

God's Immutability & Impassibility—Selected Scriptures-5/28/23
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This summer I'm tackling some questions that I did not get to in the spring when we had Sunday evening question-and-answer sessions.

Several questions related to God's unchangeableness & how to think about Him relating to us in time.

So last week I began addressing God's immutability, which is another word for His unchangeableness—He is free from any mutating.

God does not & cannot change, particularly in His essence, character, purposes & promises.

He is perfect in every attribute & cannot change for better or worse.

Last week, I added the term '*immanence*' in my title to note that God is *immanent*, meaning present & at hand & involved.

When we consider thoughts of God so far above us that we struggle to imagine them, we may be tempted to feel distant from God.

So it's good to recall that God is both immutable & immanent, that no matter how transcendent God is above our categories of experience, He does truly care about us.

God is always all His attributes all together & we must view His immutability in that proper light to lead us to trust & follow Him.

And that's our goal in studying such a lofty topic—the goal is not to philosophize or learn big words to use to sound spiritual.

The goal is to appreciate & adore & enjoy & serve God more faithfully

To that end, I began outlining 4 responses to divine immutability & we saw 2 last week & we'll see 2 more today.

From numerous Scriptures we learned a 1st point & that is that God's immutability should move us to both humility & praise.

#1 is to let God's immutability move you to humble praise.

The right response to all revelation of God is humility & praise.

As Romans 11:33-36 says, "*Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom & knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments & unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him for the glory forever. Amen.*"

We cannot fully know the mind of the Lord or counsel Him because He is so much wiser & greater than we are.

And we cannot truly give to Him anything because He is the Provider & Sustainer of all things.

We cannot plumb the depths of His wisdom & goodness & we cannot scale the heights of His majesty & power.

We are so small that we cannot even describe His complexity without using language adapted to our own limits.

So we start with humility under God that leads to praise of God.

Romans 11:33-36 quotes those phrases extolling God from the Psalms & the prophet Isaiah & from Job.

Isaiah 40 is one of those passages & verse 18 adds a question—"*To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?*"—& the answer is no one & nothing.

Yahweh God is beyond comparison as the only all-sufficient & independent '*I AM*' as He told Moses in Exodus 3:14.

We referred to Psalm 33 & 102 & 145 & 147 & Isaiah 46 & we could add more to subject our minds under God in ways that lead to worship.

We do not want to be like those God rebuked in Psalm 50:21 by saying, “*You thought that I was just like you.*”

Scripture’s revelation of God as so complex & yet also so caring testifies that Scripture truly is from God.

So at whatever point you react to Scripture & are tempted to say God can’t be like that—like God can’t be both unchanged & involved—you need to confess He is greater than you are.

For example, we saw that God’s immutability is not a fatalistic excuse that God will do whatever He wants whether we pray or not.

The biblical fact that nothing changes God does not mean our choices & actions & prayers do not matter.

We must let God be God & let His Word be our guide in affirming that He never changes & yet that He does change His relationships as people change to align with His will.

Or more precisely, God is the One who changes people to align with His will & that changes His relationships with them.

That gets us to our 2nd point from last week—to let God’s immutability move you to fervent prayer.

James 1 says God is does not tempt anyone even when He tests us in trials like He did Moses with Israel in Exodus 32.

James 1:17 says God has no variation or shadow of turning but is the source of every good & perfect gift.

So He is trustworthy to be sought & His Word believed & obeyed & He has said to submit our requests to Him.

We saw in Exodus 32 how Moses appealed to God’s sure promises to Abraham & Isaac & Jacob as reasons for Him not to destroy Israel after they had crafted a molten calf to worship.

Moses also appealed to God’s unchangeable commitment to His own glory as a reason for God to show mercy to Israel.

Think about that: Moses prayed because he trusted God not to change.

But if you doubt God will keep His Word & be the same each day, then praying becomes very uncertain & unsettling.

If you do not believe God never changes, you may resort to rituals & incantations to try to appease & manipulate God to get Him to listen.

