

God Is: Meditations on the Attributes of God

God is ... Unchanging (Psalm 102:25-28)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on November 26, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ In the last few weeks, we started a sermon series on the Attributes of God called *God Is*. Where each week, we're preaching on an attribute. So far, we've covered God's goodness and his patience. Those are two good examples of what theologians call God's communicable attributes. Attributes that he, as Creator, communicates (or shares) with his creatures. We can (and should) emulate his goodness and his patience. Those are communicable attributes. Later in this series, we'll look at two more – his nearness and his love.
 - **But this morning – and for the next three weeks – we want to address four incommunicable attributes of God.** Attributes that are unique to him as Creator. That he doesn't share with us. He does not communicate to us. Now, in theology, there are four attributes that have been classically defined as incommunicable. His immutability, his eternality, his independence, and his omnipresence.

- ❖ Don't worry if you don't know what those words mean. Our plan is to teach them to you. But for what purpose? Why are we covering God's incommunicable attributes? If they're unique to him, then they don't seem relevant to us. Well, let me ask you: **If I asked you to describe God, what would first come to mind?** You'd probably think of his love, his goodness, his patience. Which are good and true attributes.
 - **But notice how we instinctively gravitate towards the communicable ones. Which is why we tend to forget how wholly different God is compared to us.** We tend to see our difference with God merely in quantitative terms. As creatures made in his image, we see ourselves as microscopic versions of him. He's the sun; we're the candle. He's the ocean; we're the raindrop. He's the glacier; we're the snowflake.

- ❖ **We tend to think about God like we imagine an ant would think about us.** To an ant, human beings are like gods. We are astronomically bigger than them. We can crush them at our whim. **We're gods to them. But then again, we're not.** Yes, we're much bigger than ants. But we're still made of the same stuff – atoms and molecules. Yes, we can crush ants. But we can't create them. We can't form them out of nothing.
 - **The better image is to compare the difference between God and us with the difference between Shakespeare and any of his characters.** Shakespeare and Macbeth differ not in degree but in nature. One solely created the other. One utterly depends on the other. Macbeth needs Shakespeare to exist. Shakespeare doesn't need Macbeth. Shakespeare alone is author, everyone else is a character. **Likewise, God alone is Creator, everyone else is a creature.** We must not neglect this crucial distinction or else we'll have too low a view of God. I like what Martin Luther once said to a theological opponent. He said, "*Your thoughts of God are far too human.*"

- ❖ What an indictment! Against us, that is. **Our thoughts of God are far too human. We view him as a bigger, better, stronger, wiser, kinder version of ourselves.** But God is so much more. He's something else. He's in a class of his own. That's what we constantly need to be reminded of. And that's why we're going to meditate on the incommunicable attributes. This morning we'll start with God's immutability – his unchanging nature.

- ❖ This is such an important attribute to grasp. **Especially when you consider how fast this world is changing all around us.** And as the world changes, we change with it. Our weight changes. Our health changes. Our appearance changes. People change their attitude. People

change their minds. People change sides. People change loyalties. That's why you get hurt and disappointed by those whom you thought you could trust. It's because people change.

- **And it's because we live in a world of change – all of us long for some stability.** We long for something or someone reliable. Someone sure and steady. Who won't let us down. Who won't fail. **It's like we're all floating in a sea of change, and we're all grasping for an immovable, unshakable Rock.** A Rock upon which we can anchor our lives in the face of all the constant waves of change around us.

- ❖ And that Rock, of course, is the immutable God of Creation. **This is where the unchanging nature of God is so relevant to our lives.** Let's get into this incommunicable attribute. First, I'll define what God's immutability means. Second, I'll demonstrate where it's taught in Scripture. Third, I'll draw out implications of God's immutability for our everyday lives.

