

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 4: THE INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Lesson 10

The Immutability of God

The God Who Does Not Change

Key Texts: Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 13:8

The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever — The Anchor of Every Promise

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In Lesson 9 we established the first and most foundational of the incommunicable attributes: the aseity and self-sufficiency of God, the truth that the I AM of the burning bush exists entirely from and of Himself, without origin, without cause, and without dependence upon anything outside His own infinite being. We saw that this truth is not a cold metaphysical abstraction but a living pastoral reality, the ground of genuinely free worship, the anchor of unshakeable assurance, and the theological foundation for the most radical claim in all of Scripture: that from God and through God and to God are all things.

Now, in Lesson 10, we press into the attribute that is, in many ways, aseity's closest companion and most immediate practical implication: the immutability of God. If God is the self-existent I AM, the One in whom essence and existence are identical, the One who has life in Himself and derives nothing from outside His own being, then it follows with theological necessity that He does not change. Change, in its most fundamental form, is the movement from one state to another, from what one is to what one was not, or from what one has to what one lacked. But the God who is perfectly complete in Himself, who lacks nothing and needs nothing, has no movement to make. He is not becoming more than He is; He is not becoming less. He simply IS, the same, always, in the full and perfect actuality of His own eternal being.

This is the doctrine of divine immutability, and it is one of the most practically significant and one of the most frequently misunderstood doctrines in the whole of Theology Proper. It is misunderstood in two opposite directions: by those who press it so far that God becomes a cold, impassive, unresponsive Absolute with no genuine relationship to His creation; and by those who, recoiling from that distortion, so qualify and diminish it that God becomes genuinely mutable, changing, growing, responding, and being affected by creation in ways that compromise His sovereign perfection. In this lesson we will navigate between those twin errors, pressing the full weight of the biblical testimony to divine immutability while giving proper account of the distinction between ontological immutability and genuine relational responsiveness, and handling with exegetical care the problem texts that speak of God "repenting" or "changing His mind."

I. Defining Immutability: The God Who Does Not Change in Being, Perfections, Purposes, or Promises

The doctrine of divine immutability is the affirmation that God does not change, not in His being, not in His perfections, not in His purposes, and not in His promises. Each of these four dimensions of the doctrine deserves careful attention, for they together constitute the comprehensive claim that Scripture makes when it declares that God is unchanging.

A. Immutability of Being

God does not change in His ontological being. He does not grow, develop, mature, diminish, improve, or deteriorate. He does not pass through stages of becoming. He

does not evolve from a lesser to a greater perfection, nor does He decline from a former glory. He is, in the language of classical theology, pure act (*actus purus*), the One in whom there is no potentiality that has not yet been actualized, no possibility of becoming something He is not yet, no unrealized capacity that time and experience might call forth. He is fully and perfectly what He is, in every moment of eternal simultaneity, without remainder and without addition.

B. Immutability of Perfections

God does not change in His attributes. His holiness does not wax or wane. His love does not fluctuate with the worthiness of its objects. His wisdom does not increase with experience or diminish with age. His power is not exhausted by exertion or renewed by rest. His justice does not soften under the pressure of compassion, and His mercy does not harden into severity. Every divine attribute that we have explored, and will explore in the remaining lessons of Unit 4 and Unit 5, is not a quality that God possesses to varying degrees at varying times, but a perfection that He is, in the full and undiminished measure of His eternal being, at every moment and in every relationship.

C. Immutability of Purposes

God does not change His mind in the sense of discovering that a former purpose was mistaken and revising it in light of new information. His eternal decree, the comprehensive, all-encompassing, wise and sovereign purpose that He purposed in Himself before the foundation of the world, stands firm and will be accomplished without revision, without obstacle, and without the possibility of ultimate frustration. “THE LORD of hosts has sworn saying, ‘Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand’” (Isaiah 14:24, NASB 1995). What God has purposed from eternity will come to pass; no creaturely freedom, no historical contingency, and no demonic opposition can deflect the purpose of the immutable God from its appointed end.

D. Immutability of Promises

God does not break His promises, retract His covenant commitments, or revise the terms of His redemptive purposes in response to the failures of those He has bound Himself to. His word, once spoken, does not return to Him empty but accomplishes what He purposes and prospers in the thing for which He sends it (Isaiah 55:11). The promises He made to Abraham, to David, to His church in the new covenant, all of these rest not upon the worthiness or consistency of their recipients but upon the immutable character of the God who made them. “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?” (Numbers 23:19, NASB 1995).

