

# Digging Deep: Exploring the Joy of Systematic Theology

## Class 8: The Doctrine of God, part 4

### *The Attributes of God*

*"... this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."*

**John 17. 3**

## **I. General Principles**

- Throughout the Bible, the attributes & character of God are more often displayed & revealed than they are explained & defined.
- The revelation of God in the Bible is progressive and not static.
- While we have been made in God's image, God is certainly not in our image! In other words, we need to be careful of the direction of our comparison & aware of the scope of the distance.
- As God reveals Himself in the Scripture, He does so in a way that condescends to our frailty & understanding, and observes the limits of human language.

## **II. God is Unchanging (or God cannot change)**

*We blossom & flourish like leaves on a tree, And wither & perish, but nought changeth thee.*

**Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise**

### **A. God's life does not change**

*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

**Psalms 90. 2**

*Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.*

**Psalms 93.2**

*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end. The children of your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you.*

**Ps. 102. 25-28**

*Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*

**Romans 1.22-23**

*he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.*

**1 Timothy 6. 15-16**

## B. God's character does not change

*God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, & the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever & thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

**Exodus 3. 14-15**

*Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

**Isaiah 40. 27-31**

*"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me & I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.*

**Malachi 3. 6-7**

*Every good gift 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.*

**James 1.17**

## C. God's truth does not change

*A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*

**Isaiah 40. 6-8**

*Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens ...  
Long have I known from your testimonies that you have founded them forever.*

**Psalms 119. 89, 152**

*Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"*

**John 10. 34-36**

## D. God's purposes do not change

*God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*

**Numbers 23.19**

*And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret."*

**1 Samuel 15. 28-29**

*Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!  
For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.  
The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.  
The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.  
Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!*

**Psalms 33. 8-12**

<sup>16</sup> For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. <sup>17</sup> So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, <sup>18</sup> so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup> We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,

**Hebrews 6. 16-19**

- **But what about ...**

*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*

**Genesis 6. 5-6**

*"I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night ... And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.*

**1 Samuel 15.11, 35**

*And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand."*

**2 Samuel 24.16**

*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

**Jonah 3.10**

*"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts & not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious & merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love; & he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent ...*

**Joel 2.12-14**

The author of 1 Samuel is trying to teach us something about God. On the one hand, our God is not static, monotonous, and lifeless. As a personal, relational Being, God's activity in the world is subject to change and allows for all the dynamism we have in our personal relationships. There was always bound to be conflict in covenantal history *between* God and human beings, but this does not mean there is conflict *within* God's inner being. As God's ways appear to us, there will be change and variation, but as God is in his character and essence there can be no variation of shadow due to change (James 1:17; cf. Mal.3:6; Heb. 13:8; 2 Tim. 2:13).

When God reflects on the disobedience of Saul, he uses a word that makes sense to us: "regret". But this doesn't mean that God was ignorant or caught off guard by his rebellion. God is quite capable of lamenting a state of affairs he Himself foreknew and brought about. In other words, God's regret is not analogous in every way to our regret. This seems to be the point v. 29 is explicitly making. God can look back at Saul and say, "I'm grieved that he sinned; its time to find another king" while still maintaining, "I never change my mind."

*Kevin DeYoung, Does God Have Regret?*

God's heart is capable of complex combinations of emotions infinitely more remarkable than ours. He may well be capable of lamenting over something he chose to bring about. Not only that, God may also be capable of looking back on the very act of bringing something about and lamenting that act in one regard, while affirming it as best in another regard. For example, if I spank my son for blatant disobedience and he runs away from home because I spanked him, I may feel some remorse over the spanking - not in the sense that I disapprove of what I did, but in the sense that I feel some sorrow that spanking was a necessary part of a wise way of dealing with this situation, and that it led to his running away. If I had it to do over again, I would still spank him. It was the right thing to do. Even knowing that one consequence would be alienation for a season, I approve the spanking, and at the same time regret the spanking. If such a combination of emotions can accompany my own decisions, it is not hard to imagine that God's infinite mind may be capable of something similar.

Now the question is: Does the Bible teach that God laments some of his decisions in the sense that I have described above (which does not imply that He is ignorant of their future consequences), or does the Bible teach that God laments some of his decisions because he did not see what was coming?

The answer is given later in 1 Samuel 15. After God says in verse 11, "I repent that I have made Saul king," Samuel says in verse 29, as if to clarify, "The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent" (KJV). The point of this verse seems to be that, even though there is a sense in which God does repent (verse 11), there is another sense in which he does not repent (verse 29). The difference would naturally be that God's repentance happens in spite of perfect foreknowledge, while most human repentance happens because we lack foreknowledge. God's way of "repenting" is unique to God: "God is not a man that he should repent" (the way a man repents in his ignorance of the future).

For God to say, "I feel sorrow that I made Saul king," is not the same as saying, "I would not make him king if I had it to do over." God is able to feel sorrow for an act in view of foreknown evil and pain, and yet go ahead and will to do it for wise reasons. And so later, when he looks back on the act, he can feel the sorrow for the act that was leading to the sad conditions, such as Saul's disobedience. Hence we have our precious verse in *Numbers 23:19* - "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" I say it is precious, because here God's commitment to his promises hangs on his not repenting like a man. In other words, God's promises are not in jeopardy, because God can foresee all circumstances, he knows that nothing will occur that will cause him to take them back.

*John Piper, God Does Not Repent Like a Man*