But when we know that God never changes, we can approach Him in the grace He promises & cast our burdens on Him.

We can do so with certainty that He will do what is good & right for His children & we can be secure by grace in Christ.

And we know that God answers the prayers of His people, not only because He commands prayer & promises to answer, but He proved it in situations like Exodus 32 with Moses’ prayer.

How amazing that God showed mercy in response to Moses’ prayer!

How amazing that the unchanging God offered Moses a chance to intercede for Israel to be the mediator they needed!

And then how amazing to see God’s plan to promise in Deuteronomy 18 that one day a Prophet greater than Moses would arise!

To picture how great the Promised Messiah would be, God raised Moses up for the intercessory purposes of Exodus 32.

And Moses’ ministry of prayer is a small picture of what you can do.

So let God's immutability move you to fervent prayer & be aware of opportunities God gives to pray as part of His plan.

We don't know the future, but we know God's unchangeable character & promises & purposes & we can ask Him to act consistent with those.

Then when we see Him change His relationships with people, we can know He is carrying out His unchanging purposes.

And that's why we know the Scriptural language of God changing His mind is anthropopathic & not to be taken in a most rigid literal way.

God has spoken of Himself in analogical language—language of analogy that uses figures of speech to help us understand.

Analogical revelation is distinct from equivocal language that can be unclear & univocal language that can be minimalistic.

Scripture has one right interpretation of what God meant from the original human author to the original human audience.

But that one proper interpretation can include figurative language that still falls short of fully explaining God & all His ways.

That language may be anthropomorphic & anthropopathic.

Anthropomorphisms use human forms to describe God—anthropo is the Greek word for man & morph is from the Greek word for form.

Anthropomorphic language is easier to detect as figurative because God does not have a visible, physical form or body.

Of course, Jesus did become a man & that was not a change because that was part of His plan before time to create time & work in time.

Similarly, revealing Himself through Scripture did not change God & His actions in time do not change Him.

God has manifested Himself within time within His creation as part of His gracious condescension to show His glory.

And one of the things He has done is to give us words that help us understand Him & those words depict human categories.

So, for example, God does not have a hand or arm, but the Bible says that His hand or arm is not too short to save.

And God does not have literal eyes, but the Bible says His eyes go throughout the earth searching & seeing.

The point is not that God has a hand or arm or eyes, but that His power is not too small & that He always sees & knows all.

And similarly, Scripture uses anthropopathisms to describe God as having emotions even though His affections are not like humans in the instability & ever-changing feelings we have.

Pathos refers to passions & so an anthropopathism is a literary device where God is described in language of human feelings.

Because God is immutable, He does not change His affections that always love what is good & right & always hate evil.

He never changes & is therefore always trustworthy in His impassibility that is directly related to His immutability.

That's the term in today's title—rather than calling it Part 2, I added impassibility as connected to God's immutability.

That's impassible with an I & not with an A—i-m-p-a-s-s-I-b-i-l-i-t-y—and not ability with an A in that last part.

If God does not want you to take a road, He may let you pass, making it impassable with an A, but that's not today's word.

As the 1689 London Baptist Confession puts it in Article II, paragraph 1—God is a perfectly pure spirit. He is invisible and has no body, parts, or passions, meaning changeable emotions.

Impassibility refers to passions in the sense of changeable emotions or fluctuating feelings—God does not have those.

Historically, the word affections referred to God's unchanging emotions in His love & joy & all that is good in perfect constancy.

So God's impassibility is His immutable, unchanging emotions being stable & not controlled by outside stimuli or influences.

To be clear, God does have consistent, perfect, holy emotions that make Him always trustworthy to seek in keeping with His Word.

God does not grow in joy when something is joyful, but He does truly share His perfect joy, for example when a sinner repents & there is joy in heaven.

And God does not merely react to evil with rising anger because He has always hated evil perfectly as His holiness & love require, but He does make known His anger & resultant wrath at the times He plans.

