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**C0714 – April 11, 2007 – Ex 32:11-14 – Does God Change His
Mind?**

- 3. Moses Intercessory Prayer (32:11-13)**
 - a. Your People (32:11)**
 - b. Your Name (32:12)**
 - c. Your Covenant (32:13)**

Exodus 32:11-13 Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²“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 which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever.’”

This is not one of those pansy prayers offered today. This is an example of true argument in the midst of prayer. Moses argued with God over the people! We have so much hypocrisy in some of our prayers that it is no wonder prayer meetings are dead. If we would talk honestly and frankly to God, prayer meeting would be the most exciting meeting in the church.) Listen to what Moses said, “Lord...I do not recall bringing any people out of Egypt. And they are not *my* people; they are *Your* people. You brought them out of Egypt and You did it with a mighty hand. I could not bring them out. You made a covenant and swore by Yourself. Have You forgotten about Your

word? You have made a mistake, Lord.” Can you imagine talking to God like that? Moses did!ⁱ

PRINCIPLE: When are we ever going to learn how to pray from the prayers in the Bible? This prayer was answered with a “Yes”. All prayers get answers but most of them are “No” because we don’t present an argument that has any weight. Moses presented a weighty argument. It was built on Scripture and when God heard this kind of a prayer He responded with a “Yes.” Moses was doing what he was called to do “Pray”! We are called to pray and we are called to argue with God from Scripture. Moses listened closely to God and then went to God with ammunition. This is bold but when you enter the courtroom of God to petition Him you better go with weighty arguments and sincerity. You better be serious and you better let God know it. He’s not going to listen to petty pansy prayers from petty pansy Christians who don’t really know Who they’re dealing with. When you go to God in prayer don’t go only with a list of what you need. Bring reasons why He ought to give them to you! If you’re praying for your children to marry godly spouses tell Him why this is a good idea. Tell Him because marriage is a witness of Christ and the Church in the world and that this witness is dying out and it will be a good idea for your children to marry godly spouses because they will be a witness of Christ and the Church in the world. Tell Him you’ll support them all the way and how your children will be lights in the darkness and restore biblical marriages. You have to get down in the nitty-gritty. Get down to the heart of the matter and pray hard like Moses. You might have to argue with God.

We know what Moses prayed for but how did Moses get what he asked for? He based his prayer on three arguments. *First*, “They are Your People” not mine. You brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand, not me. *Second*, “It’s Your Name that’s at stake.” If you destroy them the Egyptians are going to say the God of Israel just brought them out to destroy them. The God of Israel is evil. They are going to give you a bad reputation. They are going to cast evil on Your name. *Third*, “Don’t forget Your Covenant”. **Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel.** He says **Israel** not Jacob because it means “wrestles with God”. Jacob was re-named Israel because he wrestled with God at Peniel (Gen 32:28, 30). Now Moses is wrestling with God in prayer. You can’t expect to get anywhere with God tiptoeing into the ring of prayer. You have to come to God like a wrestler, confident and armed to the teeth with His word. That’s what Moses does and here he comes with a reminder

about the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Israel, His servant. YHWH is the suzerain of Israel and Israel is the vassal of YHWH. He says **You swore by Yourself**, that is, You took a maledictory oath. This refers back to Genesis 15 where God cut animals in half, put Abraham to sleep and He alone walked through the pieces swearing to Abraham. This was a maledictory oath. A maledictory oath means “cursed be Myself if I do not do what I have said”. . Then he quotes Gen 15:5 and 26:4. You 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.’** So, Moses wrestled with God in prayer. YHWH would have been righteous and just do destroy the people and start a new nation with Moses. But Moses based his prayer on three arguments that had an amazing result. God decided to do something different than He said! What did God do?

4. YHWH’s Gracious Answer (32:14)

Exodus 32:14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

This verse is one of the most interesting and controversial in the entire Bible. We wonder, “How can it be that “the Lord changed His mind”? Especially when the Bible says “God never changes” (Mal 3:6)? And this verse is not alone. Other passages say the same thing “Gen 6:6; 1 Sam 15:35; Amos 7:3; Jonah 3:10) How should we understand this verse? Several explanations have been given.

