

No Shadow of Turning

Hebrews 6:13-20; James 1:16-18

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The ancient Greek philosopher (5th c. BC), Heraclitus, famously said: you can't step your foot in the same river twice. The reason, he argued, is that, between your first step and your second step, the river has changed. It has moved, flowed on, the water molecules are reconfigured. It is not the same river, when you dip your foot in again. Everything, Heraclitus argued, is flux and change. And there is a sense, when looking at ourselves, and the world around us, that we'd have to agree. We change incessantly. We change our minds, our perspectives, our location, our temperament, our interior states, our actions. We oscillate between rest and work, we grow, and we decay. Sitting here right now, you are in a process of change – on numerous levels. Mental, physical (we're aging), emotional, intellectual. We are bundles of flux, as is the world around us.

Cultures are themselves vast arenas of moving, shifting, forces. Always unsettled and contested, never permanently established. We crave stability, but we are in a sea of entropy. Sometimes it seems Heraclitus was right, everything is in motion, everything is changing.

There's a scene in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* where the young girl Lucy has a reunion with the Christ figure, the Lion, Aslan. She is surprised to see how much he's grown from the previous summer. In Narnia, the land where Aslan dwells, it's actually been a thousand years, not one year as in Lucy's world. But, in fact, he hasn't grown at all. And they have a conversation where she says:

Aslan, your bigger. And he says: that is because you are older, little one. Not because you are? she says. Aslan replies: I am not older, but every year you grow, you will find me bigger.

Lucy thought she had perceived change even in Aslan. But he, like Christ, and the Triune God revealed in Christ, is unchangeable, immutable. She has grown and found the unchangeable God to be bigger. It is a parable, I hope, for what is happening to us during this series. God may seem bigger to you (stranger, different), but it is we who have moved and changed and grown. We have seen more deeply into the unchanging One.

So this morning we – who are in a sea of flux -- will look at the immutability of God – that is, the fact that God does NOT change. In fact, it is more than that. Immutability means God CANNOT change. He is unable to change. Now, to recall, once again, the Westminster Shorter Catechism question: What is God? And the answer:

God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

We've already covered God's being a Spirit, his infinity, and his eternity, so we pick up this next attribute, unchangeable.

By way of introduction I want to say two things about it. First, God's immutability applies to all his attributes. He is immutable in his holiness, in his goodness, in his love, and so forth. Now there are ways we affirm this, perhaps without realizing it.

For example: God IS love, therefore his love is everlasting and immutable, or steadfast. In the words of Psalm 103: But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him.

Also, God is truth, and thus, his truth, his word, Psalm 119 says, is forever settled in the heavens.

Heaven and earth, Jesus says, may pass away, but my words, as the eternal Word of God, will never pass away.

The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.

He is immutable, and thus his decrees, counsels, and plans stand forever.

The second thing (by way of opening here) is that a little reflection will show, just how obvious and necessary it is that God be immutable. A mutable God could not be immeasurably, fully perfect. If he changed for the better, that would imply some defect being corrected. If changed for the worse, he would then become imperfect. Thus, mutability is not compatible with ANY of God's perfections. A mutable God could not simple, or infinite, or eternal or independent.

In the words of the great Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck:

Those who predicate any change whatsoever 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.

God, as the Christian tradition has uniformly held, is fully actual, he is pure act, meaning, there is no potential in God – and thus no potential for change. So – and this is really critical – we do not assert that God is immutable, because we think of him as inert or static or stoic. The word immutable can, of course, evoke these ideas in our heads. Rather, because God is the great I AM, self-existent, without need or dependency, wholly alive, fully dynamic, infinitely rich and replete in his life and light and love, in his personal communion as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, change is impossible. It is theologically repugnant.

With that, we will briefly look at God's immutability under four headings. First, ontological immutability (that is, immutability in his being). Second, ethical immutability (relations, plans, his covenant fidelity). Third, apparent change. And Fourth, redeeming change.

I. Ontological Immutability

First, then, ontological immutability. Again, we are asserting here that God is, unlike the flux all around us, unchanging in his being, his essence. We've already mentioned Exodus 3 which demands that God just BE – and that means that he who is "is-ness," has no becoming or flux in his essence.

Let's look at one of our NT texts from James 1. It's a classic place from which the church has confessed the unchanging God. Notice, the text applies specifically to the Father.

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. No variation, no shadow due to change. He who is the fulness of light does not cast any shadows of change.

Now, look at our OT text, from Psalm 102.

*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
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,
but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

Notice: the heavens will perish. God remains. They wear out. They change and will be changed out like a garment. They will pass away like all mutable things. But notice: they will pass away BUT you are the same ---a direct affirmation that, in contrast to the created order, God is immutable.

