

The 1689 Confession of Faith; Chapter 2 – “Of God and the Holy Trinity”,
Message # 8 – “Does God Really Repent?”, Presented in the Adult
Sunday School Class by Pastor Paul Rendall
on October 2nd, 2016.

Chapter 2 – Of God and the Holy Trinity, Paragraph 1 -

The Lord our God is but (a)one only living and true God; whose (b)subsistence is in and of Himself, (c)infinite in being and perfection; whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself; (d)a most pure spirit, (e) invisible, without body, parts, or passions, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is (f)immutable, (g)immense, (h)eternal, incomprehensible, (i)almighty, every way infinite, (k)most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute; (l)working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, (m)for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; (n)the rewarder of them that diligently seek him, and withal most just (o)and terrible in his judgments, (p)hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the (q)guilty.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism states in Question 4 – “What is God?” “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

We have been studying the subjects of God’s Immutability and His Impassibility. Last week we looked at the definition of Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms. We learned that Anthropomorphism is figurative language which predicates (assigns) human form to God. (Confessing the Impassible God, P. 440) And Anthropopathism is figurative language which predicates (assigns) human feelings, affections, and passions to God. This morning we want to look at a few specific Bible verses which will help us to understand whether God really has regrets like a man about the things that He has done, and whether He really repents of things which He has chosen to do in the past.

1. Verses which speak about the subject of God’s Regret - 1st Samuel 15: 10 and 11 – “Now the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, ‘I greatly regret (KJV – “It repenteth Me) that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments.” “And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night.”

In the New Century Dictionary it says this under the word – Regret: “To feel sorry for, as some fault or error of one’s own, doing or not doing something, etc. (as to regret one’s haste, harshness, or folly.” “I regret that I did not take your advice.” “The feeling of one who regrets; sorrow, or sense of loss, over a person or thing that is gone; sorrowful feeling, disappointment, or dissatisfaction over anything that one wishes might have been otherwise.” “The feeling of being sorry for some fault, act, omission, etc. of one’s own.”

This is certainly applicable to men who are finite in their understanding; who cannot see everything that will happen in advance. But what can we say about the use of this word in relation to God? According to what we have seen in our study of God’s immutability, we know that God has no fault or error in His own doing. All that He does is perfect. Therefore, He does not and cannot have any regrets about anything that He has chosen to do. He cannot feel sorrow or disappointment or dissatisfaction as a man does; that He might have failed to take some

particular feature of a man's character into consideration when He appointed him to the office that that man would hold.

The New Webster's Dictionary says that to regret is "to grieve over; to lament; to deplore; to have grief, sorrow, or remorse. In this particular case we find God describing Himself in these verses as regretting that He had set up Saul as king.

2. How then should we understand these verses concerning God's regret? Well, we cannot believe that God is changeable in either His Being or in relation to His decrees; His purposes which He has formed from before the foundation of the world in relation to every created thing and every person. But the immediate reason for God's dealing with Saul in this way is that he had rejected the word of the Lord to him. God, therefore, rejected Saul from being king. This was a very real interaction between God and Samuel over Saul's rejection from being king. God's decree is related to His infinite and perfect understanding of His purpose in relation to all the things that any man is free to do according to their own sinful nature. Men cannot change God's mind by their thoughts and actions. He already knows everything perfectly. If we look down the page a bit farther to verses 24-29 we will see that God wisely judges men by their words and by their actions without in any way changing in His own purpose or intended actions. And so we should conclude that He is speaking this way, as a man would speak and understand such a thing so that we can, in a measure, understand His hatred toward sin and His intention to remove Saul from the throne.

"Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice.' Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the Lord." "But Samuel said to Saul, 'I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.'" "And as Samuel turned around to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore." "So Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours who is better than you.'" "And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent." "For He is not a man, that He should relent." The King James version says: "And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent." The New American Standard translation says: "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind." The ESV translation says: "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for He is not a man, that He should have regret."

John Gill says on verse 11 – "It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king,.... Which is not to be understood of any change of mind, counsel, purpose, or decree in God, which is not consistent with his unchangeable nature; but of a change of dispensation, and outward dealings, and is spoken after the manner of men, who, when they repent of anything, change the course of their conduct and behaviour; and so the Lord does without any change of his mind and will, which alters not; and though he changes the outward dispensations of his providence, yet he never changes and alters in the matters and methods of his grace; though he repented he made Saul king, he never repents of his making his saints kings and priests for himself; his outward gifts he sometimes takes away, as an earthly crown and kingdom; but his gifts and calling, which are of special grace, are without repentance."

1st Samuel 15: 35 – "And Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death." "Nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul, and the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king

over Israel.” “The Lord said to Samuel, ‘How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel.’”

We see here that although Samuel was struggling with his emotions over the rejection of Saul, that the Lord reproves him over it. God, however, is impassible in regard to having feelings like a man’s in regard to this action that He took. He was ready to go on to have Samuel anoint David to be king over Israel. There was no expression of mourning or regret now.

2. What is the principle by which we are to understand these texts which speak about God’s regrets; His repenting or changing His mind?

Answer: We need to let those texts which are plain and clear help us to rightly understand and interpret anthropopathic language in terms of how we understand the being of God. 1st Samuel 15: 29 clarifies how we are to understand 1st Samuel 15: 11 and 35.

Another Anthropopathic text - Genesis 6: 5-7 – “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” “And the Lord was sorry (it repented the Lord, KJV) that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.” (it grieved him at His heart, KJV) “So the Lord said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry (for it repenteth Me, KJV) that I have made them.’”

