

The Immutability of God Comforts the Christian

Brian Doebler

God is Immutable

God does not change. This is what the dogmaticians refer to as the “immutability” of God. The Bible clearly reveals that God is immutable. God makes himself known as the unchanging God of the Israelites simply by the proclamation of his name. “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). God’s *name* implies that he simply exists without cause and without change. The psalmist describes God this way: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same and your years will never end” (Psalm 102:25-27). Humans can never fully understand God’s immutability because earthly things fail and fade. God, however, in his Word makes it clear that he is always the same. God is “the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

In the Bible we see God’s immutability mostly in his will. “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:10). The LORD’s decisions and declarations are not subject to revision. “The Scriptures, though they describe the immutability of God to us in various ways, particularly stress the immutability of his counsels and decrees, in order to strengthen our faith” (OGH, vol. 1, *The Attributes of God*, 493). God’s will as seen in Law and Gospel never change. On the one hand, “God’s wrath” remains on the unbeliever (John 3:36). On the other hand, “(God) wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). As with many of God’s attributes, God’s immutability has two possible effects. God’s immutability strikes fear in the heart of the sinful person. For believers, God’s immutability brings tremendous comfort. The Christian is comforted when God speaks of his good will for the child of faith.

First, however, some difficulties and objections related to the doctrine of God’s immutability have to be addressed in part. Such difficulties and objections arise when the finite creature seeks to comprehend his infinite Creator.

Scripture speaks of God in a twofold manner: 1) In His majesty as being above time and space...; 2) in accordance with our human views as being in time and space. Only in the latter manner is God comprehensible to us. We must so think of God that God, who in His being is immutable, is angry or merciful according to the difference in the object of His affection. We must so conceive of God that in spite of the immutability in His essence He is a gracious God to the humble, poor, and the contrite sinners, but a jealous God to the proud and self-righteous. God remains immutable, but there is mutability in the object of His affections. (Pieper, vol. 1, 440-441)

For instance, God is love (1 John 4:8). Skeptics have a hard time with this one. How can a loving God also be the “blood-thirsty” God of Israel in its conquest of the Promised Land? They scoff at a self-proclaimed God of love who allows babies to be born sinful (Psalm 51:5). They see a moody God, a God who is on an emotional roller coaster changing from love to anger from one moment to the next.

In addition, there are those passages of Scripture that say God repented. When a person repents, an attitude of sorrow is accompanied by a change in conduct. God’s repentance, as well as his other emotions towards mankind, must be understood anthropopathically. That is, God in his Word defines his nature with words that cater to our feeble and limited understanding. Concerning God’s repentance as it applied to King Saul, the NIV translation probably captures God’s meaning best by saying that God was “grieved” (1 Samuel 15:12). The Hebrew word used is *chamam* which vividly describes how Saul’s actions affected his relationship with God. God does not want to see a person disobey him. God, however, does not change his will. Saul testifies to God’s immutability in respect to repentance when he says, “(God) who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind (*chamam*); for he is not a man, that he should change his mind” (1 Samuel 15:29).

The same holds true for all of God’s affections. They must be understood anthropopathically. As Pieper mentions above, we can only reconcile affections of God such as his anger and his love when we see them in their relationship to his creatures. This being said, God’s anger and love are not figments of our imagination that should be taken for granted.

Many people try to rationalize the Bible’s statement of God’s immutability with portions of Scripture that speak of God “repenting”. They try to rationalize an unchanging God with a God who, on the one hand is described as a loving God and, on the other, defined as a vengeful God. “The Christian theist can recognize senses in which even an immutable and perfect God can change. Human beings can make a difference to God” (Nash, 105). Ronald H. Nash espouses that God is imperfect if he cannot enter into “mutual relations of love” with people. Therefore, Robert Nash, influenced by a man named W. Norris Clarke, makes following distinction: God has a “relational consciousness” which is affected by the actions of people. He also has a “intrinsic inner being” which remains unchanged and perfect, unaffected by the actions of people (Nash, 102-103). Stephen T. Davis, a self-labeled Christian philosopher, would seem to agree with this distinction in the essence of God. He argues that the Bible only describes God as immutable insofar as God makes promises. God, whom Davis also claims is only “temporally eternal”, can change in ways that do not threaten his goodness or his promises (Davis, 47-48).

