

DOCTRINE OF GOD

DIVINE IMMUTABILITY



In what way can we ever hope to truly express the inexpressible? How do we uncover the mysteries of that which is forever hidden? How do we comprehend the incomprehensible? **Walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908)**, the great Nineteenth Century Scottish hymnist and minister, attempted such a feat in his classic hymn *"Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise"* (1867) in which he exclaimed,

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.
Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.
To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish, but nought changeth Thee.

What powerful words! These words remind us of our creatureliness and God's awe-inspiring majesty. We finite ephemeral creatures "blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish." But what of God? He stands immortal, invisible, all wise, in inaccessible light, almighty, victorious, unchanging, unchanging, who rules in might, who does not wither nor perish nor change. What a contrast.

God is the immortal changeless Changer, the Unmoved Mover, who does not fade or wear out. Now not only is such a thought a major contrast to our creatureliness but it is an immense blessing and comfort. It means that out of everything in the world, God is the only one who is ultimately reliable and fully reliable.

This idea of God's unchangeableness is what we want to delve into in this lesson. In theological terminology the unchangeableness of God is known as His *"immutability."* That is not a word you hear very often. It is an old word.

*Im*mutable is the negative form of the word *mut*able, which is from the Latin, meaning "subject to change."¹ It connects to the word *mut*ation which often denotes a transformation or change in form, nature, or substance. Thus, immutability means plainly, "not subject to change."

So, God is, in a simplified way, not subject to change.

Scripture makes this known in several ways. Let us consider several passages.

¹ A.W. Tozer, *Attributes of God*. Vol. 2. pg. 90

BIBLICAL DATA ON DIVINE IMMUTABILITY

The Bible never uses a singular word to get across the term “divine immutability.” But it should be clear by now that simply because the Bible doesn’t have a particular word or terminology doesn’t mean the theological concept is somehow vacant. Divine immutability, or God’s unchangeableness comes through a variety of scriptures. Consider:

(I) SCRIPTURE SPEAKS OF GOD NEVER CHANGING: There are plenty of scriptures that get across the understanding that does not change. Here are a handful:

- God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?
Numbers 23:19 (ESV)
- 25 Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
26 They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.
Psalms 102:25-27 (ESV)
- 6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. 7 From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.
Malachi 3:6-7 (ESV)
- 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.
James 1:17 (ESV)
- 16 For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.
Hebrews 6:17-18 (ESV)
- 7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
Hebrews 13:7-8 (ESV)

So, I think, it is clear the Bible affirms that God does not change.

(II) YET THERE ARE SCRIPTURES AFFIRMING THAT GOD SEEMS TO CHANGE – Even though there are scriptures affirming God doesn't change we also have scriptures and contexts that seem to show that in fact He does change. So, consider but a few examples:

- **9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."**

11 But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? **12** Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. **13** Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" **14** And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Exodus 32:9-14 (ESV)

- **28** And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. **29** And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." **30** Then he said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the LORD your God." **31** So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD.

32 Then Samuel said, "Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites." And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." **33** And Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal.

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeath of Saul. **35** And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. **And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.**

1 Samuel 15:28-35 (ESV)

- In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: **Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.**"^(a) **2** Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ and said, "Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

4 Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: **5** "Go and say to Hezekiah, **Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. 6 I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.**

Isaiah 38:1-6 (ESV)

- **5** Then the word of the LORD came to me: **6** "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. **7** If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, **8** and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. **9** And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, **10** and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

Jeremiah 18:5-10 (ESV)

- 12 “Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.
14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?
Joel 2:12-14 (ESV)

- This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king’s mowings. ²When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,
“O Lord GOD, please forgive!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!”
³The LORD relented concerning this:
“‘It shall not be,’” said the LORD.
⁴This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, the Lord GOD was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. ⁵Then I said,
“O Lord GOD, please cease!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!”
⁶The LORD relented concerning this:
“‘This also shall not be,’” said the Lord GOD.
Amos 7:1-6 (ESV)

- ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “**Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. . . . ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, **God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.**
. . .
¹But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I **knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.**
Jonah 3:4-5 & 10 & Jonah 4:1-2 (ESV)

In each of these passages you keep seeing that God is “relenting” or “regretting” what He had previously accomplished and seeming to change in response to what people do. That word “relenting” is the Hebrew word *naham*, which can literally be translated “changed His mind.”² So, we need to wrestle with understanding what is going on here.

² John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship*, Vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), pg. 561-562

THINKING THROUGH GOD'S UNCHANGEABILITY

So, the scriptural data gives us a vision of God as unchanging. But we also see scriptures showing that in some way God does change. How do we make sense of this? Is the Bible in contradiction? Is God talking out both sides of His mouth? Let's consider the following:

(I) TWO EXTREMES TO KEEP FROM WITH GOD'S IMMUTABILITY

I know I do this every time, but I think it is helpful that when we start explaining the nuanced theological understandings of various doctrinal terms that we begin by shaving away the extremes. By doing this we begin to see a better shape or form of what is meant. This also applies to IMMUTABILITY. So when we begin thinking about immutability we need to keep from two poles:

- **GOD IS AN IMMOBILE ROCK** – A rock is stationary, fixed, immovable. Is God like this? The Bible even says God is A ROCK (Deuteronomy 32:15; Psalm 42:9), so this must be true, right? But you need to hold up! It is not enough to just find verses that use the word "ROCK" and the word "God" and then affirm "There it is! God is a rock!"

