

Does God Change His Mind?

By Charles Fisher

When I first heard the teaching that God lived in time, and changed His mind, I objected, on the grounds that God never changes, that the doctrine of immutability would not allow that. However, as I studied the Bible under the teaching of Dean Harvey (I am an alumni of his Virginia church), I let the Bible show me where my understanding of the doctrine of Immutability was incorrect.

As is no surprise, whenever I discuss the concept of God changing His mind, a dispute arise about whether or not God actually meant it every time He said that He "repented," "He changed His mind," or not. Like me, others argue that God is immutable, unchanging, and that He **can't** change His mind. A verse that is often cited was Balaam's oracle in Num. 23:19, which says, "*God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?*" And yet, when I show a verse (actually 36 of them) where God *repents*, "changes His mind," in the Old Testament, they deny that this is what happened. I have recently heard one popular bible teacher say that God repents to show that God **can't** repent.

Instead, they make a big deal about *anthropomorphic language*, saying that when the Bible says "God changed His mind," it didn't *really* mean that God changed His mind. They argue that God is using human words to explain something we can't understand because we are human and cannot comprehend with our limited minds what actually happened. I, on the other hand, deny this, calling this appeal to "anthropomorphic language" a theological *punt*, a giving up in order to save a treasured, but flawed, doctrine.

Yes, there is anthropomorphic language used in the Bible, the use of human attributes to describe God. For example, there are references to God's hands, to His eyes, arms, even feathers (does that mean that the Bible uses aviomorphic language?), but these refer to "body parts." God is a spirit, and does not have hands, arms, and eyes, in the human sense.

But when the Bible speaks of God repenting, changing His mind, it is not speaking about body parts, but the choice of a *free moral agent*, God. We must accept the idea that the moral choice of God "repenting" has been expressed accurately in the Bible, or we are faced with the dilemma of saying that **no** moral choice of God is expressed accurately. No one would be able to say, then that the Bible does not mean that God *loves* the world, but that this is merely anthropomorphic language, as well.

But what about Num. 23:19? How do I explain the apparent denial of God's immutability? In this matter, where scripture talks about God changing His mind, Immutability, God's unchangingness, is, I believe, a red herring. Instead, God has given us direct knowledge about Him changing His mind, repenting.

GOD'S "REPENTANCE" PRINCIPLE

I believe that the first thing that we have to look for, in scripture, when studying any topic, is a direct statement from God about that topic. Not an inference, not a doctrine based on an inference, but a direct statement from God. In this matter, does God say that He never changes His mind, or does He say that He does change His mind? If so, why? Fortunately, God gives us a direct statement about whether or not He repents, about changing His mind. This is in Jer. 18:7+10. Here God tells Jeremiah:

At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.

Here is God giving Jeremiah His basic workings, His method of doing things. This statement by God gives us His pronouncements as to whether or not He does change His mind, and on what basis. And it is in keeping with this principle in the character of God that the prophets made their appeals to the nations of Israel and Judah to return to God.

In Jeremiah 26, the prophet shows God pleading with Judah to turn from their evil ways and obey Him. If they do, God will "repent" of the judgment that He is to send them.

If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them because of the evil of their doings. Therefore now amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD your God; and the LORD will repent him of the evil that he hath pronounced against you.

Joel makes the same plea, in Joel 2:13+14:

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he [is] gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?

It is this willingness to "repent," to change His mind, that Jonah feared. God's willingness to change His mind and forgive those who turn to Him was exactly why Jonah ran away. Jonah 4:2:

And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, [was] not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

It was because of this facet of God's character that Moses was able to intercede on behalf of disobedient Israel. Ex 32:12:

Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people.

And in the Song of Moses, his intercession is given, again (Psa. 90:13): *Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.*

A good test of any teaching is to see if the Bible shows God acting in accordance with the teaching. Does the Bible show God "repenting," changing His mind? You be the judge: In direct answer to Moses' prayer: Ex. 32:14 - *And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.*

In the time of the judges, here is a summary of God's dealing with Israel (Judges 2:18);

And when the LORD raised them up judges, then the LORD was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the LORD because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them.

When David sinned by conducting a census, and God began to strike the kingdom (II Sam 24:16):

And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand. And the angel of the LORD was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite.

The psalmist accounts for God's working in the history of Israel: Psa 106:45 *And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.*

Another psalm, recounting God's working in the history of Israel: Psa 135:14 *For the LORD will judge his people, and he will repent himself concerning his servants.*

Jeremiah reminds Judah of God's dealings during the time of Hezekiah (Jer. 26:19):

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him at all to death? did he not fear the LORD, and besought the LORD, and the LORD repented him of the evil which he had pronounced against them? Thus might we procure great evil against our souls.

After the fall of Judah, Jeremiah has received a word from God for those left behind (Jer 42:10):

If ye will still abide in this land, then will I build you, and not pull you down, and I will plant you, and not pluck[you up: for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you.

Hosea tells of God's emotional ties to Israel, and how He desires to repent (Hos. 11:8):

How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.