God's affections are always directed in the right & best way even as the objects of those affections may change to receive or experience more or less of them like His delight or displeasure.

And since He is unchanging in all those ways, we can be absolutely certain that as we turn from sin to faith in Him, we put ourselves in the place of growth & blessing in relationship with Him.

We don't have to wonder if He will be grouchy one day or get tired of us if we know His unchanging ways & that is so stabilizing compared to our inconsistencies from day to day.

That leads us to a 3rd application to continue the outline from last week—#3—let God's immutability move you to faith & repentance.

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Knowing that God never changes should lead us always to turn away from sin & turn to Him in faith, always to repent & trust His Word.

He will be faithful to His immutable, impassible purposes & promises both in judgment & in mercy & that should warn us to flee sin & welcome us to seek Him.

For example, we see God's faithfulness in 1st Samuel 15:11 when He regretted making Saul king when Saul rejected God's words.

We're not going to take time to read through 1st Samuel 15, but God was consistent with His character to reject Saul & not relent when Saul begged for honor without repentance.

In verse 29, Samuel said that as the glory of Israel, God will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.

Yet 1st Samuel 15:35 used the same language again to say that God grieved over Saul & regretted that He had made Saul king.

So in 1st Samuel 15, in the same historical account, God was said to change His mind & then was described as not able to change His mind & yet He was again described as changing His mind.

What's the point?—how are we to rightly interpret all that?

The point is that God had given Saul an opportunity to be king & Saul had tried to do things his own way rather than to obey God.

Since God is always opposed to disobedience, He showed that by rejecting Saul in His grief over Saul's rebellion.

God was immutably consistent to turn away from Saul as He worked in real time with Saul.

That is described in anthropopathic language in the historical telling of it in verse 11 & in reviewing it in verse 35.

When explaining God's actions in time in verses 11 & 35, the language of regret or grief or changing makes sense of the events.

But because of numerous passages we mentioned last week & more, we know that God did not fundamentally change.

And verse 29 of 1st Samuel 15 repeats that description as an essential attribute of God, that He is not a man that He should change His mind.

1st Samuel 15:29 is distinct as describing God & not merely describing interactions of God with people in time.

So that's how to interpret a passage like that with both anthropopathic & transcendent descriptions of God that use the same words.

Again—the narrative relates the actions of God in time to us in anthropopathic language that we can understand what happened relationally in how God handled Saul.

But 1st Samuel 15:29 is a transcendent declaration of what God is like—He is not like men who change their minds—and so that is not an anthropopathism to help us get a feel for what was happening.

And the overall takeaway is that we should heed His Word & we should know that God will act consistent with His character & promises & so we respond to Him with repentance & faith.

We should let God's immutability move us to faith & repentance.

God's transcendent immutability as described by Samuel is a warning not to try to follow God by our own ideas or to rationalize that He will bend His rules for us somehow.

God cannot lie & He is not a man that He let unrepentant unbelief go unpunished & so we must turn away from sin & turn to Him in faith.

God's immutability is a warning that God will keep His Word to judge sin even if He has been patient with you up to now.

Please listen—do not assume that God's patience is evidence that He will not finally return in Christ to judge the world & punish sin.

Genesis 6:6 is the first anthropopathic proof-text for that reality of judgment after people had populated the earth & proven that every intent of man's heart was only evil continually.

God regretted that He had made man on the earth, not in the sense that He changed His mind about creating, but in the sense that sin is sad.

God is always displeased with sin & violence & immorality & rebellion against His standards & Genesis 6:6 showed that as the narrative turned to His global flood judgment.

The flood is a reason to repent now & not to delay.

2nd Peter warns of scoffers who come in the last days & mock the idea of God punishing sin like they mocked in Noah's time.

Yet as 2nd Timothy 2:13 says, "*If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*"

Some take that as a comfort for believers who struggle, but other verses are better for that kind of comfort.

It is more likely that 2nd Timothy 2:13 is a warning against being faithless, against not believing in Christ or turning away from Christ.

