

BIB105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 1d — God's Unchanging Character

Presented by the



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One of the frustrating things about education is that things change. Maybe not so much in math, but in things like science and technology, you no sooner learn something than something new is discovered or invented. The same thing goes on out in the internet. The latest social media is yesterday’s news. Things are constantly changing, and it is frustrating trying to keep up. As we study God’s attributes, we might be tempted to ask, “Can God change? Is it possible that God can change in his promises or in his character? Can the laws that God has set down be changed? Can we be assured that God will never change?” The short answer is that there is no change in God. An immutable object is an object whose state cannot be modified. This is in contrast to a mutable object which can be modified. One of the attributes of God is that he will never change. He is immutable.

When one changes, they usually change for the better. And sometimes they change for the worst. Since God is an absolute perfection, no change for the better is possible since you cannot improve on perfection. The same holds true for changing for the worst. Change is not possible with God. He does not develop or grow. He always remains the same. Consequently, there is no inconsistency in God. The Scripture makes it clear that God does not change in his character or purpose, his fairness towards humankind, or in his promises. The technical term for this, as we’ve said, is immutability. The Bible says, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.” [Isa 40:28] So God’s character is unchanged and it’s unchangeable. The Bible says this over and over. The basic character of God is not subject to change. The psalmists said, “You are the same, and your years will have no end.” [Psa 102:27]

Now, if God cannot change, neither can his promises. And one promise is with respect to the guarantee of Israel’s preservation. In the Book of Malachi, God declares, “For I am the Lord, I do not change.” [Mal 3:6] In the context of Malachi, God is guaranteeing the preservation of the nation of Israel. The New Testament also says that God does not change. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.” [James 1:17] There is nearly 500 years between the Book of Malachi and the Book of James. But in all of that time, God’s nature has not changed.

God, by nature, is a Trinity consisting of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He has always been a Trinity, and he always will be. His basic nature will remain forever the same. The author of Hebrews tells us, “You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.” [Heb 1:12] Because God’s nature does not change, his character remains the same. He has been and always will be completely righteous. This means his dealings with humankind are always right. He is never unfair. The apostle Paul said of God, “Because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.” [Act 17:31] God will judge humankind based on the standard that he has set down. God will not change those standards. I know our culture likes to change standards, but God will not change those standards. His judgment will be fair. It will be consistent and it will be not based on human circumstances.

Now, as God’s character does not change, Scripture also says that God does not change in his purposes. “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.” [Heb 6:17] Paul wrote, “For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of the works but because of Him who calls.” [Rom 9:11] In the Book of Job, we read, “But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does.” [Job 23:13] The psalmists wrote, “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of His heart through all generations.” [Psa 33:11]

So God’s character does not change. God’s purpose does not change, and his promises do not change either. The Bible testifies that God does not change in his promises. The Lord says of himself, “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent.” [Num 23:19] In 1 Samuel, we read, “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.” [1Sa 15:29] Paul wrote to the church at Rome, “For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” [Rom 11:29] The Bible emphasizes that God is faithful to the promises that he has made to mankind. The prophet Jeremiah said, “Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” [Lam 3:22-23] So God makes promises. Those promises will not change. And the New Testament says that God will not deny his promises. He writes, “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” [2Ti 2:13]

Another attribute of God is his power to deliver on the promises he has made. It’s one thing to make a promise. Sometimes it’s quite another to keep it. But God has the power to do that. Many times as human beings, we make a promise with full intention of wanting to keep that promise, but through circumstances or unforeseen events, we are unable to follow through, even with the best of intentions. But God has the power to follow through with his unchangeable promises. “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promises of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” [Rom 4:20-21]

Now, in dealing with humans, God has made many promises, as we have seen. But not all of God’s promises are unconditional. Some come with strings attached, so to speak. Some promises of God are conditional. When God promises something to us, he will complete his promise. But some of these promises that God has made to humankind are based on humanity’s response. For example, the prophet Jeremiah records God saying, “The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, to destroy it, if that nation whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good which I have said I would benefit it.” [Jer 18:7-10]

So what we see here is a situation where God has not changed and mankind has. God does not change. He makes and keeps promises. And God is not inactive. When we say that God does not change, we do not mean that he is a static, impersonal, distant being. God dynamically interacts with his creation. Although God does not develop or grow, he is not distant. To the contrary, he is actively involved in humanity. Although God’s actions in dealings with humanity may vary or change, he himself does not change. In his essential being, he is always the same. Human beings can change. God cannot.