The bigger issue is to ask what does the context reveal of how the symbol or metaphor of "rock" is being used? But I am getting ahead of myself! We will come back to this. The point is, don't jump too soon on literalizing metaphors.

The idea that God is an immobile is not a Christian concept. This is the view of God that comes from Aristotelian thinking that disseminated into Stoic philosophy and Gnosticism. God, for Aristotle was the UNMOVED MOVER. Remember our discussion on aseity? This meant that God doesn't change or "move" himself and instead moves everything else by being the object of desire. Pushed to its extremes this view evolves to the point that it was argued that God is so remote, so distant, so other, so distinct, that there is no way God can be affected by the world or really affect the world in any meaningful way. God was eternally and timelessly immovable. Because of this understanding of God, moral and relational categories such as "love" and "wrath" were understood as meaningless in "God talk."

Granted there have been some Christian thinkers in the history of the Church that may have pushed such an idea to some extremes, but overall, such a STRICT or WOODEN view of immutability is un-Christian because it is unbiblical.

- **GOD IS AN EVER-FLOWING RIVER** – A river is shaped by its geography while at the same time shaping the geography. The river morphs around rocks and down slopes while it is itself shaped by them. It is affected by elevation and gravity. For some thinkers who were turned off by the wooden understanding of God's immutability they began to think of God in such terms.

In theological terms this would be the view of open theists and process theologians. **Open theists** affirm God doesn't know anything while **process** theologians affirm God is in process.³ These ideas are linked together. Because God is the ever-flowing deity, because He is Continual Change, He is therefore part of Creation and Creation is part of Him. This means that He can't know everything and He can't do everything because everything is in a state of flux, even Himself. Even more, such a view leads to the understanding that we humans, who are part of Creation, can actually emotionally and spiritually shape God and make Him better while at the same time He makes us better, because we are both part of Creation.

I am sure you can see, such a view about God is as unbiblical as it comes. While I can respect the push to affirm that God is an active deity, the problem is how far that "activity" is to be pushed.

³ Millard Erickson gives a simplified yet dense description of process theology this way: "Process theology's fundamental thesis is that reality is processive. This is not to say that everything is in a process. There are unchanging principles of process and unchanging abstract forms, but to be real is to be in process. Furthermore, reality is organic or interrelated...[thus] process theology stresses interdependence. It is not merely that interdependence is given primacy or priority as an ideal; it is an ontological characteristic. It is an inescapable fact of reality" (ibid, pg. 305)

(II) CLARIFYING WHAT IMMUTABILITY ACTUALLY MEANS

The extremes of God being absolutely unchanging or being totally changing must be resisted biblically speaking. So then what do we say about God being unchanging? How should we understand this concept? Well, why don't we consider what a few thinkers in the history of the Church have said? For example, **Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.)**, the great patristic theologian said,

"The essence of God by which he is what he is, possesses nothing changeable, neither in eternity, nor in truthfulness, nor in will."⁴

Later, **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)**, the great medieval scholastic, wrote,

"God is altogether immutable. First, because . . . [the] first being must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely, potentiality is posterior to act. Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable. Secondly, because everything which is moved, remains as it was in part, and passes away in part; as what is moved from whiteness to blackness, remains the same as to substance; thus in everything which is moved, there is some kind of composition to be found. But . . . in God there is no composition, for He is altogether simple. Hence it is manifest that God cannot be moved. Thirdly, because everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him. So, some of the ancients, constrained, as it were, by the truth, decided that the first principle was immovable."⁵

In the same vein as Augustine and Aquinas, I am reminded of the words of **Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)**, the great English Baptist preacher, who reminded his Sunday morning listeners of the distinction between God and creatures,

The substance of mortal things is ever changing. The mountains with their snow-white crowns, doff their old diadems in summer, in rivers trickling down their sides, while the storm cloud gives them another coronation; the ocean, with its mighty floods, loses its water when the sunbeams kiss the waves, and snatch them in mists to heaven; even the sun himself requires fresh fuel from the hand of the Infinite Almighty, to replenish his ever burning furnace. All creatures change. Man, especially as to his body, is always undergoing revolution. Very probably there is not a single particle in my body which was in it a few years ago. This frame has been worn away by activity, its atoms have been removed by friction, fresh particles of matter have in the mean time constantly accrued to my body, and so it has been replenished; but its substance is altered. The fabric of which this world is made is ever passing away; like a stream of water, drops are running away and others are following after, keeping the river still full, but always changing in its elements. But God is perpetually the same. He is not composed of any substance or material, but is spirit-pure, essential, and ethereal spirit-and therefore he is immutable. He remains everlastingly the same. There are no furrows on his eternal brow. No age hath palsied him; no years have marked him with the mementoes of their flight; he sees ages pass, but with him it is ever now. He is the great I AM-the Great Unchangeable.⁶

So, God is unchanging. As Spurgeon said God "has no furrows on his eternal brow" for He is "the great I AM — THE GREAT UNCHANGEABLE." But what is meant by this?