God is faithful & cannot deny Himself when He warns that only those who have faith in Christ will enter heaven.

So if you are faithless—if you do not turn from your self-rule & sin to faith in Christ as your only hope for rescue—then God's immutable character & promises will not change & you will be punished forever.

That's the warning from God's immutability that should move us to faith & repentance, but there's also a welcome in this too.

Turn to Jonah for a hopeful welcome from God's immutable character.

Jonah was a prophet sent with warnings to the maybe worst nation in the world in his time that had treated Israel terribly.

But as Jonah preached judgment, God was also offering mercy.

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew God uses His Word to save people & he did not want Ninevites saved.

Jonah hated the Ninevites' corruptions & violent evils & that's why he tried to run away when God told him to go to Nineveh to preach.

And you know the story, right?—God said go & Jonah said no—so God said 'whoa!' & then Jonah said 'uh oh!'

God had a great fish swallow Jonah to humble him to go to Nineveh & he went & preached that the city would be overthrown in 40 days.

That was the message—40 days & Nineveh will be overthrown & let's read that section from verses 1-10 in Jonah 3. [READ]

Jonah preached judgment—note that when people say to tone down or take out any talk of judgment in outreach.

As Jonah preached judgment, the people believed in God & repented & humbled themselves & sought God for mercy.

They clearly said that they did not know what God would do, but they knew it was possible that God would relent & withdraw His burning anger so that they did not perish.

Why would they think such a thing?

Was that presumptuous of them to turn to God & seek His mercy?

Of course not, because they were hoping that God's warnings came with a contingent offer of mercy for those who repent.

We know from repeated examples in Scripture that God is gracious to those who humbly seek Him & we also know it from Jonah's own mouth as we read next in Jonah 4:1-2. [READ]

Jonah knew God's trustworthy, unchanging character was gracious & compassionate, slow to anger & abundant in lovingkindness as one who relents concerning calamity.

There's that anthropopathic word again—God relents concerning calamity—not because He changes in Himself, but because He always shows grace to the humble who repent & trust Him.

Jonah knew this & the Ninevites counted on it as they turned from their sins to seek God in faith & repentance.

So get this—because God is immutably & impassibly opposed to evil, the Ninevites deserved to be punished & He sent Jonah to warn them.

But because God is also immutably & impassibly forgiving & welcoming to those who come to Him in faith & repentance, He did not punish the repentant believing Ninevites.

In the anthropopathic language that we've seen before, Jonah 3:10 says God changed His mind—He relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon the Ninevites.

Since the people changed, God's dealings with them changed.

Again—since the people changed, God's dealings with them changed.

In other anthropopathic language of Scripture, we might say that God was pleased to count Christ's future sacrifice as atoning for their sins & to rejoice over their repentance.

We know more fully now that God satisfies His unchanging justice against the spiritual crimes of sin against Him that deserve to be punished by punishing Jesus Christ in His death on the cross.

Jesus was both God & man who could live perfectly & die sacrificially as a substitute payment for sin's penalty for all who would ever repent & trust Him.

God promised & pictured Christ's coming & work & all OT believers looked forward in faith to Him by God's promises & character.

And now we look back to His work already finished & proven by His resurrection & return to heaven.

God has never changed in His commitment to save sinners for His glory through Jesus as the Promised Savior.

God was not changed in His plan to save Ninevites just as He was not changed in His feelings toward rebellion or repentance.

He carried out His unchanging purpose by sending a prophet to warn the Ninevites & to awaken them by His grace to faith & repentance.

God planned that revival & executed His plan in ways that were totally consistent with His immutable & impassible attitudes & affections & actions of both judgment & mercy.

Turn to Malachi 3 to see another example of God's immutability regarding judgment & mercy that should lead us to faith & repentance.

God had rebuked the Israelites for many things & this chapter turns to the future with both warnings & promises.