II. The Biblical Testimony: A Chorus of Unchanging Certainty

The biblical testimony to divine immutability is not confined to a handful of proof texts scattered across the canon; it is a pervasive theological assumption that governs the entire biblical presentation of God’s character and the reliability of His word. We will

attend carefully to the four key texts of this lesson, but we should recognize them as representative of a much broader canonical witness.

The first and most direct declaration of divine immutability in all of Scripture is Malachi 3:6:

“I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”,
Malachi 3:6, NASB 1995

The declaration is as simple as it is staggering: I, the LORD, do not change. The Hebrew verb *shanah*, used here in the negative, means to alter, to modify, to be different. The LORD does not alter, does not modify, is never different from what He eternally and essentially is. And the immediate practical implication, “therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed”, grounds the preservation of God’s faithless people not in their faithfulness but in His immutability. The connection between doctrine and pastoral application could not be more direct: because the LORD does not change, those who have been claimed by His covenant love have not been abandoned despite every reason, humanly speaking, why they should have been.

James 1:17 provides the New Testament’s most elegant declaration of the same truth:

“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”, James 1:17,
NASB 1995

The imagery James employs is celestial and precise. The “Father of lights” is the Creator of the luminaries, the sun, moon, and stars, whose apparent movements produce the alternating light and shadow that mark the progression of time in the created order. But unlike those lights, which cast shifting shadows as the earth turns and the seasons change, the God who made them is characterized by “no variation or shifting shadow.” The Greek is remarkable: *parallagē* (variation, alteration, parallax) and *trepō tou aposkiasmatos* (the shadow cast by turning, the shadow of rotation). God does not move in parallax as He is observed from different angles of our circumstances; He does not cast the shifting shadows that even the most constant of created lights inevitably produce. He is, in His own eternal being, perfectly, invariably, and permanently the same, every good thing from Him is of the same quality, proceeding from the same source, bearing the same character, without the fluctuation that every creaturely good possesses.

Numbers 23:19 gives immutability its sharpest polemical edge, standing as the biblical antidote to any anthropomorphic misreading of the passages we will examine in Section IV:

“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?”,
Numbers 23:19, NASB 1995

And Hebrews 13:8 closes the canonical arc of this testimony with its most compressed and most celebrated formulation:

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”, Hebrews 13:8, NASB 1995

The application of immutability to Jesus Christ in Hebrews 13:8 is not incidental; it is the Christological confirmation of everything the Old Testament declared about YHWH. The One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever is the One who said “I AM” before Abraham, who is the same Lord of the Shema that Israel confessed at Sinai, who has not changed in His commitment to His people from the first promise of the seed in Genesis 3:15 to the last promise of His return in Revelation 22:20. The immutability of Christ is the immutability of God, and it is the most reliable foundation upon which any human soul has ever stood.

III. Ontological Immutability and Relational Responsiveness: A Crucial Distinction

One of the most important and most frequently mishandled distinctions in the doctrine of divine immutability is the distinction between God’s ontological immutability, His unchanging being, perfections, purposes, and promises, and His genuine relational responsiveness to His creation. These two truths are not in tension with one another; they are both aspects of the full biblical picture of God, and holding them together without sacrificing either is one of the most important tasks of classical Christian theology.

The mistake on one side is to press immutability so far that God becomes impassive, unresponsive, and essentially unrelated to His creation, an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover who exists in splendid isolation from the world He has made, untouched by any of its events, unaffected by any of its prayers, and incapable of any genuine responsiveness to the creatures who call upon Him. This is not the God of Scripture. The God of the Bible hears prayer (Psalm 34:17). He responds to repentance (Jonah 3:10). He is moved by the cries of the afflicted (Exodus 3:7–8). He rejoices over His people (Zephaniah 3:17). He grieves over human sin (Genesis 6:6). These are genuine relational realities, not mere appearances, not mere accommodations, but authentic expressions of the living God’s personal engagement with His creation.

The mistake on the other side is to take these relational realities as evidence that God is genuinely mutable in His being, that He is changed by His encounters with creation, that His emotions are responses to conditions that He did not sovereignly ordain, and that His engagement with the world involves a real alteration of His inner being. This is the direction in which open theism and process theology have moved, and it is a direction that the full biblical testimony firmly resists.