Augustine affirms that God's essence, truthfulness, and will do not change. Aquinas says, "God is altogether immutable" or rather unchanging and then goes on to affirm "movement in no way belongs to Him." YET he says at the beginning God is "pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality." **God is pure action.** That is an interesting concept.

⁴ Augustine as quote in Bavinck, *ibid.* pg. 154. Original work of Augustine is from "*On the Trinity*"

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Book 1, Question 9, accessed from <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum012.htm>

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *The Immutability of God*, A Sermon (No. 1), Delivered on Sabbath Morning, January 7th, 1855, by the REV. C.H. SPURGEON, At New Park Street Chapel, Southwark. Accessed from Blue Letter Bible, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon_charles/sermons/0001.cfm

“Actus purus” (pure act)⁷ is the understanding that God is PURELY ACTUALIZED. This means to say that God is pure life and action. He doesn’t have any potentiality within His being – He can’t be changed from outside forces! But this doesn’t mean He is an immobile timeless statue. Rather it means that his action/movement/meaning/purposes are just categorically different from creatures. Why? Because creatures, like ourselves, are finite and compound entities. We move because we are moved upon. We act because we are acted upon. God is infinite and simple, therefore there is nothing that can **make Him “move” or “act”** because He ultimately grounds all “movement” and “act.” Therefore, **“God is unmoved not because he lacks life and action, but because he is identical with his life and actuality and therefore cannot be determined to any further actuality of life than he already has.”**⁸

So, it is vitally important to understand that **immutability does not mean immobility!** It has never classically meant this. Something can be unchanging without being static. That is a very important point. As one author has put it so effectively,

“One should not be misled into thinking that God’s immutability is like the immutability of a rock only more so. What God and rocks appear to have in common is only the fact that they do not change. The reason for their unchangeableness is for polar-opposite reasons. The rock of Gibraltar does not change or changes very little because it is hardly in act at all, and the change that it does undergo is mainly from outside causes—wind and rain. God is unchangeable not because he is inert or static like a rock, but for just the opposite reason. He is so dynamic, so active that no change can make him more active. He is act pure and simple.”⁹

Another way of affirming this is that God is “always active in the fullness and completeness of his own being.” Therefore, **“immutability does not deny God’s ever-acting, ever-living, and ever-moving being”** but instead reminds us that God **“acts out of the unchanging perfection of his fully actualized being.”**¹⁰

So now we begin to see a vision of what it means to say that God is THE UNMOVED MOVER, that He is immutable or unchanging. It is getting at this understanding that He is not becoming God, He is not becoming older, He is not learning, He is not growing, He is not moving from one place to the next, He is not doing things because He is being tossed to-and-fro by circumstances beyond His control. Instead there is a **“dependability and constancy in His being, acts, and purposes.”**¹¹

Thus, we come to understand that God is not the God of the Stoic philosophers, the Supremely Static Deity, and He is not the God of process theology. Instead, God is the God of **“fully realized independence”** that calls His creation to commune with Him in the beautiful mutual joy and fellowship of His inner trinitarian Being.¹² He is unchanging in that He cannot be acted upon, and yet He acts freely and fully out of His own unbounded fully realized being. The Dutch theologian **Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)** put it succinctly,

“While immutable in himself, [God] nevertheless, as it were, lives the life of his creatures and participates in all their changing states.... God’s incomprehensible greatness and, by implication, the glory of the Christian confession are precisely that God, though immutable in himself, can call mutable creatures into being. Though eternal in himself, God can nevertheless enter into time and, though immeasurable in himself, he can fill every cubic inch of space with his presence. In other words, though he himself is absolute being, God can give to transient beings a distinct existence of their own. In God’s eternity there exists not a moment of time; in his immensity there is not a speck of space; in his being there is no sign of becoming. Conversely, it is God who posits the creature, eternity which posits time, immensity which posits space, being which posits becoming, immutability which posits change.”¹³

⁷ To learn more about this theological/philosophical concept go to: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01125b.htm>;

⁸ James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pg. 85-86

⁹ Thomas Wienandy as quoted by James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pg. 87

¹⁰ Michael Horton, *ibid*, pg. 237-238

¹¹ J. Rodhman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), pg. 58

¹² Michael Horton, *ibid*, pg. 238

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pg. 158-159

(III) MAKING SENSE OF THE SCRIPTURAL DATA

Now that we have a clearer understanding of what immutability is not and is, we need to come back to the scriptural data that has in tension God's unchangeableness and changeableness. How do we understand such passages? There are several ways of going about this:¹⁴

- (a) **NEVER FORGET THAT ALL GOD-TALK IS ANALOGICAL** – It is vitally important to remember that God is categorically unlike Creation and therefore all language is necessarily going to have to be analogical.¹⁵ This means that when we come to descriptions about God, or God is within a narrative, or God acting in history, such descriptions, narratives, and actions are going to be taking place within the confines of time and space and matter. Furthermore, these things are going to be written down by human authors using human words and human concepts to get it across. As Bavinck points out,

“Scripture necessarily speaks of God in anthropomorphic language. Yet, however anthropomorphic its language, it at the same time prohibits us from positing any change in God himself. There is change around, about, and outside of him, and there is change in people’s relations to him, but there is no change in God himself.”¹⁶

So, what does this mean? It means when we try to grapple with how God is interacting with His creation, we should be very cautious in applying finite, limited, “baby talk” to Him in a univocal (one-to-one correlation) manner. This applies to ANY and ALL attributes and teaching about who He is. Likewise, it applies to any and all of His actions in the Bible as they are described & revealed.