Note the certainty of both judgment & mercy in the predictions of the forerunner of the Messiah & the Messiah Himself as we read Malachi 3:1-7—read along with me. [READ]

The words of verse 6 come from Yahweh in the middle of both warnings & promises that make both of those undeniably sure.

Verse 6 says, "*Yahweh, the LORD, does not change*" & that's one of those transcendent descriptions of God Himself in His person & attributes rather than a narrative of His acts in time.

Malachi 3:6 is like 1st Samuel 15:29 & Numbers 23:19 saying God by nature does not change & is therefore trustworthy.

Verse 6 assures judgment in verse 5 on sorcerers & adulterers & liars & cheaters & oppressors & those who do not fear God.

That is like the list in 1st Corinthians 6:9-10 that warns not to be fooled that such people will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It's like the lists in Revelation 21:8 & 22:5 of those who finally will enter the lake of fire for eternal punishment.

God's immutability certifies that future punishment of sinners.

But God's immutability also certifies that the sons of Jacob are not consumed as He promised Israel a final revival of faith in the Messiah.

His immutability assures that His call to return to Him in faith & repentance in verse 7 is a real offer of mercy & salvation.

So let God's immutability move you to faith & repentance.

And in a similar way as a 4th & final point, 4^{thly}, let God's immutability move you to focused perseverance.

God's unchangeable promises for Israel's restoration were a reason to repent & return & never to give up on following Him.

God will prove faithful & so Malachi pointed God's people to persevere as they focused on God's immutable purposes.

The Messiah would come with revival & restoration & they could know that because Yahweh does not change.

He did not change when Balak bribed Balaam in different ways & different places in trying to get him to curse Israel.

In Numbers 23:19, God moved Balaam to say, “*God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, & will He not do it? Or has He spoken, & will He not make it good?*”

In other words—God had made promises to bless Israel & He would not change in His promises & purposes.

As Hebrews 6:17-18 says, God vowed an unchangeable purpose by His own unchangeable self to bless Abraham’s seed & He will do it.

So all who trust in Christ have sure hope in His Word.

Psalms 119:89, “*Forever, O Yahweh, Your word is settled in heaven.*”

As Jesus said in Luke 21:33, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.*”

Therefore, God’s immutability gives reason to keep trusting His Word & to persevere in faith no matter what.

So let God’s immutability move you to focused perseverance.

I hope that answers questions & ignites appreciative awe of the mind-blowing wonder of God’s immutability & impassibility.

I can offer more references if you want to study further.

To sum up, God really does have affections that are perfect in every way & unchanging in their holy goodness.

So when Scripture says He loves with an everlasting love, it is a real love of affection & action that will never lessen or fail.

When Romans 8:38-39 says nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, we can trust that unchanging promise & run to Christ Jesus & rest in God’s love there forever.

When verses point us to pursue what is pleasing to God, He is unchangeably pleased with all He has revealed as His good & wise ways by grace through faith in Christ.

So as we change in line with Him, His affections are real & He is trustworthy to stay faithful to His promises & standards.

And when God is described as grieved or angry, He is always unchangeably so in His hatred of evil in His holiness & love.

When people do what grieves or angers Him, His actions manifest those unchanging affections in time & the change in those relationships is often described in anthropopathic language.

Remember that God is always both transcendent & immanent.

He is always immutable & impassible & also always involved & affectionate because He always perfectly loves good & hates evil.

He faithfully warns the rebel & welcomes the repentant & all such consistencies make Him undoubtedly trustworthy.

So I pray we will let God’s immutability move us to (1) humble praise, (2) fervent prayer, (3) faith & repentance & (4) focused perseverance.

Pray with me for our response to God’s truth as we close.

Resources not quoted or already mentioned...

Phil Johnson at <http://www.romans45.org/articles/impassib.htm>
<https://credomag.com/article/does-god-experience-emotional-change/>
https://credomag.com/magazine_issue/the-immutability-of-god/
<https://credomag.com/article/what-is-impassibility/>
https://credomag.com/magazine_issue/the-impassibility-of-god/