Defining God's Immutability

- ❖ Let's begin by defining terms. The word 'immutability' comes from the Latin *mutare* meaning 'to change'. So something is mutable (it mutates) if it changes in form or nature. But it's immutable if it does *not* mutate. If it does *not* change in form or nature.
 - **So in theology, when we speak of God's immutability we're referring to the unchangeableness of his nature.** We mean his essential being never changes. It's consistent. And we'd say the same about **God's character**. Since his nature never changes, neither do any of his character traits that we're always praising him for. His immutability also means **his purposes** never change. His foreordained plan for your life will not change but will come to pass as he wills. And immutability means **his promises** never change. When the Lord promises something, you can be sure that he will keep it and fulfill it in his good timing.
 - His nature, his character, his purposes, his promises – four immutable aspects of our unchanging God. **This is why we often praise him as our Rock. That's a common metaphor in Scripture used to convey God's steadiness.** It suggests that he is stable while the world is not. God is reliable while people are not. God is constant while life is not. God is a Rock that does not change.
- ❖ **But just because God is a rock, that doesn't mean he's impersonal or inactive.** We might praise him as our Rock, but we have to avoid a static view of God that strips him of any personality or the ability to personally relate to us. I wouldn't want any of us to leave with a view of God that is so lifeless that he is no more than a rock. **Because how can you have a personal relationship with a rock?**
 - So here is a balanced definition: **To be immutable means that God is unchanging in his nature, his character, his purposes, and his promises; and yet God is neither indifferent nor impersonal for he responds and relates to mutable beings like us with reliable consistency.** This is the definition we'll be working with.

Demonstrating God's Immutability

- ❖ Let's start by demonstrating God's immutability from the Scripture. We'll start with the first aspect. **(1) God never changes in his nature.** This means God in his essence, in his being, does not change for better or worse – but remains exactly the same.
 - Now are we drawing this conclusion merely based on logic or philosophy. Is there scriptural support for this doctrine? Is immutability taught in the Bible? I believe so.

- ❖ Look at this morning's text, **Psalm 102:25-28**. It's important to note that Psalm 102 is considered a lament psalm. Written to express the psalmist's present grief but, at the same time, his enduring confidence in the LORD. Listen to the subscript, "*A prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD.*"
 - So we read in v3 a lament about the brevity of life – especially when our fleeting days are spent in pain and anguish. "*For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.*" That section of lament concludes in v11 like this, "*My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.*"
- ❖ **But then the tenor changes in v12 to one of hope and confidence – rooted in the eternal, unchanging nature of God.** "*But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; you are remembered throughout all generations.*" That section concludes in v24 with, "*O my God, I say, 'take me not away in the midst of my days—you whose years endure throughout all generations!'*"
 - And then the psalm concludes with the passage we read earlier. Verses 25-28 conclude with an exaltation of God's immutability. Especially in contrast to mutable creation, specifically the heavens and the earth. Listen again to v25, "*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.*"
- ❖ Notice how the psalmist purposely chose two objects that are universally recognized to be constant and unchanging. **We assume the heavens and the earth will always be around.** But in the grand scheme of things, that's simply not the case. Read on in vv26-27, "*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.*"
 - **In other words, everything in creation admits of change, but our Creator God is the one thing that never changes.** Mutability is a key characteristic of what it means to be a creature. While immutability belongs to the Creator and Him alone.
- ❖ Now because his very nature never changes, **(2) God also never changes in his character.** A traumatic accident or a stroke can completely alter a person's character. A mild-mannered, kind-hearted man can wake up from a coma ill-tempered and foul-mouthed. That can happen to people. But not God. Nothing can alter his character. His love, his compassion, his patience, his justice, his wrath – all remain the same. His character is consistent.
 - **There's a temptation – rooted in an ancient heresy – to view the God of the OT as having gone through a change (an evolution) by the time we arrive in the NT.** By the time of the NT, he seems less angry and wrathful and more merciful and loving. It's like his character changed. Like it softened.
- ❖ But that perception fails to take into account the way the Bible actually depicts the LORD. **A careful study of Scripture will conclude that God's character is consistently depicted in the same way in both testaments.** Granted, the OT accounts of ten plagues and fire coming down from heaven are visceral and scary. And we don't see punishments like that happening in the NT, so it's easy to conclude that God has softened.
 - But that's only if you overlook NT warnings of eternal punishment in a hellish future existence. **If you come to the conclusion that God has softened up in the NT, it's probably because you don't actually believe what the Bible teaches about hell.** You don't take it seriously. That's why the God of the NT appears to have softened.

- ❖ The fact is that both the OT and NT consistently portray the LORD as, “*a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.*” (Ex 34:6-7)
 - **Since the day the LORD revealed himself that way to Moses, he has not changed.** He is still the same God today. He is just as gracious, just as slow to anger, just as abounding in steadfast love, just as forgiving of sin. And he is just as just. He will by no means clear the guilty. He won’t let their sin go unpunished. **God’s character has never and will never change. He is the same yesterday, today and forever.**

- ❖ **Now granted, in humans, the inability to improve or mature in character is considered a moral weakness. But it’s different when it comes to God.** Because he has no need to improve. He’s perfect. The inability to mature is not a limitation for God. He can’t be any more loving, any more patient, or any more just. He’s perfect in his character.