- (b) **NEVER FORGET TO CLARIFY THROUGH CONTEXT** – Simply put it is vitally important that when you read scriptural passages that you read them in the context of the overarching chapters and book. Furthermore, this applies not only to the textual context but the socio-historical and theological context as well. You cannot disassociate one aspect of God’s character from another or isolate one passage of text from the overall message of Scripture in order to build your theology. Why does this matter regarding immutability? Because when you read in context many of the passages that reveal God seeming to “change His mind” are really not Him changing His mind. Instead it is Him establishing the terms of His covenantal relationship with Mankind.¹⁷

God has a covenantal relationship with His people and that relationship at times is conditional and other times unconditional. IF people do this, THEN God will do this. Still other times God proclaims something will happen and it will and there is nothing that can be done to make it not happen. The point is “we must determine from the context which principle is operative: straightforward prediction or conditional proclamaion.”¹⁸ In all of God’s covenants there is the “twin sanctions” of blessing and judgement and that must be understood within the contexts of God’s relationships to His people.¹⁹

- (c) **NEVER FORGET THAT GOD HAS SOVEREIGN FREE WILL & FOREKNOWLEDGE** – If God chooses to change His mind, do not forget that He is an omniscient God. Therefore, if He “changes His mind” such a change is a ‘surface change’ to our perspective because HE ALREADY KNEW BEFOREHAND that He would change His mind. Which, really, isn’t a change on Gods part, since He already eternally has foreknown all things, but it is on our part due to our limited perspective.

“God’s relenting is his sovereign decision” and “His right to withdraw his announced judgements and blessings is part of his sovereignty.”²⁰ This is even acknowledged by some of the texts that speak of God “relenting.” Consider:

¹⁴ These points are adapted from Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), pg. 304-305; John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), pg. 273-276

¹⁵ Consider Michael Horton’s discussion on this in his systematic theology, *ibid*, pg. 49-57

¹⁶ Bavinck, *ibid*, pg. 158

¹⁷ A good discussion on this comes from John Frame, *ibid*, pg. 563-566

¹⁸ John Frame, *ibid*, pg. 565

¹⁹ John Frame, *ibid*, pg. 566

²⁰ John Frame, *ibid*, pg. 564

- **BOOK OF AMOS (7:1-6)** – God eternally foreknew and intended to forgive Israel, but He did this through the power of Amos’ intercession. God was “forming locusts” and “was calling for a judgment by fire” but what did Amos do? He kept repeatedly going before God “O LORD GOD, PLEASE FORGIVE!” And God relents. Relenting was part of the plan from the beginning in God’s eternal ways.
- **BOOK OF JONAH** – Jonah was to obey God and go and tell the people of Nineveh “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4). But the people ask for forgiveness and the city is spared. But do you notice what Jonah says? He admits that even God eternally had a plan in the workings. He prayed saying,

“O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster”
Jonah 4:1-2 (ESV)

Jonah acknowledges that God, in His own nature, has ‘abounding steadfast love” and “relenting” and it is all part of His gracious mercy.

Simply because we cannot see the fullness of a plan but only parts of it doesn’t mean God doesn’t have one. And it doesn’t mean that God doesn’t have within that plan contingencies and operations that involve humans doing certain things that He foreknew they would do. I mean consider Gods plan of salvation!! This was a mystery, yet it was part of God’s overall plan (**Romans 9-11**), not realized at once and seemingly conflicting with His relationship with Israel, yet it was part of His intended ends.

(d) NEVER FORGET THAT CHANGE CAN BE RELATIONAL WITHOUT BEING ESSENTIAL – What I mean by this is that changes can take place externally and relationally to a thing or person that do not inherently change that thing or person. For example, I stand in the relationship of being my father’s “son.” That relationship is relative in the sense that if my father did not have a son, such a relationship would not hold. Now if my father were the president of the United States, I stand now in two varying relationships, that of “son” and that of “citizen” – so there has been a “change” that has taken place. How I interact in these two modes of relationship is contingent and susceptible to change. However, I have not myself changed and neither has my father! Neither of us has changed in the essential makeup of what we are. Rather the roles within the confines of the titles and responsibilities has changed in the context of new relationships.