Open Theists claim that God changed in the sense that He chose a different course *that He had not anticipated before*. In other words, the future is open because of future human choices. In this view for man’s choices to be truly free they cannot be known by God in advance. God is waiting to see what choices humans will make and then He responds. So, in this case, God said I will destroy them but then Moses prayed and this human choice caused God to change His mind and take a course He had not anticipated before. This view is inadequate because the Bible clearly teaches that God knows all things actual (Ps 147:4-5; Job 37:16; Isa 45:21) and possible (Jer 38:17-23; 1 Sam 23:11-12; Matt 11:21). Therefore God knew that Moses would pray and that He would not destroy all the people.

Classical Theists claim that “the Lord changing his mind” is an anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is a figure of speech that means “ascribing to God something that only humans possess”. In other words, what God did was *similar* to when a human changes his mind but not *identical*. Classical theists say that “no one’s prayers or arguments can actually move God to do anything he had not already planned to do.”ⁱⁱ This is a popular explanation for this passage because the Bible does use anthropomorphisms. For example, the Bible ascribes to God a “mighty hand” “eyes” “ears” a “face” but He is actually an invisible Spirit. This view has some merit in the context. Clearly Moses spoke anthropomorphically when he said in verse 13 “Remember”. God never has to “remember” something the way we do since He knows everything! Although this view has some merit it is probably not the best for two reasons. *First*, it trivializes prayer. The only prayers that are answered are those God pre-determined to answer before the foundation of the world. This does not adequately deal with many passages that give humans conditions to meet in order to have our prayers answered (e.g. Matt 7:7; John 15:7; Js 1:5; 4:3; 5:17). *Second*, this view reduces the sovereignty of God to creature experience of cause-effect. That is, it de-personalizes the universe into a mechanical process. It argues that God’s plan is fixed, static with the effect that no truly personal interactions occur between God and men. This view sees no other way of God’s ends being certain if every detail was not determined in a cause-effect chain of unalterable events. But this view does not take into view the fact that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and our ways are not His ways. His thoughts and His ways are infinitely higher than ours (Isa 55:8-9). It is therefore conceivable that an alternative to these explanations is possible.

To give a third interpretation let’s look at some Scriptures. On one side we have Scriptures that say “God does not change” (*saha*).

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

James 1:17 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 shadow cast from turning (author’s translation).

On the other side we have Scriptures that say “God did change his mind” (*naham*). In fact, in 1 Sam 15:29-35 it says God will not change His mind (*naham*) and six verses later it says God did change His mind (*naham*).

1 Samuel 15:29-35 “Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.” ³⁰Then he said, “I have sinned; *but* please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the LORD your God.” ³¹So Samuel went back following Saul, and Saul worshiped the LORD. ³²Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag came to him cheerfully. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.” ³³But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal. ³⁴Then Samuel went to Ramah, but Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.

Which is it? How are we to understand the immutability of God? Does God change or not? To unravel this difficulty we have to study the word *naham* used in Exodus 32:14, consider the context and other contexts that use the same verb form. First, the words “changed His mind” in Exodus 32:14 are from one Hebrew word, *naham*. KJV translates “repented”, most translations say “relented” (e.g. NIV, ESV, NKJV, NET). “relented” is the best translation here.ⁱⁱⁱ He relented of a proposed course of action. It is used eleven times in this form^{iv} (Gen 6:6; 24:67; 38:12; Exod 32:14; Judg 21:6; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chron 21:15; Ps 106:45; Jer 26:19; Ezek 31:16; Jonah 3:10) and seven of these eleven uses have God as the agent (Gen 6:6; Exod 32:14; 2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chron 21:15; Ps 106:45; Jer 26:19; Jonah 3:10).

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

Exodus 32:14 So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

2 Samuel 24:16 When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity and said to the angel who destroyed the people, “It is enough! Now relax your

hand!” And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

1 Chronicles 21:15 And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it; but as he was about to destroy *it*, the LORD saw and was sorry over the calamity, and said to the destroying angel, “It is enough; now relax your hand.” And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

Psalms 106:45 And He remembered His covenant for their sake, And relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness.

Jeremiah 26:19 “Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and the LORD changed His mind about the misfortune which He had pronounced against them? But we are committing a great evil against ourselves.”

