

Does God Change His Mind?

By Vic Coleman

Introduction

God has many attributes. One of which is that He is immutable...He doesn't change. Based on this, one could reason: "If God doesn't change, and He knows everything, then He should never change His mind." But there are instances illustrated in the Bible where changes His mind. In this study we'll take a closer look at these examples, understand the context and see how similar situations can apply to our lives.

A Deeper Look

First of all let's look at a larger list of some of the attributes of God. These play a large role in understanding the context of an apparent change of mind of God. There qualities and characteristics include:

1. Self Sufficient - He needs no one or nothing else
2. Holy - Intrinsic purity; the standard of righteousness by which all the universe is measured
3. Sovereign - His absolute rule and control over all His creation including the affairs of men
4. Glory - the visible manifestation of His attributes, character and perfections
5. Omniscience - He has all knowledge
6. Wrath - God's intense displeasure at sin and His judgment against it
7. Full of Grace and Mercy - He gives us what we don't deserve (any and everything good), and saves us from getting what we do deserve (total separation from Him)
8. Immutability - His character, nature, personhood and purposes *cannot* change

The Bible talks about God being unchanging throughout the Old and New Testaments.

- James 1:17
- Hebrews 6:17-18
- Jerimiah 31:3
- Malachi 3:6
- 1 Samuel 15:29
- Psalms 33:11
- Proverbs 19:21
- Numbers 23:19

So it's well established that God's character does not change. Why is this important to us? It means that we can trust Him, especially His Word. Since God is immutable, we can have confidence in His care for us, His love for us, His plan to conform us to the image of Christ. Sometimes His plan involves correction, or the word we don't like to hear: discipline.

Now given that He is immutable, one could reason the following: “Well, since God doesn’t change, and He knows everything, then He wouldn’t need to change His mind about anything.” But there are other major factors we need to consider in the context of His unchanging nature:

1. The People Aspect: God’s response to people and their response to Him
2. The Bigger Picture: God’s ultimate, long range plan

First Example

In 1 Samuel 8, the people of Israel approached the elderly prophet Samuel and asked that he appoint a king to rule over them, “such as all the other nations have.” In a sense they were rejecting a more direct leadership and relationship with God. They were asking for something that was like the rest of the world, which did not know the one true God. They had forgotten that Israel was chosen by Him, and were a vehicle for Him to express His glory and reveal Himself to the rest of the world.

In 1 Samuel 9, God tells the prophet Samuel that Saul is the man who will lead His people. He is made king in 1 Samuel 10. By the time we get to 1 Samuel 15, the weakness of Saul as a leader becomes evident. God told Saul to *completely* destroy the Amalekites, all the people and animals; His instructions were clear. Saul did not follow through with God’s instructions completely. Saul’s army kept alive the best animals and Saul kept the Amalekite king alive.

Key Point: Partial obedience is disobedience.

Look at God’s response to Saul’s disobedience in verse 10. God “regrets” making Saul king. The word *regret* comes from a word that means: *to breathe strongly, as being sorry*. Saul had turned away from fully obeying God. As leader of a nation, this would have devastating effects.

Now God appointed Saul in the first place. He knew Saul’s shortcomings. Did God change His mind about Saul, and in effect, is this an instance of inconsistency or changing in God? Not quite. We have five other of God’s unchanging characteristics involved: His **holiness**, **wrath**, **grace**, and **sovereignty**.

The People Aspect:

First, put yourself in Saul’s position. The Creator of the universe appoints you king over all *His* people; a people He mightily delivered from slavery, and through whom God demonstrated to the world that He is the one and true God. And what do you do – disobey His instructions, lie about it, and try to blame someone else (vs. 20 - 21). You were in a special position appointed by God, with great influence over His people...and you blew it. You, like a number of other kings and judges before you, begin to lead the people down the road of disobedience, putting them at enmity with God.

God's **holiness** required Him to respond to Saul's sin. God's **wrath** or punishment of Saul was in play (rejection), but actually tempered to some degree by God's **grace** (Saul didn't immediately die).

The Bigger Picture:

In His **sovereignty** God was preparing a "*Plan D*" (King David) to carry out His predetermined purposes for His nation and to bring them back to a nation with a more godly influence. While a shepherd, David was being prepared to be king. David was anointed by Samuel as king in 1 Samuel 16.

So this was an example of God's unchanging character (**immutability**) and a response to sin that opened the door for a **sovereign** God to move another man into Saul's position, who would write many of the Psalms which we enjoy today.

So God's unchanging character traits can be seen as he responds to Saul and carries out His ultimate long term plan.

Another Example

In Numbers 13, Moses sends 12 men to spy out the Promised Land. They come back after 40 days. Ten of them spread doubt and fear among the people. Only Joshua and Caleb encouraged the people to trust the Lord and press forward.