In like manner when God repents it is simply a relational language revealing the full paradigms of God’s revealed character and work. His sorrow IS the other side of His being, not something opposite of His joy. Such a change (from joy to sorrow and vice-versa) has nothing to do with God changing in His essence or knowledge. So “God’s ‘repentance’ is not really a change in God, but it is His bringing to bear on the human situation some other aspect of His being and nature.”²¹ As one theologian has put it, “Does forgiving the sinner change any of God’s moral or non-moral attributes or cause him to cease being pure spirit? Of course not. Nor does it change his purposes, decree, or ethics.”²² Rather such change is “a relational change in virtue of God’s unchanging moral rules and governance.”²³

The Puritan clergyman **Stephen Charnock (1628-1680)** put it effectively this way,

“When a man sins, he hath another relation to God than he had before,—he hath relation to God, as a criminal to a Judge; but there is no change in God, but in the malefactor. The being of men makes no more change in God than the

²¹ J. Rodman Williams, *ibid*, pg. 59

²² John Feinberg, *ibid*, pg. 272

²³ John Feinberg, *ibid*, pg. 275

sins of men. As a tree is now on our right hand, and by our turning about it is on our left hand, sometimes before us, sometimes behind us, according to our motion near it or about it, and the turning of the body; there is no change in the tree, which remains firm and fixed in the earth, but the change is wholly in the posture of the body, whereby the tree may be said to be before us or behind us, or on the right hand or on the left hand."²⁴

Charnock helps to clarify even more so when He speaks of God's love and hate,

"God is not changed, when of loving to any creatures he becomes angry with them, or of angry he becomes appeased. The change in these cases is in the creature; according to the alteration in the creature, it stands in a various relation to God: an innocent creature is the object of his kindness, an offending creature is the object of his anger; there is a change in the dispensations of God, as there is a change in the creature making himself capable of such dispensations. God always acts according to the immutable nature of his holiness, and can no more change in his affections to good and evil, than he can in his essence. When the devils, now fallen, stood as glorious angels, they were the objects of God's love, because holy; when they fell, they were the objects of God's hatred, because impure; the same reason which made him love them while they were pure, made him hate them when they were criminal. The reason of his various dispensations to them was the same in both, as considered in God, his immutable holiness; but as respecting the creature, different; the nature of the creature was changed, but the Divine holy nature of God remained the same: "With the pure thou wilt show thyself pure, and with the froward, thou wilt show thyself froward" (Psalm 18:26): he is a refreshing light to those that obey him, and a consuming fire to those that resist him. Though the same angels were not always loved, yet the same reason that moved him to love them, moved him to hate them."²⁵

Another way of saying this is "change is from the satellite and not its primary." What this means is that humans are oriented to God in relation to how they act and respond to Him. When humans are obedient, they are in God's favor, when they are disobedient, they move into God's disfavor. God is not changing in either respect. His standards are the same. Rather, if you notice, the change is fundamentally from the human in relation to God's unchanging standards. Bavinck said it this way,

"Without losing himself, God can give himself, and while absolutely maintaining his immutability, he can enter into an infinite number of relations to his creatures.... God...putting himself in any relation to any creature of his...[is him putting] all things in those relations to himself, which he eternally and immutably wills—precisely in the way in which and at the time at which [such] relations occur."²⁶

Thomas Oden (1931-2016), the great American Methodist theologian, helps clarify even further by saying it this way,

"What may appear to be a change of God's mind may upon closure inspection be a different phase of the hidden unfolding of the provident divine plan. The execution of the divine purpose is firm precisely because it is responsive to temporal contingencies.... Creaturely purposes, actions, and intentions have beginnings, stumblings and endings, but God's character does no change. In dealing flexibly with the changing scenes of history, God remains faithful to his own constant will."²⁷

What seems to be change, Bavinck and Oden would affirm, is really in fact the unfolding of the ever complex and beautiful changeless set of intentions and purposes on the part of God displayed through changing human relations.

²⁴ Stephen Charnock, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 120, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/charnock/attributes_p.pdf

²⁵ Charnock, *ibid*, pg. 122

²⁶ Bavinck, *ibid*, pg. 159

²⁷ Thomas Oden, *Classical Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1992), pg. 69

SO, IS GOD IMPASSIBLE?

Something right on the heels of God's unchangeability is his "impassibility." This is a theological term meaning God has no emotions. It is worth talking about it now under immutability because it is diametrically connected.

Some theologians have affirmed that God does not have emotions. God cannot suffer. God cannot feel pain. God cannot lack. God cannot desire or love. If He were to do any of these things, then God would be seen as weak or lacking fulfillment. What do we say to this?

Well, there are equally two flaws to keep from. **One is to affirm that a God who needs nothing cannot love and the other is that a God who loves must be needy.**²⁸ Both sides are wrong.

It is biblically undeniable that God FEELS and is truly emotional. The Bible says God grieves (Psalm 78:40; Ephesians 4:30), He rejoices (Isaiah 62:5), He has wrath against disobedience (Exodus 32:10), He loves (Isaiah 54:8, Psalm 103:17). BUT as with everything, when we speak of God, we are in a different category of Being. We need to be thinking analogically about how God is similar and dissimilar to our understandings of such realities.