- ❖ Now what about God’s purposes? Where does Scripture teach that **(3) God never changes in his purposes?** Let me read a couple of verses affirming this. **Psalm 33:10-11**, says “*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.*”
 - **Isaiah 46:9-11** says, “*Remember the former things of old; for 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 not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose. . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.’*”

- ❖ There is no other God like our God. What he has purposed, he will do. His counsel shall stand. Now we change our plans all the time. Because we can’t foresee weather patterns, we end up canceling that trip to the beach we had planned for weeks. Because we don’t have the power to make traffic jams disappear like that, we have to postpone our dinner plans. We experience the frustration of having to change plans all the time.
 - **But because God knows all and can do all AND because these are never-changing attributes of his never-changing nature, no plan of his can ever be thwarted or is ever in need of adjustment** (Job 42:2). His purposes never change.

- ❖ **But what about those passages that speak of God changing his plans?** Like when he threatens to destroy a city but ends up not doing it. Think about the book of Jonah. God sends the prophet to Nineveh to preach that in forty days this ungodly city will be overthrown. But in response to his preaching, the inhabitants of the city repent – and so God relents. He doesn’t go through with it. Now it sure seems like, in that instance, God changed his plans.
 - But I would argue that that’s *not* an example of God changing his plans. **That’s just another example of God being completely consistent – doing what he always does in response to sinners who heed his warnings and turn away from their sin.** This is what God always does when we repent of our sins.

- ❖ **The Bible says that if we change – if we repent – God will always relent. He will always forgive when sinners confess their sins and repent.** Someone might insist on calling that a literal change in God’s mind. But the Bible just calls that a reliable response by a gracious, all-knowing God who is reliably consistent in his eternal purposes.

- **A literal change in mind or plans would be if God suddenly refused to relent even after a sinner genuinely repents.** But God never does that. He is reliably consistent. So if God ever withdraws his threat of punishment – if he ever relents – it’s not because he has changed in his purposes or plans. Rather it’s because a sinner has changed. Hallelujah, a sinner has repented.
- ❖ The theologian A.H. Strong puts it well. He writes, “*When a man bicycling against the wind turns about and goes with the wind instead of going against it, the wind seems to change, although it is blowing just as it was before.*” ¹ God is reliably consistent. The wind of his kindness that leads to repentance always blows away from sin and destruction and towards God. We’re the ones who have to stop riding into it. To stop resisting his kindness. Instead, let it turn you and propel you towards God. He doesn’t change. We do.
- ❖ Now fourthly, **(4) God never changes in his promises.** That means God remains faithful to his covenants. When he gives his word, you can take it to the bank. Listen to **Malachi 3:6**, “*For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.*”
 - The preceding context of Malachi 3 emphasizes God’s coming judgment on those in Israel who refuse to follow his ways but God is merciful and will not consume the children of Jacob, the Israelites.
 - *Why?* Because God does not change his promises to his people. **Just as we can count on the certainty of his judgment against the wicked, we can count on the certainty of his faithfulness to his people.** God made a promise to their ancestors. So in spite of their unfaithfulness, they can be sure that God will be faithful and will not bring about their utter destruction.
- ❖ People make promises all the time, and people break promises all the time. **But God alone is the Rock and God alone makes rock-solid promises that cannot be broken.** His promises never change.

Drawing Implications o God’s Immutability

- ❖ From Scripture we see it clearly taught that God never changes in his nature, character, purposes and promises. Now let’s draw out some implications. There are four in particular that I want to draw to your attention. **(1) God’s immutability is a strong encouragement to pray.** Think about it. *Could you imagine what it would be like to pray to a mutable God who only had loose plans for your life – plans that could change at the drop of a hat?*
- ❖ Listen to the words of the Puritan Stephen Charnock. “*What comfort could it be to pray to a God, that like the chameleon changed colors every day, every moment? What encouragement could there be to lift up our eyes to one that were of one mind this day and of another mind tomorrow?*” ²
 - But we don’t have to worry about God changing his plans. His purposes are eternal and unchanging. If they were mutable, then we would have no idea how to pray according to his will since everything would always be changing. **Prayer, as prescribed in Scripture, would be near impossible if not for his immutability.**

¹ A.H. Strong, quoted in William Evan’s *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 24.

² Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 348.

