

Lesson 4

God's Immutability

Immutability

Basic Idea: God is unchangeable in His essence and attributes

The immutability of God is related to, but clearly distinct from, His eternity. In saying that God is eternal, in the sense of everlasting, we mean that He always has and always will exist. He was preceded by nothing and shall be succeeded by nothing. **In saying that God is immutable we mean that He is consistently the same in His eternal being. The Being, who eternally is, never changes.** (adapted from Sam Storms; Enjoying God Ministries; www.enjoyinggodministries.com).

READING #1

As an infinite and absolute Being, self-existent and absolutely independent, God is exalted above all the causes of and even above the possibility of change. Infinite space and infinite duration cannot change. They must ever be what they are. So God is absolutely immutable in His essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be. He is no less changeable in His plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment.

- *He is "the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."
(James 1:17)*
- *"God is not a man that He should lie; neither the son of man that He should repent; hath He said and shall He not do it? or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?"
(Numbers 23:19)*
- *"I am the LORD, I change not." (Malachi 3:6)*
- *"The counsel of the LORD stands forever; the thoughts of His heart to all generations."
(Psalms 33:11)*
- *"There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless, the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand." (Proverbs 19:21)*
- *"The Lord of Hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand." (Isaiah 14:24)*
- *"I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." (Isaiah 46: 9-10)*

(adapted from Hodge, Systematic Theology, vol I, 390-391)

Immutability as Consistency of Character

This affirmation of unchangeableness, however, is not designed to deny *that there is change and development in God's relations to His creatures.*

- *We who were once His enemies are now by the grace of Christ His friends* (Romans 5:6-11).
- The God who declared His intention to destroy Nineveh for its sin "changed" His mind upon its repentance (more on this later).
- Furthermore, this affirmation of immutability must not be interpreted in such a way that the reality of the "Word become flesh" is threatened (John 1:14). The Word who became flesh did not cease to be God when He took the form of man.

Immutability simply means that when the circumstances in any situation call for goodness, justice, or love on the part of God, that is the way He will respond.

To be more specific, God is immutable in respect to His:

- **essential being** (God can neither gain nor lose attributes)
- **life** (God neither became nor is becoming; His life never began nor will it ever end)
- **moral character** (God can become neither better nor worse)
- **purpose or plan** (God's decree is unalterable)

We shall now consider these in turn.

A) Constancy of Being, Life, Character, and Plan

- 1) **The immutability of God's Being** - Immutability is part of God's divine essence in the sense that God can neither gain new attributes, which He didn't have before, nor lose those that are already His. There is no increase or decrease in the Divine Being. If God increases He was, necessarily, incomplete prior to the change. If God decreases, He is, necessarily, incomplete after the change. God, then, is incapable of development either positively or negatively. He neither evolves nor devolves. His attributes, considered individually, can never be greater or less than what they are and have always been. God will never be wiser, more loving, more powerful, or holier than He ever has been and ever must be.

This is at least implied in God's declaration to Moses: "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14); and is explicit in other texts. E.g.,

- *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who **does not change** like shifting shadows"* (James 1:17).
- *"I the Lord **do not change**. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed"* (Malachi 3:6).
- *"Jesus Christ is the **same yesterday and today and forever**"* (Hebrews 13:8).

2) The immutability of God's Life - When we talk about the immutability of God's life we are very close to the notion of eternity or everlastingness. We are saying that God never had a beginning nor will ever cease to be. His life simply is. He did not come into existence (for to become existent is a change from nothing to something), nor will He go out of existence (for to cease existing is a change from something to nothing). God is not young or old: He is. Thus, we read:

- *"In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end"* (Psalms 102:25-27).
- *"Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God"* (Psalms 90:2; 93:2).

3) The immutability of God's Character - Immutability may also be seen in God's moral character. He can become neither better (morally) nor worse than what He is. If God could change His moral character, it would be either for the better or the worse. If for the better, it would indicate that He had been morally imperfect. If for the worse, it would indicate that He is now morally less perfect or complete.

4) The immutability of God's Plan - God's plans or purposes will never change.

There are, as I understand, only two reasons why God would ever be forced or need to alter His purpose:

(a) if He lacked the necessary foresight or knowledge to anticipate the future

OR

(b) if He lacked the power or ability to do what He had planned

But since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no error or oversight in the conception of His purpose. Also, since He is infinite in power (omnipotent), there can be no failure or frustration in the accomplishment of His purpose.

The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to His creatures are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God's being or purpose. They are, rather, **the execution of His purposes in time that had eternally existed in the mind of God.** For example, ending of the Law of Moses to the New Testament system wasn't change in God's will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of His will. Christ's coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the Old Testament scheme. They were but the realization of what God had from eternity decreed.

- *"The LORD foils the plans of the nations; He thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of His heart through all generations" (Psalms 33:10-11; 110:4).*
- *"The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand'" (Isaiah 14:24).*
- *"I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose' . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Isaiah 46:9-11).*
- *"Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isaiah 48:8-11).*
- *"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails" (Proverbs 19:21).*
- *"But He stands alone, and who can oppose Him? He does whatever He pleases" (Job 23:13).*
- *"I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).*
- *"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath" (Hebrews 6:17).*

B) Can God Change His Mind?

No treatment of the doctrine of immutability would be complete without a discussion of the problem posed by God's alleged "repentance." If God's plan is unalterable and He is immutable, in what sense can it be said that He "changed His mind"?

- *"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind (repent). Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19).*
- *"So Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind (repent)'" (1 Samuel 15:28-29).*
- Yet, elsewhere it says,
"I regret (repent) that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands. . . . And the LORD regretted (repented) that He had made Saul king over Israel." (1 Samuel 15:11, 35)
- To repent means to change one's mind. In 1 Samuel 15:11,35 it says that God "repented" or "regretted" making Saul king. Yet in 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19 it says that God cannot "repent" or "regret" an action He has taken. "

How do we explain these apparent contradictions?

Simply stated, God's immutability requires Him to treat the wicked differently than the righteous. God punishes the wicked and unrepentant but blesses and forgives the righteous and repentant. Therefore, when the wicked repent, His treatment of them must change. When God plans to punish people because of their sinful behavior it is **based on the assumption that they are and will remain wicked**. However, if they repent (as they sometimes do), to punish them would mean that **God had changed** for He would then be punishing rather than blessing the repentant. His treatment of the unbelieving differently at times does not constitute real change, for God has revealed to us that this **IS** the way He deals with men. It is therefore consistent with His nature.

C) God is Dependable

What all this means, very simply, is that God is dependable! Our trust in Him is therefore a confident trust, for we know that He cannot change. His purposes are unchanging, His promises unassailable. It is because the God who promised us eternal life is unchangeable that we may rest assured that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword shall separate us from the love of Christ. It is because **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever** that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, no not even powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39)!