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God is Immutable

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ARTICLE FIFTY-FOUR: GOD IS IMMUTABLE

“Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end” (Psa. 102:25-27, NKJV).

“For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob” (Mal. 3:6, NKJV).

The Definition Involved

God is immutable:

In a sentence, this says that God never differs from Himself. He may on occasion alter His dealings with men in a dispensational sense, but His divine character remains constant. This is a vital attribute of God, without which He could not be God. For example, a person may only change in two directions. He may go from better to worse, or from worse to better. But it is unthinkable that God could travel down either of these roads. To go from worse to better implies past imperfection. To go from better to worse implies present imperfection.

The Clarification Involved

While God is immutable, He is in no sense whatsoever to be thought of as being immobile! Also this does not suggest that there are no changes in the outworkings of God. Thus:

- **Those areas which will never change:**

- A. His Person

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8, NKJV).

“ . . . who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:11, NKJV).

- B. His purposes

“The LORD of hosts has sworn, saying, ‘Surely, as I have thought, so it shall come to pass, and as I have purposed, so it shall stand . . . For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?’” (Isa. 14:24, 27, NKJV)

“Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it” (Isa. 46:9-11, NKJV).

"I have declared the former things from the beginning; they went forth from My mouth, and I caused them to hear it. Suddenly I did them, and they came to pass" (Isa. 48:3, NKJV).

"In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11, NKJV).

" . . . according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11, NKJV).

" . . . who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Tim. 1:9, NKJV).

"He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 Jn. 3:8, NKJV).

C. His promises

"Behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth. And you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spoke concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one word of them has failed" (Josh. 23:14, NKJV).

"And now I pray, O God of Israel, let Your word come true, which You have spoken to Your servant David my father" (1 Kings 8:26, NKJV).

"And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (Mt. 28:18-20, NKJV).

" . . . (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls). . ." (Rom. 9:11, NKJV).

"By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Heb. 11:11, NKJV).

- **Those areas which have or will change**

A. In regard to His gracious invitation

1. From: "Come unto me!" – spoken by a Savior

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28, NKJV).

2. To: "Depart from me!" – spoken by a Judge

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Mt. 25:41, NKJV).

B. In regard to His spokespersons

From the very beginning God has used different groups to represent Him before men.

These would include:

1. The patriarchs
 - a. Enoch (Gen. 5:21, 22, 24; Jude 1:14, 15)
 - b. Noah (Gen. 5:28, 29)
 - c. Job (Job 38-41)
2. The early fathers of Israel (Gen. 12:1-3)

This would include Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph
3. The soldiers of Israel
 - a. Joshua (Josh. 1:1-9)
 - b. The Judges (book of Judges)
4. The priesthood
 - a. Aaron
 - b. Eleazar
 - c. Ezra
5. The kings
 - a. Saul (1 Sam. 11:6)
 - b. David (1 Sam. 16:13; book of Psalms)
 - c. Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon)
6. The prophets (Acts 3:24)
 - a. Isaiah
 - b. Jeremiah
 - c. Elijah
7. The words of the Savior Himself (Heb. 1:1, 2)
8. The New Testament writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Paul, Jude, James)

The Reconciliation Involved

Question: How to reconcile the immutability of God with those O. T. passages which speak of God repenting? Here are but a few:

“And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Gen. 6:6, NKJV).

“So the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people” (Exod. 32:14, NKJV).

“I greatly regret 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” (1 Sam. 15:11, NKJV).

(See also 2 Chron. 24:16; Jer. 26:13; Joel 2:14; and Jonah 2:9.)

- Perhaps the best answer can be found in the N. T. where the word ‘repent’ is the Greek verb *metanoein*, which means to change one’s course of action. Thus, in the Genesis passage God had determined that He would no longer allow man’s universal works of wickedness to continue unpunished without invoking the divine judgment to fall upon them, thus the universal flood!

- This change of action can also be seen in His decision following repeated warnings by the prophets to punish His people! Once again, the question and bottom line summary:

What does the Bible mean when it says God repented?

This is recorded no less than 15 times in the Old Testament (Gen. 6:6; Exod. 32:14; 1 Sam. 15:35; Jonah 3:10). God’s unchanging holiness requires Him to treat the wicked differently from the righteous. When the righteous become wicked, His treatment of them must change. The sun is not fickle or partial because it melts the wax but hardens the clay. The change is not in the sun but in the objects it shines upon.

- So far, so good. But what about these instances where we are clearly told that God does not repent?

“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” (Num. 23:19, NKJV)

“And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent” (1 Sam. 15:29, NKJV).

“The LORD has sworn and will not relent, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’” (Psa. 110:4, NKJV).

“For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29, NKJV).