And this text is cited in Hebrews 1 of Jesus, the Son of God. He, the second person of the Trinity, like the Father and the Spirit, is immutable. And later in that same epistle of Hebrews, in chapter 13, we hear that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. God is ontologically, on the level of his essence, his being, his character, immutable.

II. Ethical Immutability

Second, let's look at his ethical immutability. His unchanging faithfulness with respect to his covenant, his sovereign purposes. A key text here is the other NT text from Hebrews 6:

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, 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.

Notice two things here. This text affirms our first point – that God is immutable in his being. It does that by saying it is IMPOSSIBLE for God to lie. He cannot change his essence, his nature, his character. But it also says he took an oath to convince us of the unchanging character of his purpose. And here this refers to his covenant promises made with Abraham. Both in himself, and in his actions toward us, he is the steadfast, immovable Rock.

Another place we see this clearly is Malachi 3:

For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. Again both aspects of immutability are here.

God himself doesn't change, and therefore he doesn't change his covenant purposes toward an unfaithful people, and we are not consumed. The identical combination is seen in Numbers 23:19:

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? Because he doesn't change, his stated purposes shall be accomplished.

In other words, your salvation depends on God's immutability. If he were not immutable, he could revoke his covenant purposes. Our whole assurance, our confidence, our certainty, our perseverance rests here.

In terms of Exodus 3, the I AM WHO I AM, is the one who WILL BE WHAT HE WILL BE. The first is foundational for the second. This is beautifully put in our closing hymn, *Great is thy Faithfulness*: Thou changest not, thy compassions

they fail not. The second type of immutability (purposes) depends on the first (being).

So, in terms of our two points, we would say: Thou changest not in your being, THEREFORE, Thy Compassions, thy actions, fail not.

III. Apparent Change

Third, apparent change. We all know there are texts, that state that God repents. He repented of making man at the time of the flood, he regretted that he made Saul king of Israel. Let's address this through the saga about Saul. In a chapter (1 Sam. 15) which twice mentions God's regretting that he made Saul king. Samuel says:

The Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.

So clearly, God repents without repenting. He is NOT a human being. He doesn't change his mind the way we do. He repents--- in such a way ---that his eternal plan is flawlessly executed, and his covenant purposes are upheld. After all, it was decreed long ago, that the kingship would come from Judah, not Saul's tribe of Benjamin. And the Christ, the Davidic King, descended from Judah, was slain, in the immutable plan of God, from before the foundation of the world. God may change his stated purpose, but never in such a way that entails change in his eternal plan OR change in his covenant fidelity.

Often God's promises, or his actions, are conditional. Sometimes the conditions are explicit, other times they are implied. Saul's maintaining the kingdom was clearly dependent on a reasonable measure of obedience. In any event, this language of God repenting, is a way of God stooping to us, accommodating our weakness, and in the case of Saul, or of mankind before the flood, it is meant -- among other things -- to express God's hatred of sin. His righteous opposition to the current state of affairs. To take this language of God changing his mind literally would be to destroy the classical doctrine of God in its entirety.

IV. Redeeming Change

Finally, redeeming change. In the fulness of time, the immutable God becomes man, taking on a mutable human nature. He who, as divine, is the same yesterday, today and forever, as human grows and learns and weep, suffers and dies, and is raised in now immutable glory. And as such, he redeems our lives of change and decay, he liberates the creation itself from its futility, its bondage to death. Now, in his glorified humanity, he holds a permanent, eternal and unchanging priesthood, and secures for us an unchanging inheritance.

Indeed, we shall even partake of a kind of limited, creaturely, immutability ourselves, for in heaven we will be immutably blessed, beyond probation, beyond the possibility of falling.

As our confession puts it, in glory, the will of the redeemed will be perfectly and immutable free to do the good alone. All the corruption that comes from creation's mutability will be healed. Change will be redeemed. All the vulnerabilities and insecurities of this age will be past. Until then, Richard Baxter describes our plight in this flux, and our confession of the One, with whom there is no shadow of turning. Here's Baxter:

Our houses may be burned; our goods may be consumed or stolen; our clothes will be worn out; our treasure here may be corrupted; but our God is unchangeable, the same forever.

Our laws and customs may be changed. Our governors and privileges changed. Our company, our employments, and habitation changed; but our God is never changed.

Our estates may change from riches to poverty. And our names that were honored, may incur disgrace. Our health may quickly turn to sickness and our ease to pain; but still our God is unchangeable forever.

Our friends are inconstant and may become our enemies; our peace may be changed into war, and our liberty into slavery; but our God doeth never change.

Time will change customs, families, and all things here. But it changes not our God.

He who is immutable in his being, is he whose faithfulness, whose compassions will fail not. And thus, He in whom we, and our futures, rest secure. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

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