- ❖ **But some would argue that immutability makes prayer meaningless – that it shatters any motivation to pray.** If nothing we do can change God’s mind, then why bother even praying to him? What’s the point? Well, what does Scripture say? Does prayer change the mind of God? The Bible says No. But does prayer change things? The Bible says Yes!
 - **Prayer is not meant to inform God with new information that he was previously unaware of.** Jesus makes that clear in **Matthew 6:8**. He says the Father knows what you need even before you ask him. But does Jesus go on to conclude that there is no need to pray since God already knows what you need? No, he goes on to teach *how* to pray, giving us the Lord’s Prayer. **Prayer may not change the mind of an all-knowing God but it certainly changes things!**

- ❖ **(2) God’s immutability is a strong comfort to His children.** Just consider our Psalm 102 passage again. After magnifying God’s immutability in relation to the mutability of everything else, how does the psalmist conclude the psalm? In v28, he draws out the implication, the take-home lesson. God, because you’re immutable, *“The children of your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you.”*
 - **Because you’re immutable, because you never change – not only are we secure – but our children are secure, and our children’s children are secure.** Your immutability is a strong comfort and source of security.

- ❖ Now I realize that many of you are in a difficult season of life right now. Prayers are not being answered. God seems distant while difficulties are all around. It feels like God is putting you through quite a trial (Jas 1:2).
 - But here’s the comfort: **Because God never changes in his goodness towards his children, you can be sure that this trial you’re going through is not meant to tempt you or hurt you BUT to help you – to refine your faith.** This trial is exactly what you need right now for your spiritual growth. For that reason, we can count it all joy when we face trials of many kinds. **Everything He gives you, even that which is hard and painful, is a perfect gift for your good.** His immutability guarantees that.

- ❖ **(3) God’s immutability is a strong warning to the unrepentant – to those who refuse to turn away from their sin.** While his immutable character is good news for his children, it is bad news to those who are resolved in their sin. Remember that we read earlier that the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. That’s part of his unchanging character.
 - And the guilty are those who have transgressed his holy law, which is not just an arbitrary code of ethics. No, the law reflects the immutable, holy character of God. So to trample the law is to trample on the holiness and honor of God himself.

- ❖ Charnock says, *“Being the same God, he is the same enemy to the wicked as the same friend to the righteous. . . . Without repentance, the sinner must irrevocably perish, or God must change his nature: there must be a change in man; there can be none in God.”*³
 - The unrepentant sinner is headed towards certain judgment *unless* one of two things happens. **Either the sinner repents or God changes his holy character.** It’s like playing a game of chicken – that dangerous game where two people drive their cars headfirst towards each other to see who will swerve first.

³ Ibid., 353.

- **In the same way, those who remain unrepentant of their sin are playing a dangerous game of chicken with God. Driving right at him hoping that at the last second he's going to swerve.** “Maybe God will change. Maybe he'll change his character and clear the guilty just this one time.”
- ❖ But that's just wishful thinking. God never swerves. If you plan to stand before an immutable God on your own, remember that **his holy character is immutable**. He will never condone the slightest sin. **His omniscience is immutable**. He will never forget a single trespass. **His omnipotence is immutable**. He will never tire or lose the power to inflict judgement.
 - What a dreadful thing to stand before a holy, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable Judge on nothing but your own merit! Like I said, immutability is a strong warning to those who are unrepentant. Who feel like they don't need Jesus.
- ❖ But that leads to our fourth implication, **(4) God's immutability is a strong assurance to those who do repent and trust in Jesus**. Remember, our immutable God who does not clear the guilty is *also* the immutable God who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin.
- ❖ **It's for that reason that the Father sent his Son who – without any change to his divine nature – added to himself a human nature**. He humbled himself as a servant and became obedient to death, even death on a cross in the place of guilty sinners.
 - When Jesus set his face like a flint to the cross, it was as if – in that game of chicken – **Jesus took our place in the car and drove head first towards the immutable justice of God, knowing that his Father wouldn't swerve but would unleash his wrath against our guilt – upon his Son**.
 - On the cross, Jesus bore *our* guilt and God punished him *because* he does not clear the guilty. But on the third day, God raised Jesus from the grave, announcing to the world that his sacrifice was accepted.
- ❖ **Announcing that – because the guilt of sin is cleared in Christ – the wind of God's kindness blows immutably towards those who turn to Christ for salvation**. Towards those who stop riding into the wind, who turn from their sin and trust in Jesus.
 - **Immutability is a fearful doctrine to those who insist to stand on their own before God. But it is great assurance for those who repent and trust in Jesus**. Because of Christ, God will never change his love towards us who believe. His face will continually shine with favor on you with the same strength and brightness. The same yesterday, today, and forever. Because God never changes.