- In a word, these verses reassure us there are certain decisions which God will never abandon for a different course of action!
 - A. Regarding Num. 23:19—He will never reverse His original plan to bless the nation Israel (Gen. 12:3) and then curse its people.
 - B. Regarding 1 Sam. 15:29—God’s decision to reject King Saul for a lowly shepherd boy would never be rescinded.
 - C. Regarding Psa. 110:4—Jesus will forever remain a priest after the order of Melchizedek.
 - D. Regarding Rom. 11:29—God’s (spiritual gifts?) and call (salvation?) are irrevocable.

The Distinction Involved

As can be readily imagined, there is a vast difference between God's repentance and man's repentance.

Man's repentance:

A. As preached by John the Baptist

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" (Mt. 3:1, 2, NKJV).

B. As preached by Jesus

"From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Mt. 4:17, NKJV).

"Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard that, He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance'" (Mt. 9:10-13, NKJV).

C. As preached by Peter

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38, NKJV).

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19, NKJV).

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, NKJV).

D. As preached by Paul

"Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:29, 30, NKJV).

"... testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21, NKJV).

"Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance" (Acts 26:19, 20, NKJV).

The Summarization Involved

W. Ralph Thompson offers an excellent overview concerning this attribute:

Repentance. The word *metanoia*, “repentance,” means a change of mind. The Bible acknowledges repentance in God as well as man. God’s repentance means sorrow or regret followed (usually) by positive action (Gen. 6:6; Exod. 32:14; Deut. 32:36; Jer. 18:8). This does not contradict the doctrine of the divine immutability. God’s unchanging law is that His mercy is toward them that love and obey Him, and His judgments toward them that disobey Him. Which of these attributes God assumes at a given moment depends on man (cf. Rom. 11:20-23). When a person, as e.g., King Saul, disappoints God, God is sorry and alters both attitude and action in relation to that person (1 Sam. 15:11, 23).

In respect to man’s repentance, it can be said to be evangelical if it has in it three elements.

The first is intellectual. By it the sinner comes unto “the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20) and its consequences.

The second element is emotional. It is a genuine sorrow for sin. It must be deeper than sorrow at being caught (“worldly sorrow”). It must be “godly sorrow,” sorrow because one has sinned against God (2 Cor. 7:9-10).

The third element in evangelical repentance is volitional, a change of the will and purpose. It is a turning from sin unto God, the heart crying out for pardon and cleansing (Psa. 51:7, 10).

The importance of repentance is underlined by John the Baptist. In his ministry, which was to prepare the way for the Lord, he made repentance the theme. Jesus himself said, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5).

Although evangelical repentance is basically an act of man, it is impossible apart from the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Rom. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25; Heb. 12:17).

Repentance is antecedent to and a preparation for salvation. It is necessary if God is to forgive (Acts 2:37-38; 11:18; 20:21). It involves confession and restitution (Exod. 22:1-4; Luke 19:8-9, 1 John 1:9). (*Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, Beacon Hill Press. Kansas City, MO, p. 449, copyright 1983)

The Application Involved

The bottom line application to this attribute is precious indeed:

Question: How can we be assured that Jesus still saves lost people and strengthens and comforts saved people?

Answer: Because He once did, and He never changes.

This is certainly not the case with us. The following amusing story illustrates this:

A man and his wife were walking down the street when the husband spotted an old college friend coming toward them. With great enthusiasm he embraced him and said to his wife, "Doris, meet Bob Brown, my old college roommate 30 years ago! But my, my, Bob," he continued, "how much you've changed! Why, Doris, when we were in school, Bob here was slim, dressed in the latest fashion, and sported a full head of hair. But now, look at him. Bob, since then your weight, clothes, and hairline have all radically changed." At that moment, the other man, visibly annoyed, exclaimed—"Sir, I want you to know my name is not Bob Brown, but John Smith!" The husband then replied, "How about that, Doris, he's even changed his name!"

Minor changes of course. But all too often they are anything but minor! As those who are involved in counseling troubled marriages can testify to, one of the first indication of a failed union heading for divorce are the words . . . "I just don't know him/her. They have changed so much. He/She is not the person I married." But not so regarding the changeless One!

*There have been names that I have loved to hear,
But never has there been a name so dear
To this heart of mine, as the Name divine,
The precious, precious Name of Jesus.*

Refrain

*Jesus is the sweetest name I know,
And He's just the same as His lovely Name,
And that's the reason why I love Him so;
Oh, Jesus is the sweetest name I know.*

It would seem musicians Henry Lyte and William Monk had the immutability of God in mind when they composed this beautiful hymn:

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

*Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;*

*Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

*I need Thy presence every passing hour.
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.*

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*

*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*