

5. Immutability

a. Analysis

(1) Scriptural Data

Let's go on to our next attribute that we want to discuss, and that is God's immutability which means his unchangeability. Let's look first at some scriptural data related to God's being immutable.

1. The Scripture indicates that *God is unchangeable in his existence*. Psalm 102:25-27. The psalmist writes,

Of old thou didst lay the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of thy hands.

They will perish, but thou dost endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.

Thou changest them like raiment, and they pass away;
but thou art the same, and thy years have no end.

God is changeless in his existence. As we saw in discussing God's necessity and eternity, God never comes into or goes out of being. He exists permanently. So he is unchangeable in his being, in his existence.

2. *God is unchangeable in his character*. In Malachi 3:6 the prophet gives Israel these words of assurance from the LORD: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." The reason Israel is not destroyed is because of the unchangeable character of God. "I the LORD do not change" - indicating that his character is always consistent.

Over in the New Testament, in James 1:17, James writes, "Every good endowment 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.” Here James says that God’s generosity, his loving kindness and character, is unchanging. There is no variation or shadow due to change. This is expressed in his kindness and generosity to us. So God is unchanging in his character.

3. *God is unchangeable in his faithfulness.* Psalm 119:89-90: “For ever, O LORD, thy word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Thy faithfulness endures to all generations; thou hast established the earth, and it stands fast.” Here the psalmist speaks of God’s faithfulness that is everlasting, ever-enduring, and unchanging.

Then in the New Testament, similarly we have in Hebrews 6:17-18 the affirmation of God’s unchanging faithfulness:

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us.

Here the writer of Hebrews speaks of God’s promise and then God’s solemn oath. Both of these, he says, are unchangeable things. His promise and his oath are unchangeable and therefore impossible that they should prove false. This gives us a solid basis for our hope. They are based upon God’s unchangeable faithfulness.

4. *God is unchangeable in his wisdom and plan.* Psalm 33:11: “The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.” Here God’s counsel – his wisdom, his plan – is said to be unchanging and ever-enduring.

So the Scriptures indicate that God is not only changeless but even unchangeable in a number of respects.

(2) Systematic Summary

Let me say a few words by way of systematic summary about this in our closing minutes.

(a) Traditional View

Under the influence of Greek philosophy, traditional Christian theology came to embrace the immutability of God in a very radical sense to mean the absolute changelessness of God in every respect. This is one of the unfortunate areas where I think those who decry the influence of Greek philosophy on biblical thought are correct. The God of Aristotle was called The Unmoved Mover. He was the cause of change; he was the mover of things. But he was himself unmoved, changeless in every respect. He was utterly changeless. The way he moved things was simply by being an object of desire, much in the same way that a statue, though utterly changeless, can inspire admiration in a viewer of the statue. In the same way the God of Greek philosophy was this changeless entity that moves things only by being an object which things desired and therefore were motivated to act in different ways.

This is in striking contrast, I think, to the God of the Hebrew Bible who is the living, dynamic God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not frozen into immobility like a statue. Rather, he acts and reacts in personal relationships with human beings in history, in

time. Therefore he exhibits that kind of changing activity that is appropriate to that.

I see no reason to think that God needs to be immutable in this radical Greek sense of the term. The arguments for that kind of immutability, I think, are not very good. For example, the most common argument for absolute immutability would be to say that since God is a perfect being any change in him would be a change for the worse which is impossible. So as a perfect being he cannot change. He is already in a state of perfection. Any change from that would have to be necessarily a change for the worse. Why is this not a good argument? I think it is a bad argument because it assumes that change only occurs, so to speak, on the vertical scale of best-to-worst. But why couldn't God change, so to speak, on a horizontal scale where he remains perfect but he changes in ways that are not for the worse? Why can't there be horizontal change, so to speak, but not change vertically on the scale of best-to-worst? For example, take the illustration of God's knowing what time it is. If God changes in knowing it is now three o'clock and then a minute later he knows it is now 3:01, he's changed. But would anyone say that is a change for the worse in God? He somehow lost his perfection? I think not. On the contrary, as I've said, knowing what time it is is a perfection in a being. That is a better being than one that doesn't know what time it is. So I don't think there is any reason to think that God's perfection implies that any change in God would be a change for the worse. He could change in neutral ways, like knowing what time it is, without changing for the worse. So I do not think that we should adopt this view that God is like an ice statue or a mannequin in a store window who is utterly immutable in every way.

How should we understand God's immutability?

J. I. Packer, I think, gives a nice summary of God's immutable attributes in his book *Knowing God*. Here is what Packer says.

1. *God's life does not change.* That is to say, God exists forever and he neither matures nor regresses. God is permanent, eternal, never begins to exist, never ceases to exist, and as Packer says he neither gets better or gets worse. He neither matures nor regresses. He has a perfect permanent life.

2. *God's character does not change.* God's mercy, love, faithfulness, justice never change. God's moral qualities are essential to God. Although he may deal with people in different ways, they will all be consistent with his fundamental moral character which is immutable.

3. *God's truth does not change.* That is to say, the word of the Lord endures forever. God's revelation to us stands secure. Obviously, that revelation progresses from the old covenant into the new covenant as further truth is unfolded. But God's word is trustworthy and true and therefore can be relied upon.

4. *God's ways do not change.* Again, God certainly does deal with people in different ways. He dealt with the people in the old covenant in a different way than he deals with us. There was a system of animal sacrifices and temple worship in the old covenant that is done away with now. But I think what Packer is saying is that God, in the ways he deals with people, is consistent in dealing with men. He punishes sin consistently. He bestows grace freely. It is not as though God is capricious or changing in the way he deals with people. His different ways will be expressions of that deeper consistent way of dealing with human persons – punishing sin and

unrighteousness and awarding or bestowing grace and forgiveness freely.

5. *God's purposes do not change.* God's plans are from eternity past with full foreknowledge of the future. Nothing catches God by surprise. He doesn't need to change his plan or adjust with mid-course corrections because his plans are set from eternity past. Therefore there is simply no need to change. Indeed change is ruled out in virtue of his full foreknowledge of the future. So God's purposes and plans are unchangeable.

6. *God's Son does not change.* Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

I think that gives us a nice summary of the ways in which we can affirm biblically that God is immutable but without falling into this fallacy of thinking that God is utterly and totally changeless. He can change in certain contingent ways but he will not and cannot change in his life, his existence, his fundamental character, and in the way he deals with human persons.