regretted twice we also find a pronouncement that God does not change His mind: *“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**)
 - iii. **Exodus 32:12-14**
 1. We saw above that **verses 12** and **14** mentioned “changed mind” in reference to God.
 2. However in **verse 13** the basis that Moses appeal to God to not wipe out the Hebrews assumes that God keeps His promise and does not change: *“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”* ← As a promise-keeping God, God does not and should not change His mind!

- iv. So we see that even within the context of passages that says God changes His mind there are statements made that should slow us down from a simple or naïve conclusion that God does change His mind.
- g. How do we explain God changing His mind? Answer #2: Anthropomorphism
 - i. Anthropomorphism means the “assignment of human attributes to nonhuman” which in this instance is applied to God.
 - ii. Anthropomorphism often convey mental word pictures that makes truths more vivid.
 - iii. The Bible does use anthropomorphic language to describe God.
 - 1. **Exodus 6:6** include the phrase “*I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm.*”
 - a. Of course knowing the attribute of God’s aseity (independence of God), we know God does not need a physical body since He does not depend upon anything that is not God to be God.
 - b. The point is that this is a vivid imagery of the strength of God.
 - 2. **Exodus 4:14** include the phrase “*the anger of the Lord burned against Moses*”
 - a. In the Hebrew it is literally “the nose of the Lord burned.”⁴
 - b. Of course God does not literally express His anger out of His nose but we get the sense that God is angry.
 - iv. If God can use human arms and nose to describe Himself He can also use the example of human minds.
 - v. Some Open Theists and Christians object to the explanation of anthropomorphism being employed in these passages since it doesn’t explain much.
 - vi. If we ONLY say these passages that mentioned God changing His mind are anthropomorphism then the critics have a point. So we must also ask how the anthropomorphic language function or what truths that it points to.
- h. How do we explain God changing His mind? Answer #3: Some verse are conditionals
 - i. Point: Sometimes languages of God relenting describes a conditional situation.
 - ii. “*And rend your heart and not your garments.*” *Now return to the Lord your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness And relenting of evil. 14 Who knows whether He will not turn and relent And leave a blessing behind Him, Even a grain offering and a drink offering For the Lord your God?”* (**Joel 2:13-14**)
 - 1. Here we see the Prophet Joel telling the people to repent to God (**v.13**).
 - 2. Whether the people repent or not is the condition.

⁴ Source: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/anthropomorphism.html>.

3. If the people repent then what follows is that the Lord would bless them (v.14).
 4. Thus the changing of the mind describes different responses from God according to what conditions are being met and not necessarily the fact that God changes per se.
- i. How do we explain God changing His mind? Answer #4: Historical Linear Perspective
 - i. Remember Scripture often uses normal everyday language and not academic specialized language.
 - ii. Remember also God's relationship with us takes place in real life and in real time.
 - iii. So we should not be surprised that our relationship with God is described as experiences in linear historical terms.
 - iv. Description of God changing His mind does not mean literally God changed His mind.
 - v. Example from day to day life to consider: "The sun rises." But that does not mean we are denying the truth that it is the earth that rotate around the sun.
 - j. How do we explain God changing His mind? Answer #5: Cambridge Change
 - i. What is Cambridge Change?
 1. A Cambridge Change is what philosophers describes what seems to be a change but is really not a change.⁵
 2. It describes changes of relations more than changes of the subject itself.
 3. John Frame has a good example: "On the human level, consider that Mary has the property of being taller than her son Justin on January 1, 1998, but loses that property on January 1, 1999. She has remained the same height, but Justin has grown taller. Normally we would say that Mary has not changed in this respect, but that Justin has. If we are in a philosophical frame of mind, however, we can formulate the event as a change in Mary, by saying that she has lost and/or gained a property. We might call this a Cambridge change as opposed to a real change."⁶
 - ii. Cambridge Change helps us conceptualize how at times when passages says God change His mind, it is not God's essence or Himself that changes but the relations between human beings and God has changes. Ultimately like John Frame's analogy human beings are the "Justin" that changes while God as "Mary" was not the one who truly changed.
 - k. How do we explain God changing His mind? Answer #6: Relenting and repenting at times convey God's attribute of mercy and grace
 - i. Language in Scripture of God relenting and changing His mind doesn't describe God changing but sometimes it describes His attribute as a God of wrath against sin.

⁵ John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 268.

⁶ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002), 567.

1. *“The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”* (**Genesis 6:6**)→This verse describes God’s attribute of wrath against sin which is later displayed with the Noahic flood.
 2. Likewise the description of God changing His mind with Saul being king in **1 Samuel 15** describes God’s judgment against Saul for sinning.
- ii. Language in Scripture of God relenting and changing His mind doesn’t describe God changing but sometimes it describes His attribute as a God of mercy
 1. *“So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.”* (**Exodus 32:14**)→This verse describes God not destroying the Hebrews after their idolatry.
 2. *“Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds.”* (**Jeremiah 26:3**)→Here God changing His mind describes His mercy of sparing them from judged for their evil deeds.
 - iii. Since these passages demonstrate that God is a God of wrath and a God of mercy, it does not show God changing in His essence but rather it demonstrates God’s various attributes.
1. Implications
 - i. We can trust in God to not change in His Word and promises.
 - ii. We need to be a promise driven people!