

The Immutability of God

From the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, intellectuals have tried to understand change. Many have concluded that there must be something unchanging, a reference point from which we can measure and therefore understand the changes around us. The Bible clearly teaches that the ultimate vantage point has always been the unchanging and immutable God.

The doctrine of God's immutability teaches that ontologically and decretally speaking, God does not and cannot change.

Scriptural affirmation:

1. God's unchanging nature (ontological)
 - Psalm 102:25-27 (quoted and applied to Christ in Heb. 1:10-12)
 - Malachi 3:6
 - According to Hebrews 6:17-18, God's character is unchangeable.
 - James 1:17
2. God's unchanging decree
 - Numbers 23:19
 - 1 Samuel 15:29
 - Psalm 110:4

In other words, God's counsel and decree stands firm; He does not need to 'improve' or 'change' it. He cannot change for the better since He is already perfect, and He cannot change for the worse since that would result in His becoming imperfect.

Because of His infinite wisdom and power, His purpose will certainly come to pass. Because God is unchangeable, He remains eternally faithful to Himself and His promises, decrees, and works.

- The oft-used image of God as “Rock” underscores YHWH’s stability and the sureness and reliability of His promises.

“Problem” Texts:

What are we to do with the multiple texts in Scripture that apparently teach that God “changes His mind”?

- Genesis 6:5-7
- Exodus 32:9-10
- 1 Samuel 15:11
- Jonah 3:3-5, 10

The following principles are helpful:

1. God always immutably acts the same way toward moral evil and immutably the same way towards good.

- Jeremiah 18:7-10

Thus, if men and women alter their relations to Him, He will always respond in a manner consistent with His immutably holy character.

- This is precisely what happened to the Ninevites: when they repented, God “changed” how He would relate to them (i.e. He would no longer punish them).
 - This is consistent with His unchanging nature to forgive those who truly repent of their sins.

2. When God is grieved over the sins of His creation, it is because of His unchanging, holy, and loving character, which must *always* recoil against sin, even if He decreed its existence.

- Reymond: Since God is good and holy and pure, it would be strange if we did not hear Him say that sin and evil were a source of great grief to Him.¹
 - For those who are sealed with the Holy Spirit, their sin actually grieves Him (Eph. 4:30), for He is in His very essence, “holy.”
- Though God’s decree of election and reprobation (e.g. Romans 9:11, 14-24) will certainly come to pass, it nevertheless grieves the God who takes no pleasure in the death or damnation of the wicked (cf. Ezekiel 18:30-32; 33:11).

3. Third, with God’s threat to destroy Israel and to “begin anew” with Moses, we need to realize that though God’s anger against Israel was in no sense feigned, He knew that His threat to destroy Israel and to make Moses into a great nation was in no danger of ever being actualized.

Why, then, the threat?

- Reymond: By allowing His response to Israel’s sin to turn upon Moses’ mediation...God intended to teach that He always relates Himself to men salvifically through a mediator, [with the ultimate purpose of becoming] a type of Christ’s [final] mediatorial work. So what many assert is an example of the

¹ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 182.

mutability of God's purpose is in actuality a remarkable example of God's *fixed purpose* to relate Himself to sinful men on the basis of the intercession of an appointed Mediator.²

4. Fourth, to those who ask why God, if He is a God of compassion, made men in the first place although He knew beforehand (not to mention decreed) that they would insult Him and cause Him grief, resulting in their eternal harm and hurt, the answer is that in God's inscrutable wisdom, this was the best way to bring about His maximum glory in the redemption of His elect through Christ.
 - Moreover, as Reymond notes, by accomplishing redemption this way, the full range of God's attributes were best put on display for His eternal glory.

Application:

1. How should the truth about God's immutability bring comfort to His people?
2. How should this truth bring assurance of salvation to God's people?
3. How should this truth bring confidence in evangelism?
4. How should this truth offer hope for the future?
5. In light of this, is the triune God of Scripture your unchanging "Rock"?

² *Ibid.*, 183.