

# ***ON THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD***

by

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*"But He is in one mind, and who can turn Him?  
and what His soul desires, even that He does."  
Job 23:13*

In this chapter Job expresses his grief and vexation of spirit in a very moving and pathetic [affecting] manner. See verse 2, "Even today is my complaint bitter; my stroke is heavier than my groaning." And if we duly consider all the circumstances of his unhappy situation at this time, we shall not wonder that he was ready to sink in despondency, or that the patientest man should be brought at last thus bitterly to complain.

For under his complicated strokes of adversity from the immediate hand of God or from the permitted malignant agency of the grand adversary, under the sudden loss of all his substance and of all his children and the most distressing bodily pains from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, he not only had no one on earth to console him, but not one, it seems, but who was against him and ready to add to his affliction. His wife appeared rather to upbraid and insult him, saying, "Do you still retain your integrity? Curse God and die." His three greatest and best friends (who came from afar on this melancholy occasion on purpose to condole with him), though wise and good men, yet from a common mistake concerning the ways of Providence they proved, as he calls them, miserable comforters. Supposing that men were always dealt with in this world very much according to their moral characters, they concluded that Job must have been an extremely wicked man notwithstanding his former reputation for piety and virtue, or he would not have been visited with such singular divine judgments. And hence they exerted all their powers of argumentation and rhetoric to bring him to a confession of gross hypocrisy.

Now in such a state of complicated troubles, when all other sources of consolation were shut up, how natural and necessary is it for a good man to refer his cause to God and seek help and support from him. But even this last resource of a suffering saint seems now to have been denied to Job, for he says, "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat! I would order my cause before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments" (vers. 3,4). And in verses 8 and 9, "Behold, I go forward, but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him." One would suppose from these complaints that Job wanted to reason with God, not being able to comprehend the goodness, or perhaps the righteousness, of these his present strange dispensations.

In this view of the foregoing words, our text may be considered as Job's recollection of himself, and calling to mind the folly of expostulating with the Most High respecting what he had done, or of thinking to alter his purposes in regard to what he was about to do. "But He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? and what His soul desires, even that He does."

The meaning of the words is plain and easy to be understood; namely, that God is unalterable in his determinations, that he never changes his counsels, and that no one can move him to alter his mind in any instance. That what he once designs he always does, let what arguments or entreaties be used to persuade him to the contrary. And as the meaning of Job is very obvious, so the sentiment he here expresses is very evidently true. For,

1. Such unchangeableness is often ascribed to God and claimed by him in the holy Scriptures. "The counsel of the LORD [Yahweh] stands forever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11). "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure'" (Isa. 46:9,10). "I am Yahweh, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). And James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

2. Such immutability in God may certainly be concluded from his other perfections--his infinite power, knowledge, and goodness.

To be fickle and given to change is ever considered an imperfection in a man. Surely then, nothing like this ought to be supposed in the all-perfect God. The wisest and most steady men do indeed often alter their minds, and it is often wise and necessary for them to do so. They cannot always foresee how things will turn out or what incidents may happen. Objections to their plans, unthought of at first, frequently arise in the prosecution of them, or occur to their thoughts on more mature consideration. Men are sometimes obliged to desist from their designs because of the opposition they meet with from some, or the failure of others on whom they depended for help. They are sometimes induced to alter their purposes by convincing arguments suggested to them; and sometimes when not convinced it is best, they are overcome by the earnest entreaty of friends whom they cannot bear to disoblige.

But to a Being who is infinite in power and knowledge, and in every moral perfection, no such causes of alteration are possible. "Known to God are all His works," and every thought relative to them, "from the beginning of the world" [Acts 15:18]. No new consideration can occur or be suggested to him as a reason for changing his mind, nor will he ever be over-persuaded to alter any purpose of his heart without reason; and none can stay his hand.

Thus indisputably evident is it, both from particular texts of Scripture and from the other revealed attributes of God, that he is in one mind and none can turn him. Nevertheless, there are objects against this doctrine, or apparent difficulties relating to it, which deserve some attention.

1. Several texts will readily occur which appear to assert the contrary. We are told in Genesis 6:6, "It repented Yahweh that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved His heart." It is said concerning his people, "Nevertheless He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry; and for their sake He remembered his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of His mercies" (Ps. 106:44,45). And in Jeremiah 18:7,8, God says, "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation

against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it."

