

Title: God: The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever

Text: Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8

Main Point: God's immutability shapes every aspect of the Christian life.

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Series: That's My God

## INTRODUCTION

In 1973, J.I. Packer authored the book *Knowing God*. It began as a series of magazine articles aimed at the “ideal reader who was impatient with religiosity but wanted to know God” (as noted in the preface to the 2005 edition). It later developed into a book. *Knowing God* was named one of the 50 books that have shaped evangelicalism by *Christianity Today* in 2006. “My anchor-thought today [for the book] is that God remains the same [immutable] though the world does not,” says Packer in the preface to the 2005 edition. (J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Westmont, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 5.)

Those who attend seminary are likely to have encountered the “immutability of God.” As a theology major, I had many such discussions. One of my professors, Dr. Jack Cottrell, in his book, *God the Redeemer*, writes a 66-page chapter titled “The Immutability of God.” Immutable comes from the Latin; the prefix “im” is a negating prefix meaning not, and “mutabilis” means “changeable.” Therefore, immutability means not changeable. God is not changeable, or in the positive, He is immutable.

Most will not attend seminary nor know the term “immutable.” Yet God’s immutability significantly shapes one’s daily Christian experience, whether or not the person is aware of it. What people know and believe about God will affect their peace, joy, confidence, anxiety, depression, and sense of purpose. If God changes, He cannot be fully trusted. If God is not trustworthy, the only recourse is to trust oneself. The greater the emphasis on trusting oneself often the more anxiety and depression. In reflective moments, we know how unsure we are about ourselves. Joy and peace come knowing that God is for us, loves us (last week’s sermon), and can deliver on all His promises, particularly eternal life. This confidence collapses if God changes.

I will use two Bible verses to support the claim that God does not change: Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8. Many others further establish God’s immutability. These are so concise that I have chosen them.

## GOD’S IMMUTABILITY BIBLICALLY

1. As I begin, I acknowledge the complexity of God’s immutability. For example, biblically, God regrets, relents (Genesis 6:6-7; Jonah 3:10), shows different emotions (Numbers 14:18), and takes on human flesh in the incarnation (Matthew 1:23). All of these actions indicate change. When I use the word “immutability,” I mean God does not change in essence or purpose. For example, your cell phone changes many times a day depending on your preferences; however, it never becomes an encyclopedia in book form. It remains a cell phone its entire existence. The same is true of God. He changes in response to different conditions (human prayer, repentance, desire for salvation, etc.), but the essence of what makes Him God (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and character) remains unchanged. Immutability, understood in this way, is more than a theological discussion; it also has a significant influence on your daily life, as we will see in a moment.
2. Malachi 3:6 states: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”

2.1. “The book of Malachi addresses the situation in Judah sometime after the temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, following the return of Jewish exiles from Babylon. The message of the book is about the covenant—Israel’s contract with God (compare Exod 24:1–8). The book records six legal disputes in which God either defends His own faithfulness or accuses the people and their leaders of forsaking their covenant. The book ends with a promise of the coming of Elijah and the Day of Yahweh. Malachi addresses how God is faithful to His covenant love, even when we doubt His faithfulness.

Based on the book’s opening verse, the author is traditionally thought to be a prophet named Malachi. However, “Malachi” is the Hebrew word for “my messenger,” and it might not be used here as a proper name. No date is given in the book, but the prophet’s ministry seems to have occurred sometime between the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple (516 BC) and the time of Nehemiah (ca. 444–432 BC). Although the temple had been rebuilt, Malachi shows that the reforms inspired by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (starting in 520 BC) had little effect.

Malachi concludes the Old Testament canon of the Protestant Christian tradition. Thus, the Old Testament ends with Malachi’s promise of God’s messenger who is to come (Mal 4:5–6). When you turn the page to the New Testament, the Gospels show the fulfillment of this expectation. The Gospel writers show how John the Baptist, in the spirit of Elijah, prepares the way for Jesus (Mal 3:1–4; 4:5; Luke 1:16–17).” (John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

2.2. In Malachi, God’s people, Israel, sinned in numerous ways (leadership misled God’s people, marriage was not honored, and they falsely said, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them 2:17). Despite their sin, God who does not change, remains faithful to His covenant with Israel. Malachi ends with God restating His faithfulness to His people, saying, “The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2). (I agree with those who claim that this immediate context supports the righteousness of God in general. Still, the fulfilment of “The sun of righteousness” is Jesus (see Luke 1:71, 76–79).) As Malachi ends, the immutable God will care for His people who repent from their sins. The same God in Malachi provides confidence today that, despite our sins, the unchanging God will give eternal life because of His commitment to the finished work of Jesus.

3. The book of Hebrews 13:8 also affirms God’s immutability: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

3.1. “‘Yesterday’ has been taken to refer to the time of the leaders mentioned previously (13:7) or to the time of Christ’s atoning work on the cross. ‘Today’ is probably best taken to refer to the present in general terms rather than to Christ’s present work of intercession, although such is included. ‘Forever’ may refer specifically to Christ’s eternal high priesthood, but more likely is a general designation for the unending future.” (David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 612–613.)

### GOD’S IMMUTABILITY PRACTICALLY

1. God’s immutability and trust work together.

1.1. I suspect one reason older people dislike change is because of the comfort of the familiar. There is a certain level of trust in what is known and suspicion (lack of trust) in the unfamiliar. Younger people are often more accepting of change because their lives are constantly changing as they grow. This makes them vulnerable to untrustworthy ideas and people. They will learn, through disappointment, that trust is earned over the long term through trustworthy ideas and people.

- 1.2. God's immutability establishes truth over the long term. What you currently believe about God's immutability is often discovered through life's disappointments. When you do not get the job prayed for, despite your best efforts, the marriage ends in divorce, the child trained in the "way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6) becomes old and departs from the faith, and the tear-soaked cheek that prayed and prayed but did not receive the desired outcome. Why God is the heart's cry!
  - 1.2.1. In these moments, the wounded heart must press into the truth of God's immutability. The unchanging God who said (to all Jesus followers): "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) He is the same God "for you" now in your brokenness. The same God meets you now with His love because nothing (your present pain) can separate you from the "love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). Absent immutability, your healing lacks completeness since you cannot be confident God loves you in the difficult circumstances.
- 1.3. Those who are mature in faith have a responsibility to help those under challenging circumstances who have lost perspective of God's immutability. They must remind those struggling of God's unchanging promises, which remain certain despite circumstances.
2. God's immutability helps in combating fear, anxiety, and depression.
  - 2.1. Technology has produced a rate of change that is staggering, particularly with the advent of AI. Social trends oppose Christian belief; CO2 levels are rising in some metrics, affecting the atmosphere; and financial pressures take a toll. Anxiety levels increase as the world becomes more chaotic. Those who lose hope for the future are depressed.
    - 2.1.1. Those who understand and believe in the immutability of God find help to combat anxiety and depression: "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. The children of your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you (Psalm 102:25-28).
3. Everyone's hope of heaven rests on the immutability of God.
  - 3.1. Except for near-death experiences, no one has been to or seen heaven. We live for and serve God with the confidence of the biblical evidence that heaven awaits every follower of Jesus. Why? Because we believe in the immutability of Jesus' words: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1-3).

### GOD'S IMMUTABILITY CONCLUSION

1. Because God is immutable, Christians have confident reasons to surrender to Jesus and serve Him fully. We have the strength to combat anxiety and depression, and we have confident expectations that our best life awaits us.