God, however, does not ask us to rationalize what he says about himself in the Bible. God does not say that he is only somewhat immutable. Rather God is “I AM”. “I the LORD do not change” (Malachi 3:6). God loves all people and yet hates the sinner. The Scripture clearly teaches both.

Critics attack God’s immutability on two other points. They claim that the creation and the incarnation both necessitate changes in God. Creation does not mean a change in God. Rather, there is a change in God’s relationship to the creature (Pieper, 441). For both of these objections we can again argue that the Bible says first of all that God does not change. Meanwhile, the Bible also says God “created”. Both are facts presented by Scripture. The Bible also says that Jesus Christ, true God, became also true man without a

change in his divinity (Hebrews 13:8). Again these may not fit neatly into the pigeonholes of our logic and yet they remain true. Let our reason be held captive to the infallible Word.

God's Immutability and the Law

God does not change. His purposes, his will and decrees remain unchanged. Again, his will is not subject to change or circumstance. God's immutability is significant for believers. It works with, effects and strengthens God's Law and his Gospel.

Insofar as God's Law is concerned, man can only tremble when he recognizes that he will not escape eternal damnation because of his sin. God's Law reveals all people have fallen far short of what God has every right to demand. God's Law says all people deserve death as payment for their wicked lifestyles. "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this **will not enter the kingdom of God**" (Galatians 5:22). When we stand before God's throne on Judgment Day, we know that according to God's immutability he will not say, "Well, I know that you have broken my laws. I know I said that the punishment for these transgressions is eternal separation from my Presence. But, I am going to let you off the hook anyway." Rather, he will say to those people who remain slaves to the law, "Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

God's Immutability and His Promises

Men have divided the Bible into 31,173 verses. One could well defend each of these verses as a promise of God. For God is saying in each verse that something happened or that something will happen. Even if one were to propose a more narrow definition of "promise," the Bible still contains thousands of promises from God. "Through these (God's power, glory, and goodness) he has given us his very great and precious promises" (2 Timothy 1:4a). These promises of God can be categorized into two types, conditional and unconditional.

God's immutability necessitates faithfulness to his promises. "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love" (Deuteronomy 7:9). In our human experience, we often see promises made. Political campaigns are full of promises. A marriage vow is a promise. Consumer products often come with "satisfaction-guaranteed" promises. But so many human promises are broken. Not so with the immutable God. God binds himself to keep *his* promises. Balaam, the soothsayer of Mesopotamia, proclaimed under divine impetus, "God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19).

The Bible contains many historical examples of God's faithfulness to his promises. Two specific examples can be seen in the lives of Abraham and Paul. God promised Abram (when he was already 75 years old!) that he would have a son. Ten years later, Abram remained childless. In fact, his faith in God's promise for an heir began to waver. He and his wife conspired to have a child by Sarai's Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. God, however, remained faithful to his promise even when Abram was unfaithful. "...If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). Fourteen years

later, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old and Sarai was well past child-bearing age, God promised Abram again that he would have an heir by his wife, Sarah! God *did* remain faithful to his promise and one year later Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Abraham “considered (God) faithful” (Hebrews 11:11).

In Acts we can see another historical example of God’s faithfulness to his promise in the shipwreck Paul experienced. God promised Paul that he would arrive safely in Rome. God even promised that all of his fellow passengers would also survive (Acts 27:24). The validity of this promise was likely questioned by some of the men on board as they saw their boat tossed about by the storm and eventually destroyed. Yet, God remained faithful and every man survived and reached the land safely (Acts 27:44).

His gospel promises also give tremendous comfort to his twentieth century children of faith. Almost 2000 years have passed since God’s last recorded promise to people. Yet, they hold true for us today. Jesus’ promise to his disciples remains true: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus is with us as he fulfills his promises to help us in time of need and to bring believers to their heavenly home.