These texts and some others seem to imply that God is not always in one mind but is turned from his purposes, or made to regret having executed them, sometimes by the wickedness and sometimes by the repentance and prayers of his creatures. But it is very certain that all such texts are to be understood only as figurative representations accommodated to our thoughts and ways, or as speaking after the manner of men. We also read of the arm of the Lord and of his hand and eyes; yet no one, unless grossly ignorant, will suppose that God, who is a spirit, has actually such bodily organs as these. The eyes of the Lord are his understanding, his hand or arm denotes his power. And in like manner he is said to repent when he alters his treatment of creatures from what it had been, or seemed about to be. When he destroys what he had created or spares those whom he had threatened to destroy, in these cases the alteration is in them and not at all in him; and all these variations in his ways he foresaw and fully determined from all eternity. But,

2. Some may reject this doctrine, and others misimprove [weaken] it, as though the inevitable consequence of it were that all supplications and intercessions to God can avail nothing. If he will do just as he sees fit after all, and just as he had eternally foreordained--if he be so in one mind that nothing can turn him, it may be said, "Why should we call upon him, and what profit should we have if we pray to him?" To this is may be answered,

First, that whatever difficulty there may be in reconciling the efficacy of prayer with the immutability of God, yet both must be believed if we believe the Scriptures; and we must impute the seeming inconsistency between them to their being matters too high for our comprehension. We are expressly assured in his word, and must necessarily conclude from his other perfections, that with God there is no shadow of turning. But we are also abundantly taught that he hears prayer and is a rewarder of them who diligently seek him. It is written, "He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, and shall not despise their prayer" [Ps. 102:17]. It is written, "I did not say to the seed of Jacob, 'Seek Me in vain'" [Isa. 45:19]. It is written, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" [James 5:16]. And our great Teacher has told us, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" [Luke 11:9].

There are also many examples of the wonderful efficacy of prayer recorded in the holy Scriptures for our encouragement to this duty. We have the instance of Jacob's wrestling in prayer until the breaking of the day, to whom it was said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince you have power with God and with men, and have prevailed" [Gen. 32:28]. We have repeated instances of the prevalence of the fervent intercession of Moses for averting the threatened vengeance of God and the utter destruction of his people in the wilderness. We have the instance of the Ninevites, when by express divine command Jonah had made a solemn public proclamation, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" [Jonah 3:4]. Nevertheless, on their fasting and crying mightily to God, we are told, "And God relented of the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" [Jonah 3:10].

From these declarations and examples it is certain, if the Bible be true, that prayer is not a vain thing, however hard it may be to conceive how it can be of any avail if God changes not and is not

to be turned.

Second, it may be observed that there is no more difficulty in this [reconciling how prayer can be effective when God changes not] than there is in reconciling God's decrees, or even his foreknowledge of whatsoever comes to pass, with using means to preserve our lives, to recover our health, or to procure our food. But,

Third, in every case the true solution is that God has decreed the means as well as the end; or that, though he has determined whatever he will do and never alters his mind, yet he has determined to do things in a certain way and in no other. Some things indeed God determined from eternity to bring to pass without means; and these he thus brings to pass. But concerning those events which he determined to effect by the use of means, it is not true that they would come to pass at all if the appointed means were not used. What God has thus joined together cannot be put asunder. To suppose that things which he designed to do by certain means, he afterwards should accomplish without the use of those means, is to suppose him mutable. It is to suppose an alteration in the Divine Mind. If God be unchangeable, he will do everything in the very way he has purposed and in no other way.

Respecting prayer in particular, the subject now under consideration, some mercies God from eternity determined to bestow without his being sought for them--for instance, giving men capacities and a disposition to seek and serve him. In regard to these, he is found of them who did not seek him and has mercy on whom he will have mercy.

But there are other blessings, which though he has determined to grant, yet he has as absolutely determined to be sought for them first, and to bestow them only in answer to prayer. This is the case with respect to the pardon of transgressors and giving them a covenant title to eternal life. And this is the case respecting many temporal deliverances and salvations. When God has determined to deliver a sinful people from threatened judgments, he will deliver them; but he will yet, for all this, be inquired of to do it for them. He will first cause them to repent and accept the punishment of their iniquities. He will take away their stony heart and give them a heart of flesh--a feeling, sensible heart, a heart to mourn for their sins with godly sorrow and to seek him in a humble, penitent manner. And in this way only will he restore them to his favor, plant them, and cause them to flourish. But when he has determined to destroy a guilty nation, though Noah, Daniel and Job were in it and interceded night and day for it, their intercessions could be of no avail.

Some favors God will confer upon persons at the request merely of others. Other things he will not bestow on any until they seek it from him themselves. Some blessings may always be obtained if we ask aright for them, as pardoning mercy, justifying grace, and progressive sanctification. In other cases God will sometimes grant the particular requests of his children and sometimes in mercy refuse them. But all these diversities of operation and the real efficacy of the prayer of faith are fully reconcilable with the eternal unchangeableness of His purpose, who works all things after the counsel of his own will.

I shall now conclude with a few reflections arising from what has been said upon this subject.

1. We may hence see that the immutability of God is a glorious attribute; that His being so in

one mind that none can turn him, instead of affording any cause of complaint or uneasiness, is matter of the highest joy and rejoicing. We have seen that this is necessarily the consequence of his infinite wisdom, power and goodness, and that it is not inconsistent with his hearing prayer or being easy to be entreated, and it is evidently necessary to be believed as the ground of trust and confidence in him.