And Amos tells Israel about how God twice changed His mind and didn't bring a pronounced judgment upon them. He tells them that they may not be so lucky again. Amos 7: 3, 6 *The LORD repented for this: It shall not be, saith the LORD.*

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, (Thomas Nelson, 1985), on p. 202, says that here are times when God says that someone has gone too far for Him to repent, and God "had no choice but to implement His judgment." There are five such verses in the Old Testament:

1. Jer. 4:28 *For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black: because I have spoken it, I have purposed it, and will not repent, neither will I turn back from it.*
2. Jer. 15:6 *Thou hast forsaken me, saith the LORD, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting.*
3. Ezek. 24:14 *I the LORD have spoken it: it shall come to pass, and I will do it; I will not go back, neither will I spare, neither will I repent; according to thy ways, and according to thy doings, shall they judge thee, saith the Lord GOD.*
4. Hos. 13:14 *I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes.*
5. Zech. 8:14 *For thus saith the LORD of hosts; As I thought to punish you, when your fathers provoked me to wrath, saith the LORD of hosts, and I repented not:*

Do these five verses negate the principle God gives in Jer. 18? No, they demonstrate the negative aspect of that principle. God said that if a nation turned from Him, He would "repent," change His mind about the blessings He planned to send, but bring judgment, instead.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE CONTRADICTIONS?

I would say, first of all, what contradictions? I do not believe there to be any contradictions, and I do not believe we have to *punt* to any supposed "anthropological language." Yes, there are verses, to which some people appeal in order to support their flawed doctrine, that say God will not change His mind. But I believe that a thorough study of the Bible, an examination of the context of these verses, will completely

demonstrate that there is not any contradiction between the principle that God described in Jeremiah 18.

Instance #1 - Number 23:19

This is the verse that is most often used to say that God is immutable and cannot change His mind.

Here is the verse:

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

And, yes, it does say that God is not a son of man, that He should repent. But a close examination of the context of the verse will demonstrate that God is not contradicting Jeremiah 18, nor is He making a broad, general statement, as in Jeremiah.

What is the historical context for this verse? Moses is leading Israel through Moab, and Balak tried to get Prophet-For-Hire Balaam to curse Israel for him. God pronounces this oracle through him:

And he took up his parable, and said, Rise up, Balak, and hear; hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor: God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it. He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God [is] with him, and the shout of a king is among them. God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn. Surely [there is] no enchantment against Jacob, neither [is there] any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought! Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain. (Judges 23:18-24)

Moses is leading Israel to Palestine, in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, over 400 years before. He promised the patriarchs in His covenant with them that their descendants would take possession of the land. And now, Balak is trying to get an oracle from God to change this. But God, speaking through Balaam, tells Balak that no divination (v.23) is going to change this. God has made a covenant with the nation of Israel, and He is going to fulfill it, now. His mind is made up and He is not going to change.

What we have is a specific promise being referred to, here, and it is a valid rule of scriptural interpretation that specific events do not take the place of God's general principles for dealing with mankind.

This verse does not say that God never changes His mind. It merely says that God is not going to change His mind in this situation, His mind is made up.

Instance #2 - I Sam 15:29

In this situation, Saul has repeatedly disobeyed God, and God has rejected Saul as king of Israel. Samuel tells Saul this message and turns to go, but as he does so, Saul grabs at his cloak, tearing it and pleading for Samuel to appear with him before the nation, so that no one will know that Saul has been rejected. Samuel says:

And Samuel said unto him, The LORD hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbor of thine, that is better than thou. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent. (II Sam. 15:28-29)

Is Samuel, in this context, saying that, as a principle, God never changes His mind? No, because we have this in the same chapter:

And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death: nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul: and the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel. I(I Sam 15:35)

So what is Samuel saying? That Saul's pleadings are no good, that his tears of repentance will not move God. God has decided beyond any changing of His mind that Saul is no longer king of Israel. Again, we have a specific word that does not override the general principle given in Jeremiah 18.

Instance #3 - Psa. 89:34

My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Psa. 89:34

This one doesn't even say that God will not change His mind, but is often appealed to, to demonstrate that God's Word, once given, is unalterable. God here says that He will not alter His covenant with David. This is a specific promise to a specific individual, and does not override the general statements God made in Jeremiah 18.

Instance #4 - Psa 110:4

Psa 110:4 The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

This one is EASY!!! To whom was this promise made? *Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.* Heb. 6:20 This, again, is a specific promise, not a statement of general principle, so, again, this does not override God's statements in Jeremiah 18.

Instance #5 - Exek. 24:14

In this final instance, Ezekiel is in Babylon, and on a specific date, receives a directive from God. He is to boil a pot of water with meat and bones in it in front of everyone as a visual parable that God is finally bringing judgment on Jerusalem. He tells Ezekiel that the king of Babylon, that very day, in Judah, laid siege to the city of Jerusalem.

In v. 14, Ezekiel writes:

I the LORD have spoken it: it shall come to pass, and I will do it; I will not go back, neither will I spare, neither will I repent; according to thy ways, and according to thy doings, shall they judge thee, saith the Lord GOD.

God says He will not repent, that He will not change His mind. But is this a general statement, or specific decision? God is saying that the final judgment and fall of Jerusalem has come about, and that there is no turning back. He will not change His mind about this, but will allow Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem. Fini. The End. No reprieve. This is not a general statement that God will never change His mind, but a statement about a specific situation.

CONCLUSION

So there you have it. I do not believe that there is a contradiction in the scriptures, and one need not resort to a weak *punt* to some supposed "anthropological language" to show that God meant what He said, when He said that He changes His mind.

Scripture makes a straight-forward statement, in Jeremiah 18, not couched in "anthropological language," that God does, indeed, change His mind. Scripture also demonstrates that God operates in accordance with this statement. Scripture does not have a contradicting principle to falsify this teaching. On its face, the teaching is valid, and not heretical, since it is in accord with scripture.

I believe that I have demonstrated that God's declaration of His willingness to change His mind, and His actions in accordance with this principle are not in conflict with the statements where God said that He will not change His mind. Rather, in these five instances, God is acting in keeping with this principle, completing His plans and promises.

I believe that if one takes the time to read the scriptures I have given, in context, he/she will see the validity of the teaching.

This page may be copied and distributed freely as long as it is not altered.