In Numbers 14, the people even talked about killing Aaron and Moses by stoning them. In verse 12, God told Moses He would strike the people down with a plague. He would start a whole new nation stronger and greater through Moses, who was about 80 years old at this time.

Again we have God's other unchanging characteristics involved: His **holiness**, **wrath**, **grace**, and **sovereignty**.

The People Aspect

In verses 13 - 19, Moses makes an appeal to God to forgive the people and not kill them all. He appeals to God's reputation among the Egyptians and other nations, His loving kindness, and being "slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion". God decides *not* to kill the Hebrews in response to Moses' plea.

God's **holiness** required Him to respond to sin, i.e., the total lack of trust in Him. God said he was "tested 10 times" by His people. Their apparent rejection of Aaron and Moses was really a rejection of God. God's **wrath** was demonstrated, but tempered again by His **grace**, i.e., Moses' intercession. The people did not die all at once. People 20 years old and older died in the desert over the next 40 years due to their continued rebellion towards and disbelief in God.

The Bigger Picture

God's immutable plan (reference Proverbs 19:21) was eventually fulfilled 40 years later through Joshua and Caleb when they led a new generation across the Jordan River. A **sovereign, graceful** God kept His word by preserving the nation for 40 years and delivering them to the Promised Land.

Key Point: *Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purposes of the Lord that will stand. (Proverbs 19:21)* God's ultimate plans will prevail in our lives.

A Third Example

In Exodus 32, we see that Moses had been with God on Mount Sinai for a long time...long enough that the people began to question what had happened to him. Then at Aaron's direction and cooperation, they made an image of a calf made of gold. Then if that wasn't enough, they started to worship the calf, make sacrifices to it, and even gave it credit for bringing them out of Egypt (v.4).

When Moses returned from being in the presence of God, he became so angry with what he saw and heard. He threw the two stone tablets written by God to the ground and broke them. Needless to say God was angry too. He referred to the people as "stiff-necked". Verse 10 states:

"...Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

The word "consume" comes from the Hebrew word "kalah" which means: *to come to an end, finished, to be complete*. In other words, God was stating that He would destroy the people who had sinned. He would start a new nation from Moses.

In the remainder of chapter 32 and into chapter 33, we see the following: **wrath, holiness, mercy, glory** and **sovereignty** exhibited by God.

The People Aspect

God's **holiness** was violated by the people's construction and worship of the golden calf. This violation demanded a response. But Moses' intercession for the people (Exodus 32:11 - 14), and the fact that he had found favor with the Lord (v. 33:17), brought about God's **mercy**. Moses' heart was so much focused on God that he asked God: "...Please show me your glory." (v. 33:18). Moses intercedes again in Exodus 33:12 - 16.

The interesting thing to note is that Moses made an appeal to God's character, how He would be viewed by other nations, and even His promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from about 600 years earlier. Why is this important?

Moses appealed to the immutable traits of God: the integrity of His word, His holiness, and His mercy. He was concerned about how God would be viewed and His reputation. Besides his obedience, this is how Moses found favor with God. These were “concerns” of love for God that flowed from his heart.

God’s **wrath** was displayed due to a plague that inflicted the people (v 32:35). The people avoided some wrath through obedience. In 33:1 - 6, God told them to leave Mount Sinai and take off the ornaments they used in celebration of and worship of the golden calf. They did so.

The Bigger Picture

The **sovereign** God was going to fulfill His word to Abraham, Issac and Jacob spoken 600 years earlier...to deliver His people out of Egypt into a Promised Land. It was going to be accomplished one way or another, even if He had to start a new nation through an 80 year old man. God was **glorified** through the fulfillment experienced by the next generation of the existing people led by Joshua – a young man who did not depart from the tent of meeting where God and Moses (33:11) spoke to each other. *Joshua* was effectively being trained by being present around God and Moses. He was God’s “*Plan J*”, so to speak, to accomplish His spoken word.

Summary

From the examples we can see that the immutable God does indeed change His mind, but it's in response to people, in the context of repentance, obedience, intercession, restoration, and relationship. God also fulfills His ultimate plan. He is so sovereign that His plan comes into being in stages. If one chosen person falls short, God will fulfill His word through “Plan B”, “Plan C”, “Plan D,” ...and so on. God is not dependent on a single person. He is **self-sufficient**. .

What does this mean for us, personally?

1. We can always depend on and rest in God’s nature.
2. Because of His sovereignty, we cannot predict the exact way God will do something, unless He tells us specifically. That’s good, because it forces us to keep looking to Him instead of depending on ourselves or others.
3. God’s plans will come to pass; He is big enough to get it done.
4. Our prayers can have a major impact on our lives and the lives of others.
5. We can find favor with God through an obedient heart that is concerned about Him.
6. In the end, God will receive the glory.