Jonah 3:10 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*.

With the exclusion of Genesis 6:6 what these passages are teaching is that in certain situations God “relented” from some course of action due to prayer or His great lovingkindness. It can rightly be said that God is a relenting God. “So, relenting is part of his very nature as the Lord. He is the Lord who relents...Relenting is a divine attribute.”^v We need to be clear in stating that just because God changed a proposed course of action this does not constitute a change in His character. God’s character never changes. His character is immutable and this means His character is forever perfectly stable. He was, is and always will be sovereign, righteous, loving, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, immutable, eternal, etc...Also we need to be clear in stating that just because God changed a proposed course of action this does not constitute a change in the knowledge of God. God is omniscient meaning He has complete knowledge of everything actual and possible. He never learns anything new. His knowledge never changes. He always knew that He would threaten to destroy Israel and He always knew that Moses would entreat Him and He always knew that He would relent.

What we learn from this is several things about God. *First*, relenting is an attribute of God. He is the Lord who relents. *Second*, He personally responds to prayer. He is the Lord who answers prayer (Exod 32:10-14). Sometimes He

says “No” but sometimes He says “Yes” (cf. 1 John 5:16-17). *Third*, He is faithful to His covenants. He is the Lord who fulfills His covenantal promises (Ps 106:45; Exod 32:10-14). *Fourth*, He is full of lovingkindness. His love sometimes leads Him to relent (Ps 106:45; 2 Sam 24:16). *Fifth*, God’s prophesied actions are sometimes conditioned on human responses. If humans change in relation to Him then God’s proposed course of action may change (Jonah 3:4, 10). *Sixth*, God built flexibility into His plan so that he has a number of options available to Him in certain situations. In these situations the choice God makes will not change His revealed plan.



There are choices within God’s revealed plan of history and prophecy which are “open” to more than one choice and others that are “closed”. By “closed” we mean to say that certain choices must be made by a human or else it will change God’s revealed plan of history and prophecy which is impossible. By “open” we mean to say that certain choices are left open to the human and no matter what the choice it will not change God’s revealed plan of history and prophecy. I know of only one guideline that can help you know whether a choice is “open” or “closed”. If it is a command in Scripture then the choice to obey or disobey is an “open” choice. Neither obedience nor disobedience to the command can alter God’s revealed plan of history or prophecy. Both choices only confirm that what He said would happen is true. However, this does not mean the choice to obey or disobey is insignificant. These choices will your personal privileges and position in the Millennial Kingdom and the New Heaven and Earth. Outside of this we cannot know whether a choice is “open” or “closed”. For example, if I had the choice of buying one pair of soccer shoes or another I do not know if this choice is “open” or “closed”. That is, I do not know if it would alter God’s revealed plan of history and prophecy or not. If it would then God would work it out where I purchased the pair that would not alter His revealed plan. If it would not then I could make either choice. In such a case it would not affect my eternal privileges or position. This is why I

have placed a dashed line between the “open” and “closed” areas in the above diagram.

Finally, is it reasonable to conclude that if Moses had not prayed God would have destroyed Israel? I think “Yes”. Apparently God knows more than we do and God knew that if he destroyed all Israel and started anew with Moses He could still make His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel come to pass. We may not know how but He does know how. Therefore, playing Monday morning quarterback we know this was an “open” choice. God could have destroyed them and His revealed plan would not be altered or God could also have “relented” and it would not have altered His revealed plan. God chose to “relent” due to the intercession of Moses. This choice did affect the privileges and position of these Israelites in the Millennial Kingdom and the New Heaven and Earth. Moses’ intercession is therefore quite significant.

ⁱ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, Based on the Thru the Bible Radio Program., electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1981), 1:ix-301.

ⁱⁱ John Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 65.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Hebrew word *naham* is translated numerous ways: “relent, repent, comfort, compassion, satisfy, relief, pity, change, sorry, console, regret”.

^{iv} The form is verb, nifal, passive, prefixed (imperfect) sequential, singular, masculine, third person.

^v John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 562-563. Frame is a hyper-Calvinist but I agree with his exegesis on Exodus 32:14.

[Back To The Top](#)

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