What we can say is that God experiences pain, sorrow, grief, rejoicing, wrath, and love BUT in categorically different ways. For He isn't:

- **OVERWHELMED OR SURPRISED** — God knows all things so there is no way that He is taken unaware of what is happening around Him or what will happen or what could happen. Even the free-will choices of human beings does not surprise Him. (Exodus 7:1-7 & 10:1-2; 1 Samuel 23:10-13; Isaiah 42:9; Psalm 139:1-18; John 37:16; Acts 2:23; Romans 8:28 & 9:16; Ephesians 1:11)
- **OVERWHELMED BY OPPOSITION** — God cannot be overthrown and His plans cannot be overturned is what is meant by this (Exodus 15:1-23; Psalm 22:28-31 & 135:5-21; Jeremiah 27:5; Daniel 4:17-37; Acts 17:24-26; Romans 9:17-21; Revelation 11:15-19)

The Bible reveals that within the unfolding covenantal drama God interacts with His people by condescending to their level. He desires for them to do the right thing and continually has to draw them back over and over and over again through grace and discipline. As **Michael Horton (1964-present)** has affirmed on this point,

"There is real change, partnership, and even conflict in covenantal history and therefore between God and human beings, but not within God's inner being. Just as God can assume our flesh without altering his divine nature, he can relate the world of becoming to himself without surrendering his fully complete and fully active being."²⁹

Therefore, it must be remembered that, "**God freely allows us to affect him**, although even our affecting action is comprehended in God's eternal counsel.... God loves out of self-determining freedom rather than need that he can love in spite of the unresponsiveness of the human partner."³⁰ **C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)** said it this way,

"God is Goodness. He can give good, but cannot need or get it. In that sense all His love is, as it were, bottomlessly selfless by very definition; it has everything to give and nothing to receive. Hence, if God sometimes speaks as though the Impassible could suffer passion and eternal fullness could be in want, and in want of those beings on whom it bestows all from their bare existence upwards, this can mean only, if it means anything intelligible by us, that God of mere miracle has made Himself able so to hunger and created in Himself that which we can satisfy. If He requires us, the requirement is of His own choosing. If the immutable heart can be grieved by the puppets of its own making, it is Divine Omnipotence, no other, that has subjected it, freely, and in a humility

²⁸ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), pg. 244

²⁹ Michael Horton, *ibid*, pg. 241

³⁰ Michael Horton, *ibid*, pg. 249

that passes understanding. If the world exists not chiefly that we may love God, but that God may love us, yet that very fact, on a deeper level, is so for our sakes. If He who in Himself can lack nothing chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed.”³¹

So, what about prayer? If God is unchanging yet loving and all-knowing then why should we pray if we cannot affect Him?

Well, we will address this in more detail under DIVINE OMNISCIENCE (specifically foreknowledge) but for now, consider the fact that **God eternally has known what we would pray and what we do in fact pray.**

This means that prayer is not God sitting on His throne upon in heaven all comfortable and then suddenly hears our prayers and jumps up to answer them. This is an example of a contingent and capricious kind of God that is anything but biblical.

Rather prayer is more about faith and relationship. It is our active responsibility to engage with the eternal, living, and ever-knowing God.

Prayer is NOT about giving information to God. He already knows everything! Therefore, prayer doesn't change His mind like we understand change. Rather, our prayer aligns (or misaligns if we pray selfishly) with His already known will and character.

Thus, prayer is all about communication with God. It's relational. It's you coming to Him because you want to be with Him rather than merely giving Him a laundry list of things you desire. **When you enter a relationship you are called to an "I-thou" communion, not a third person contract.** You are to speak TO a person in a relationship not merely AT or ABOUT that person. That is what God wants. He wants us to want Him. When we do this in prayer, we come into alignment with His beautiful tri-personal communion and experience the fullness of His will and love for us in our lives. As **Norman Geisler (1932-2019)** has said so effectively,

“Prayer is not a means by which we change God; it is a means by which God changes us. Prayer is not a means of our overcoming God's reluctance; it is a way for God to take hold of our willingness. Prayer is not a means of getting our will done in heaven, but a means of God getting His will done on earth.”³²

³¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain, The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2002), pg. 576

³² Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), pg. 86

WHAT OF THE INCARNATION & GOD'S UNCHANGEABILITY?

Another issue theologically that comes upon on the heels of God's impassibility and immutability is the incarnation. If we are saying that God doesn't change internally within Himself then how do we make sense of God becoming a Man? For we must never forget that the God who is unchanging is also the God who "plunged totally into the maelstrom of human events"³³ in the incarnation. Isn't that a change?

It doesn't seem so when you understand the theological and philosophical nature of the tri-unity of the Godhead. Nor does this seem to be the case when you reflect upon the nature of Jesus Christ. Now, we are not going to get into the depths of all of this because each issue will be treated separately in our study. For now, let me just briefly try and explain this.

JESUS IS TRULY GOD AND TRULY MAN. This has been the historical understanding of Jesus as the God-Man. Jesus was not 50% God and 50% Man. Jesus was not a mixture of Man and God like some Herculean creature. Jesus was not a God that merely had human flesh. Jesus was truly God and truly Man. This means to say that Jesus possessed two NATURES. One nature of Jesus was DIVINE and the other nature was HUMAN. How this worked its way out is going to be discussed later under the Doctrine of Christ, but for now understand that Jesus had two natures. This means to say that Jesus' divine nature did not change in the incarnation. The incarnation was a UNION of essences, two "whatnesses," of humanity and divinity. As the **Westminster Larger Catechism (1648)** said on this,

"The eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fulness of time became man, and so was and continues to be God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person, forever"³⁴

Therefore, what Jesus did in His humanity was done in His humanity. At other times, what He did in His divinity, He did in His divinity. Bavinck is helpful here when he said,

"Neither creation, nor revelation, nor incarnation (affects, etc.) brought about any change in God. No new plan ever arose in God. In God there was always one single immutable will"³⁵

What this means to say is the incarnation was known by God through His eternal will and decree. This means it is not as if God had to work out a "plan" for the incarnation to execute considering past spiritual failures. Before the foundation of the world our salvation was known (**Ephesians 1:4**) and Christ's sacrifice was foreknown (**1 Peter 1:20-21**). So, it was all part of God's eternal will and knowledge.