So to summarize thus far, the Bible says that God will never change. There are a number of specific ways in which the Bible says that God will remain the same. First, there is his basic character. Nothing about it will ever change. Next are his purposes. They will remain constant. The Bible also says that his fairness towards humankind would always be the same. And finally, we are told that his promises will all be kept. Therefore, we can rest assured that God will remain the same.

Now, having said that, if we accept the fact that God is perfection and that he cannot change, how do we account for certain parts of the Bible that seem to indicate that God changed his mind? There are several instances in Scripture where God seems to relent or repent or change his mind about something that he was going to do. One of those stories that many people are familiar with deals with Moses and the people. You might remember the movie when Charlton Heston, I mean when Moses, came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments. He found that the people had followed into sin. They had made for themselves a golden calf and were dancing around it and worshiping it. God then told Moses that he was ready to destroy the nation. Moses pleaded for the people. And the Scripture says, “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he had planned to bring on his people.” [Exo 32:14] Is this not a clear example of God changing his mind?

Another example is that God regretted that he had made Saul the king of Israel. Scripture seems to say that God had second thoughts about this. “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.’ Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night.” [1Sa 15:11] Another seeming example of change is the account of God’s change towards Nineveh. In the Book of Jonah, God was going to destroy the people of Nineveh. They repented of their sin, and God had mercy on them. It says then, “God saw their works, that they had turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.” [Jon 3:10]

The seeming changing of God’s mind in these and other situations makes people wonder if God is wavering in his word. But this is not the case. In this situation with Moses, God was angry because the people had rejected him in favor of an idol. His desire to destroy them was not unalterable. Moses’ interception on behalf of the people kept them from being destroyed. From humanity’s point of view, God’s mind was changed. But God had known all along what would happen. Moses prayed for mercy, and God answered his prayer. The same is true in the case of Jonah and Nineveh. The people of Nineveh prayed to God, had a massive revival, asked his forgiveness. God heard their prayer and granted mercy to them. He did not change his mind for he knew all along they would repent of their sins. Yet from a human point of view, this was not unknown. The people had not been assured that God would stop judgment if they repented.

But Jonah had an idea that that might happen. When the prophet realized that Nineveh would not be destroyed, he prayed to God and said, “Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, one who relents from doing harm.” [Jon 4:2]

So as we look at these situations, we see the change was with humanity. In these instances, a prayer of repentance changed the outcome of the situation. The change was not with God, but with humanity. When the conduct of humanity changed towards God, the conduct of God appeared to change towards humankind. Yet God was consistent in his behavior all along. We also see in these changes that it’s always God stopping punishment. When Scripture tells us about God relenting or repenting of what he said he would do, each instance is in regard to punishment. It is never a case of God promising to do something good and then changing his mind. His promises to his people will not be broken.

As we look at these accounts, we have to dig deeper and look at the translation. There’s also the possibility that the word translated “repent” has the idea of being grieved or sorry, with no idea of the concept of change. If this is the case, then Scripture does not even suggest a change in God’s dealing.

So in the end, the Bible assures us of the following things about God’s nature. God will not change towards us with his promises. And seeming change in God’s dealings is from humanity’s point of view, not God’s. Every time God changed his mind, it was in favor of humanity rather than against. There is also the possibility that the word translated “repent” has more an idea of being grieved or sorry. If this is the correct translation, then there is no issue here with regard to God’s dealing with humanity.