Does our sinful nature somehow forfeit our right to the fulfillment of God’s promises? God is with his children as promised though the sinful flesh still clings tightly to us. The descendants of Israel testify to God’s faithfulness in their desperate condition. When God called Abraham out of Haran, he promised Abraham more than an heir. He promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation under God’s blessing. He promised Abraham that he would be the ancestor of the Messiah. God then repeated and confirmed this promise with each of the patriarchs. God also reaffirmed this promise with the children of Israel as they set out for the Promised Land at Sinai. Forty years later Israel reached the Promised Land and took possession of it. Fifteen hundred years later the Messiah was born as a descendant to Abraham. According to human logic, God had every right and reason to break his promise. The Israelites disobeyed God at every opportunity. Our unchanging God kept his promise. King Solomon testifies, “Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses” (1 Kings 8:56). The new covenant God promised through the prophet Jeremiah despite an unfaithful people (Jeremiah 31:31-34) was fulfilled in the gospel which Paul preached (Romans 1:2,3).

Christians do struggle with the sinful nature. Christians give into the temptations of the devil, the world and their sinful flesh. Yet, God remains faithful to New Testament believers as he did to his chosen people of Israel. “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10). Peter in this context recognizes that God’s children will be tormented by the temptations of the devil. Yes, they will even sin grossly. Yet, God does not abandon them to the horrible consequences of their sin. God restores them to his family through repentance. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

God also promises believers that we will have crosses to bear. Paul said to the Christians in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). In fact, God promises that people will hate us simply because we follow God. Jesus promised the twelve disciples, “All men will hate you because of me” (Matthew 10:22).

Amidst these trials God does not change. He does not decide to help us one day but ignore us the next. He provides us with a way out of every temptation. “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). He tells us to bring our trials and burdens to him and he will help. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). In Jesus we have the promise of peace (John 14:27), a peace which comes from the knowledge that God always controls everything for our good. In Christ, God promises to meet all our needs (Philippians 4:19). God promises that he is our great Physician in times of sickness (Exodus 15:26). His gracious promises envelope every facet our existence every day.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Which of you, if his son asks for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

(Matthew 7:7-11)

We can turn to him in prayer and he will provide what we need. We are comforted because we know that God will work our trials for good. “Therefore we do not lose heart...For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17,18).

According to God’s promise we his children have in store for us a greater treasure in heaven. Our immutable God has given us the certain hope of everlasting life. We have “a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time” (Titus 1:2). God promises our salvation comes by grace through faith and not by our own feeble efforts. Again, when we stand before God on Judgment Day we know that he will not say, “Well, I know I said heaven was a free gift of my grace to believers, but I really think you need to earn that gift.” Rather, he will say to believers, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

The devil enlists his spiritual headhunters to rob believers of eternal life. Demons and evil men work constantly to take this promised crown of righteousness away from the believer. Yet, God promises the elect believer that this is not possible. Our gracious God elected his believers to eternal life before the world was created (Ephesians 1:4-6). This election stands firm for all time. The devil cannot pull one of the elect from God’s grace (Matthew 24:22-24).

We rely on God with the full knowledge that he does not change. Everything we need to know about God he tells us in his Word. Here, God defines himself as a faithful God. He promised a Savior to mankind. Jesus Christ fulfilled that promise. God promises eternal life to all who believe, a promise that will be fulfilled on Judgment Day. In God we can have true and lasting peace. He will provide for all our earthly needs. He sustains us with the guarantee of salvation.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, St. Thomas. Summa Theologiae. Ed. Timothy McDermott. Westminster, Md: Christian Classics Inc., 1989.
- Calvin, John. The Institutes of Christian Religion. Ed. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987.
- Davis, Stephen T. Logic and the Nature of God. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.
- Heppe, Heinrich. Reformed Dogmatics. London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1950.
- Lockyer, Dr. Herbert. All the Promises of the Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962.
- Nash, Ronald H. The Concept of God. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.
- Pieper, Francis. Christian Dogmatics. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.