Again, such a discussion may get us too far afield into the Trinity or Incarnation. So, I will cease from further discussion.³⁶ In closing consider this quote from the Puritan clergyman **Stephen Charnock (1628-1680)** who said,

"There was no change in the Divine nature of the Son, when he assumed human nature. There was a union of the two natures, but no change of the Deity into the humanity, or of the humanity into the Deity: both preserved their peculiar properties. The humanity was changed by a communication of excellent gifts from the divine nature, not by being brought into an equality with it, for that was impossible that a creature should become equal to the Creator. He took the "form of a servant," but he lost not the form of God; he despoiled not himself of the perfections of the Deity. He was indeed emptied, "and became of no reputation" (Phil. 2:7); but he did not cease to be God, though he was reputed to be only a man, and a very mean one too. The glory of his divinity was not extinguished nor diminished, though it was obscured and darkened, under the veil of our infirmities; but there was no more change in the hiding of it, than there is in the body of the sun when it is shadowed by the interposition of a cloud."³⁷

³³ J. Rodman Williams, *ibid*, pg. 59

³⁴ <https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/larger-catechism/>

³⁵ Bavinck, *ibid*, pg. 154

³⁶ Also consider this short little video from Greg Koukl from *Stand to Reason*, <https://str.typepad.com/weblog/2015/12/how-do-we-reconcile-an-unchanging-god-with-the-new-covenant.html>

³⁷ Stephen Charnock, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 120, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/charnock/attributes_p.pdf

THE WAYS IN WHICH GOD IS UNCHANGING³⁸

Charles Hodge (1797-1878) the great Presbyterian theologian and principal of Princeton Theological Seminary affirmed,

“We believe . . . that God always is, was, and ever will be, immutably the same; that all things are ever present to his view; that with Him there is neither past nor future; but nevertheless that He is not a stagnant ocean, but ever living, ever thinking, ever acting, and ever suiting his action to the exigencies of his creatures, and to the accomplishment of his infinitely wise designs.”³⁹

I could not say it any better! That said, consider some of these ways in which we can understand the IMMUTABILITY OF GOD:

- **GOD IS UNCHANGING IN HIS ESSENTIAL NATURE** – God doesn’t grow, age, mature, learn, or lack. He cannot get better and He cannot get worse in any essential attribute, for He is wholly and eternally perfect. (Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17)
- **GOD IS UNCHANGING IN HIS CHARACTER** – God is not capricious. He is not bipolar. He does not talk out two sides of His mouth. He is not two faced. He doesn’t get overwhelmed and He doesn’t get crotchety or annoyed. He is always and forever the moral, righteous, just, wrathful, merciful, and loving God as He has always been. When we experience His wrath or His love, He is not changing, rather we are changing in relation to the unique interlocking dimensions of His eternal character. (Exodus 3; Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 7:9; John 3:16; Hebrews 6:18)
- **GOD IS UNCHANGING IN HIS PURPOSES** – That is, whatever He wills to be is going to be the way He has willed it. What God does in time He has known and foreknown and willed from eternity. This means that if God seems to “change” in His ways of relating to us it is not a change in the overall purposes for which He has planned. (Numbers 23:19; Psalm 33:11; Ephesians 1:11)
- **GOD IS UNCHANGING IN HIS COVENANT** – God keeps His promises to His people. While those promises may be divided across 1,400 years and two dispensations (Old and New Testaments) His covenant is lasting with His people. While method of the covenant may be contextualized (Old vs. New) that does not change the true inner workings of God’s intended will to covenant with His people. (Psalm 89:34-37; Isaiah 54:10; Malachi 3:6; Micah 7:19-20; Hebrews 6:17-20)
- **GOD IS UNCHANGING IN HIS TRUTH** – What God declared to be true is true then, now, and forevermore. How that truth is displayed across time may be tied to conventions and socio-historical contexts, but the overarching TRUTH of His word and His decrees are for everlasting to everlasting. (Isaiah 40:6-8; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

³⁸ There are a variety of good discussions on this point, so I will list where most of the material in this section is going to come from: John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship*, Vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), pg. 568-570; J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), pg. 77-81; John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), pg. 266-276

³⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:390-391, found at <https://ccl.org/ccl/hodge/theology1/theology1.iv.v.vii.html>

APPLICATION

Immutability, the unchangeableness of God, is an indispensable attribute of who He is. It is like a theological counterweight that solidifies and underline all the other attributes of His being and character. As Charnock said,