Could God be persuaded to alter his eternal plan, or any part of it, by our arguments or entreaties, then it would not be his wisdom and power that would govern the world but rather the weakness and folly of partial, ignorant creatures. In one whose understanding can never err, and who is always disposed to do what is best, immoveable fixedness in his own opinion and intention is certainly to be rejoiced in and adored. Hence Moses says, "Because I will proclaim the name of Yahweh, ascribe ye greatness to our God. He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He" [Deut. 32:3]. David also says, "Who is a God, save Yahweh? And who is a rock, except our God" [2 Sam. 22:32]. And again, "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end." [Ps. 102:25-27].

2. We may learn from this subject the unreasonableness and danger of that power for which some contend as being essential to the freedom of a moral agent--a power to will and act this way or that, in all cases, contrary to one's own disposition as well as according to it. The Almighty himself has not this power. If he had, what Rock--what immoveable basis--what firm foundation would there be in the universe on which the mind of a good man could be stayed and kept in perfect peace? The lack of such a power as this is implied in that immutability of the Supreme Being, which is essential to be believed as the ground of all trust and confidence in him. Were it possible for God to lie or to act unwisely, unjustly, or unmercifully, or were it possible for him to change his own nature, or to will and do in all cases contrary to his own mind, he could not be relied upon any more than the changing wind or the fluctuating ocean. And must man have more power than God Almighty or else he cannot be a free agent? Nothing can be more palpably absurd than to think it a desirable power and a great privilege to be able to will and act without all motive or reason and contrary to one's own inclination!

3. What has been said may be of service for the correction of some errors, which are probably common, respecting the design and usefulness of prayer. The end of our being required to offer up supplications and intercessions to God cannot be to inform him of our needs, or to move his pity, or to make any alteration in his purposes. We are not to conceive of Him as being altogether like ourselves or our fellowmen. In petitioning earthly rulers for justice or the rich for mercy, and filling our mouths with arguments, we may hope to convince them of the equitableness of our cause, or acquaint them with our necessities, or move them to compassion. But none of these effects can reasonably be expected from the most melting entreaties or most clear and ample representations to the omniscient, immutable Jehovah--the God of all grace. He knows what things we have need of before we ask him, his mercy is self-moved, and he is ever in one mind.

But though informing, moving, or turning Him ought not to be thought of as the end of prayer to God, yet there are purposes to be answered by prayer which render it our reasonable service. It

is designed to alter us, to make us more sensible of our dependence, and so prepare us for mercies; and also to give glory to the Father of lights as the giver of every good and perfect gift. This last end at least may be subserved by intercessions for others as well as by supplications for ourselves. And for all these reasons prayer is not a vain thing. It is our life, and by this shall we escape eternal death. "For," says the apostle Paul, "the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For whoever calls on the name of Yahweh shall be saved" [Rom. 10:12,13].

4. From this subject it may be seen that it is our highest wisdom as well as most indispensable duty to be resigned to the unalterable will and unerring counsel of the only wise God in our wills, desires, and prayers. He certainly knows what is best, and we do not. His designs are always right and universally good; our wishes are often partial, selfish, and wrong. Had we our requests in all cases, leanness might be sent into our souls. It might be ruinous to ourselves as well as hurtful to the universe. Unreserved submission to infinite wisdom certainly becomes all creatures. We should pray for what appears desirable to us provided only it seems good in the sight of God.

Indeed, in regard to things expressly revealed to be the Divine will, there is no room for such a proviso or submission. In our desires and prayers for saving grace, personal holiness, and heavenly happiness, we need not express a willingness to be denied if it be the will of God; because we know it is not. We know that they who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled, and that it is the Father's good pleasure to give the kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit. When, therefore, we have this spirit and sincerely desire these blessings, we may ask for them without reserve.

But in regard to temporal comforts or being saved from temporal evils--in regard to all things about which the purpose of God is not revealed--submission to his unknown will ever becomes us. This is what reason dictates, and this is what Scripture constantly inculcates. Many are the precepts enjoining this and many the examples by which it is enforced. Not to multiply texts on a point so abundantly taught and so self-evident, I will only observe that our Saviour directed his disciples to pray that the will of God might be done before they petitioned for their daily bread, and that when Jesus himself was in the bitterest agony and prayed most earnestly for relief, yet he was all resignation. "My Father," says he, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" [Matt. 26:39]. Let us bear in remembrance this spirit of our suffering Saviour; and may the same mind be in us which was in Him. Amen.

Sermon V from *Sermons, on a Number of Connected Subjects* by John Smalley (Hartford: Oliver D. Cooke, 1803). **Note:** The text has not been modified except for some very light editing for clarity. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, long paragraphs have been divided, and the NKJV has been used for numerous quotations.