Genesis 6: 5-7 should be understood by a clear Text - Numbers 23: 19 – “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent.”

John Gill says: And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth,.... Because of the wickedness of man, the wickedness of his heart, and the wickedness of his life and conversation, which was so general, and increased to such a degree, that it was intolerable; wherefore God could have wished, as it were, that he had never made him, since he proved so bad; not that repentance, properly speaking, can fall upon God, for he never changes his mind or alters his purposes, though he sometimes changes the course and dispensations of his providence. This is speaking by an anthropopathy, after the manner of men, because God determined to do, and did something similar to men, when they repent of anything: as a potter, when he has formed a vessel that does not please him, and he repents that he has made it, he takes it and breaks it in pieces; and so God, because of man’s wickedness, and to show his aversion to it, and displicency (dislike, dissatisfaction and displeasure) at it, repented of his making him; that is, he resolved within himself to destroy him, as in the next verse, which explains this: and it grieved him at his heart; this is to be understood by the same figure as before, for there can, no more be any uneasiness in his mind than a change in it; for God is a simple Being, uncompounded, and not subject to any passions and affections. This is said to observe his great hatred to sin, and abhorrence of it.”

Conclusion: We should see our great need to understand that God is not a man, nor is He like a man in his feelings. And out of this conclusion we should not think of God as undergoing turbulence and turmoil in His affections as a result of what man does. He is communicating feelingly in words what we are meant to understand, but He is doing so without any change or movement within Himself as a result of either what men have done, or what He Himself has purposed.

Listen to Ronald Baines in *Confessing the Impassible God*, P. 126 – “By refusing to see these texts as anthropopathic expressions that give context to the revelation of major changes in God’s redemptive dealings with creation (Gen. 6) or Israel’s king (1st Samuel 15:11, 35), we are left to see them as expressions of God’s emotionally-charged response to his own actions. We must assume, therefore, the sequence of God’s action, man’s sin, and then God’s emotionally charged frustration with Himself as expressing the main point of the narratives.”

What these occurrences better reflect is that how we handle biblical expressions of God’s repentance directly relates to our doctrine of God; that is, hermeneutics and theology dovetail.” “Either God is undergoing some sort of emotional turmoil for what He has done, or He is using such language, language that would be expressive of a man’s emotional turmoil at the frustration of His own purposes, to give expression to a major shift in the narrative’s trajectory.” “God is about to judge mankind and start over with Noah, and God is about to judge Saul and start over with David.” “From a human perspective, these are redemptive-historical movements that come to us as major shifts.” “But for God, they were part and parcel of His redemptive plan all along.”

Job 23: 13 and 14 – “But He is unique, and who can make Him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does.” “For He performs what is appointed for me, And many such things are with Him.”

Joseph Caryl in his commentary on Job 23: 13 says this: “How is God unchangeable, or, in one mind, when we read of His repenting what He had done, of His saying what He would do, and yet not doing what He had said, both in His promises and in His threatenings? How can these changes and the Lord’s unchangeableness stand together? Or how is He but in in one mind, the tenor of whose doings doth so often vary, both from what He hath formerly done, and from what He hath professed He would do. In a word, How is the Lord constant to what He says He will do, when either He does not do it, or does quite contrary to it? He that repents is not in one mind, seeing repentance is a change of the mind.”

“First, I answer: Repentance properly taken notes a change of the mind; but in an improper or allusive sense, there may be repentance without any the least change of the mind. When God is said to repent (as in those texts alleged) we are to understand it improperly, or only in allusion unto man. The Scripture in many other things speaks of God, either as condescending to man’s understanding, or as alluding to the common actions of man. God does not act as a man does, yet by such expressions as hold out, what and how man acts, we may come the more easily to understand what God does. As in the present instance, when man repents, he does two things.

First, he ceases to do, what he began to do, he breaks the thread of his former motions. Secondly, when man repents of that which he has done, or made of such a thing, he is ready to deface and destroy that which he hath made or done: When man repents that he has set up such or such a thing, he removes and takes it down. Thus God is said to repent, not because his mind is changed, but because (as a man that repents) He ceases to do what He did, or He destroys that which He had made. Thus the Lord is said to repent His making of Saul king, because He meant to remove him from being king; and to repent that he had made the world, because His purpose was, for the sin of man to deface and destroy the present beauty and excellency of the world which He had made. “God often puts forth the effects of repentance toward man, but the repentance of a man never put forth any effect upon God.”

Secondly, We may answer thus: God often minds a change: but He never changes His mind. And so all those Scriptures before mentioned, note only that God did mind a change, or make a change: But not that He did change His mind. There is a vast difference between these two; to mind or determine a change, and to change the mind or determination. As for instance a man that is resolved to wear garments suitable to the season of the year, and temperature of the weather; in the heat of summer it is his mind to wear light and thin garments that he may be cool, and in the cold of winter, his mind is to wear heavier and thicker garments that he may be warm. Now if this man, when winter comes, leaves off his light thin garments, and puts on those that are heavier and thicker, he cannot be said to change his mind, for his mind was always to wear change of garments according to the season of the year, and temper of the weather. And thus the Lord according to the changes which he finds among men for the

better or for the worse, doth both mind and make eminent changes among them, as to His providential administrations, whether in ways of Judgment or of mercy, but these He never changes His own mind, forasmuch as His mind was everlastingly fixed, in case of such emergencies, to make those changes in His administrations and dealings with the sons of men.”