“Immutability is a glory belonging to all the attributes of God. It is not a single perfection of the Divine nature, nor is it limited to particular objects thus and thus disposed. . . . [Rather] immutability is the center wherein they all unite. There is not one perfection but may be said to be and truly is, immutable; none of them will appear so glorious without this beam, this sun of immutability, which renders them highly excellent without the least shadow of imperfection. How cloudy would his blessedness be if it were changeable! How dim his wisdom, if it might be obscured! How feeble his power, if it were capable to be sickly and languish! How would mercy lose much of its lustre, if it could change into wrath; and justice much of its dread, if it could be turned into mercy, while the object of justice remains unfit for mercy, and one that hath need of mercy continues only fit for the Divine fury! But unchangeableness is a thread that runs through the whole web; it is the enamel of all the rest; none of them without it could look with a triumphant aspect. His power is unchangeable: “In the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength” (Isa. 26:4). His mercy and his holiness endure forever: he never could, nor ever can, look upon iniquity (Hab. 1:13).”⁴⁰

Immutability is the “enamel” of all the attributes of God. Bavinck helps add to the weighty importance of this attribute by affirming,

“The doctrine of God’s immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds this rest in God, in Him alone, for only He is pure being and no becoming. Hence, in Scripture God is often called the Rock. . . . We humans can rely on him; he does not change in his being, knowing, or willing. He eternally remains who he is. Every change is foreign to God. In him there is no change in time, for he is eternal; nor in location, for he is omnipresent; nor in essence, for he is pure being.”⁴¹

He went on to affirm,

“Those who predicate any change whatever of God, whether with respect to his essence, knowledge, or will, diminish all his attributes: independence, simplicity, eternity, omniscience, and omnipotence. This robs God of his divine nature, and religion of its firm foundation and assured comfort.”⁴²

I could not agree more with Charnock of Bavinck on this point. Immutability is essential to the nature and character of God.

Because of this this attribute has indispensable practicality to our Christian life. Consider some of the following practical applications:

(1) GOD’S UNCHANGEABILITY MEANS WE BETTER CEASE FROM DICHOTOMIZING HIS SELF-REVELATION – While it can be helpful for us to consider the theological and socio-historical distinctives between Old and New Testaments, we had better be wary of any teaching that wants to put a wedge between the Old Testament and the New. Far too often today preachers love to speak of the “dispensation of grace” as opposed to the “dispensation of judgement” in relation to the Old and New Testaments.

Furthermore, there are far too many preachers and teachers who push the heretical belief that the Old Testament “doesn’t matter” or is somehow unimportant and therefore concentrate on nothing but Pauline Epistles.

⁴⁰ Stephen Charnock, *The Attributes of God*, pg. 112, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/charnock/attributes_p.pdf

⁴¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pg. 156

⁴² Bavinck, *ibid*, pg. 158

God doesn't speak out both sides of His mouth! God is not a different God from the Old Testament to the New Testament. If you think this, then you aren't reading the Bible. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever ([Hebrews 13:8](#)) and His WORD endures forever ([Isaiah 40:8](#); [1 Peter 1:25](#)).

Christ is in the Old Testament as much as He is in the New Testament. If you don't think so, then you need to make sense of the resurrected Christ taking the time to teach His disciples about how MOSES AND ALL THE PROPHETS revealed Him ([Luke 24](#)).

We dichotomize out our own detriment and I would argue we do this far too often to justify our lackadaisical approach to our Faith. We want to only speak of "love" and "mercy" and "forgiveness" and never take into account that the God who was the God of wrath and justice is still the God of wrath and justice ([Nahum 1:2](#); [Romans 1:18](#); [Revelation 19:15](#)).

(2) GOD'S UNCHANGEABILITY MEANS WE NEED TO LIVE IN THE CONSTANCY OF HIS POWER – We must stop looking to our fickle so easily manipulated selves for our saving. We need to truly rely upon His power and Spirit to get us through this veil of shadows we call life. I cannot say it any better than [J.I. Packer \(1926-present\)](#) on this part when he writes in his book *Knowing God*,

"Where is the sense of distance and difference, then, between believers in Bible time and ourselves? It is excluded. On what grounds? On the grounds that God does not change. Fellowship with Him, trust in His word, living by faith, 'standing on the promises of God', are essentially the same realities for us today as they were for Old and New Testament believers. This thought brings comfort as we enter into the perplexities of each day: amid all the changes and uncertainties of life in a nuclear age, God and His Christ remain the same—almighty to save.

But the thought brings a searching challenge too. If our God is the same as the God of New Testament believers, how can we justify ourselves in resting content with an experience of communion with Him, and a level of Christian conduct, that falls so far below theirs? If God is the same, this is not an issue that any one of us can evade."⁴³

(3) GOD'S UNCHANGEABILITY MEANS WE CAN FIND PEACE IN HIM – So much of life is undependable. Things are undependable because they fall apart or break or malfunction. People likewise are undependable – they are frail, finite, and fickle. But God is the same. God is the constant unchanging everlasting pillar in our lives. This means that **He is the indispensable dependable One**. We can come to Him and He listens to us. We can look to Him for guidance and comfort.

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](#))!

⁴³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 80-81