

Series: God Is Unchangeable #1720

Title: Various Scriptures
Anthropopathic Language

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. It is good to have you here and I remind you that we are now at a place in our discussion of the doctrine of God's immutability (the fact that God does not change) where we can look at some texts in the Bible which seem to indicate the opposite: that God does change. Last time we established that *if* God does change, then the Scriptures contradict themselves.

A shining example of this is the interplay between two verses in the same chapter. The chapter is 1 Samuel 15 and the verses are 11 and 29. As we get going, let me get the texts back on your mind. Concerning Saul being the King of Israel, God says in verse 11, **"I regret that I have made Saul king."** That sure sounds like God has changed. Originally the Lord thought it was a good idea that Saul rule Israel, now, not so much. *But* across the page in verse 29 the Bible says, **"The Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind."** These verses in 1 Samuel prove to us that any reference to God repenting or regretting or changing cannot mean what we often think they mean. Scripture has no contradictions. *So then*, the *big* question stands: what *do* they mean?

Here, we have to talk about language. We have to consider how Infinite God communicates to finite creatures. He does so through anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language. Some of you are saying, "We have talked about this before. We've had this. I remember this." And you are correct. For example, we spent some time on anthropomorphic language when we talked about the names of God. If you remember what we said there, it will be helpful background information for you now. Furthermore, let me say, this is a *big* topic. These two types of language have bearing on several doctrines in the study of God. As we are discussing the unchangeable God, there is a popular false teaching related to this – called Open Theism – that misunderstands anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language, and thereby misinterprets holy God as One who *changes*.

So a proper, prolonged, and necessary teaching on these types of language in reference to the immutable God and in response to Open Theism, is appropriate. But I am not going to do that at this time. The main reason is I want us to keep a sharp focus on the biblical texts that *seem* to suggest God changes, but do not. At a later time we can take up heresies, quite frankly, like Open Theism when we have more concentrated time. I only mention it now to say insights into how God communicates to us, and how we understand His communication is the answer to why some passages *seem* to say God changes.

Let's tackle some definitions. By anthropomorphic we mean language that conceives of God as having human characteristics or existing in human form. The Bible talks about God listening with His ears and seeing with His eyes and touching with His fingers, but we know God is Spirit and does not literally have ears, eyes, hands and fingers as people do. By saying these things about Himself God accommodates Himself to us, lowly human beings. He speaks in a language we can understand. By anthropopathic we mean language that conceives of God as having human emotions. The Bible talks about God experiencing joy, grief, anger, love, and jealousy. *And*, pertinent to our study, God as regretting, repenting, and changing. Again, He speaks in a language we can understand.

It becomes abundantly clear in reading the Bible that it uses language from the mutable (the changeable) creature – men and women – to describe the immutable (unchangeable) being of the Creator – God. But we must be careful with this. We do not have permission from God to say that because He uses anthropopathic language, like describing His emotion as changing, we should interpret this to mean that He *does* indeed change. The language that we require in order for Him to communicate truth about Himself to us cannot be language that is then used to inaccurately define His being, His essence, His Person, or His form. We cannot attribute to God the qualities of His creatures.

The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writes as follows in his profound and lengthy work *Reformed Dogmatics*, quote, “[The Bible’s use of this language] forbids ascribing change to God in His relation to creation...Scripture necessarily speaks of God in anthropomorphic language. Yet however anthropomorphic its language, it at the same time prohibits us from positing any change in God.”

What this means is, in the passages we have looked at and in these ones that follow God does not change, even if, so we can understand, He appears to do so. God is accommodating Himself to our language. Really, as Bavinck also says, “Scripture does not merely contain anthropomorphisms, on the contrary, *all* Scripture is anthropomorphic.” As soon as we open the Bible we hear God speaking to us anthropomorphically. He uses human language to communicate to us. In His wisdom the Lord has chosen to do it this way.

Thus far, we have had the example of 1 Samuel 15 where God employs this anthropopathic language of “regret.” And, as mentioned in the introduction many days ago, we also have Genesis 6 and Exodus 32. I am reading Genesis chapter 6 and verses 5-7. **“Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. ⁷ The Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.’”**

What? God was sorry that He had made man. God was grieved in His heart. And, verse 7, therefore God decided to blot out man and animal from the earth and sky? Certain translations of the Bible say God repented or God regretted the making of man and woman. That sure sounds like God changed His mind about His creation, doesn’t it?

And Exodus chapter 32, verses 10-14. Following the sinful episode when God’s people made a golden calf to worship, listen to the exchange between Moses and God in prayer. Exodus 32, verse 10 begins with the Lord speaking, **“Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”** ¹¹ Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, **‘O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about *doing* harm to Your people.**

¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, **‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’** ¹⁴ So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” Here I do not have to say “it sure sounds like God has changed His mind,” because the text says, “the Lord changed His mind.” Exodus 32, verse 14. Moses asked God to change His mind and God did change His mind.

But both Genesis 6 and Exodus 32 have to be held to the same standard as 1 Samuel 15. Again we have that strong anthropopathic language. This conceives of God as having the human emotions of repentance, regret, and change. But does this mean God goes counter to His eternal decree and will and actually changes? I believe it does not. However, given that we will soon run out of time, and I have more to say about this, let’s stop and pick up here next time. I strongly encourage you to stay with us, because it will take some time to solidify these important points in your busy mind. We are coming down the stretch in this series. It will be over before you know it. Let’s finish strong, believing the immutability of God is essential for us to know and apply to our lives.

I am aware that many of these doctrines of God are not easy to grasp, especially when we are used to a kind of light, devotional, quick “pick me up” kind of Christianity. But beloved, we need much more than that. We need to go deeper and wider to truly know and worship and love the God who is.

So, can I count on you to continue to be with us? I sure hope so. And invite someone else to listen along with you as we continue to discover who God Is. ---END---