The classical theological distinction that holds these two truths together is between God’s intrinsic being (what He is in Himself, in His eternal, immutable actuality) and His relational expressions (how He engages with and responds to His creation within the framework of His sovereign and immutable purposes). The Westminster Confession of Faith expresses this with characteristic precision, declaring God to be “without body, parts, or passions; immutable” while also affirming that He is “most holy in all His counsels, in all His works, and in all His commands.” The immutability is ontological; the holiness, the mercy, the judgment, these are expressed in genuine relational engagements with creation that do not alter the divine being itself.

Herman Bavinck, the great Dutch Reformed theologian, pressed this distinction with particular sharpness. God, Bavinck argued, is immutable in His being and in all His perfections, He is not changed by creation, by prayer, by sin, or by repentance. But He is not therefore “stiff and rigid, like a piece of stone or wood,” indifferent to the affairs of His creation. He is “alive, spontaneous, and free” in His engagement with the world, genuinely responding, genuinely relating, genuinely acting in accordance with His own immutable purposes and perfections. The relational engagements are real; the ontological change is not.

IV. The Problem Texts: When God Is Said to “Repent” or “Change His Mind”

The most challenging exegetical task in the doctrine of divine immutability is the interpretation of those passages in which God is described, in apparently straightforward narrative language, as repenting, changing His mind, or relenting of what He had said He would do. These passages have been cited by open theists and others as evidence that divine immutability is not a biblical doctrine, and that the God of Scripture is genuinely mutable in His decisions and responsive to creaturely actions in a way that involves real revision of His prior intentions. A careful exegetical engagement with these texts is essential.

The two most frequently cited examples are Genesis 6:6 and 1 Samuel 15:11. In Genesis 6:6, the narrative of the Flood is introduced with the declaration: “THE LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (NASB 1995). In 1 Samuel 15:11, in the context of Saul’s disobedience, the LORD declares: “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands” (NASB 1995). Both passages use the Hebrew verb *nacham*, which can mean to be sorry, to repent, to relent, to change one’s mind, or to have compassion, depending on context.

The crucial hermeneutical key is provided not by external philosophical considerations but by the Scripture itself, in the very same narrative context as one of these passages. In 1 Samuel 15:29, immediately following the divine declaration of regret in verse 11, the prophet Samuel declares:

“Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”, 1 Samuel 15:29, NASB 1995

This internal canonical corrective is of enormous exegetical significance. The inspired author places within the same narrative, indeed, within the same chapter, both the anthropopathic statement of divine “regret” (v. 11) and the explicit theological qualification that God “will not change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind” (v. 29). The apparent contradiction is deliberate and instructive: the narrative account of divine “regret” is not a statement of ontological divine mutability; it is an accommodated, anthropopathic description of the moral seriousness with which God responds to Saul’s covenant faithlessness, a response that is genuine and real at the level of relational engagement, without implying any revision of the divine decree or any alteration of the divine being.

The language of divine “repentance” (*nacham*) in the Old Testament operates at two distinct levels that must be carefully distinguished. At the level of the phenomenological, the description of God’s relational engagement with the moral conditions of the world He governs, the language of divine sorrow, regret, and relenting is entirely genuine. God genuinely responds to human sin and human repentance in ways that are morally serious and relationally real. When Jonah’s preaching produces repentance in Nineveh, God “relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them” (Jonah 3:10, NASB 1995), and this relenting is not a mere appearance; it is a genuine expression of the God who takes human repentance seriously.

But at the level of the ontological, the description of what God is in His eternal, immutable being, the language of repentance does not imply revision, regret over a mistaken decision, or any alteration of the divine decree. The Jonah case is instructive: God’s declared intention to destroy Nineveh “in forty days” was not an unconditional decree that He subsequently revised when Nineveh repented; it was a conditional announcement embedded within a larger, immutable purpose of mercy, a purpose that had been stated in the very fact of sending a prophet to announce the impending judgment, since a purely unconditional decree of destruction requires no warning. God’s “relenting” in Jonah 3 is the execution of His immutable purpose, not its revision.

Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29 serve as the canonical controls: the God who is described in accommodated, anthropopathic language as “regretting” or “relenting” is the same God who is explicitly described, in the same canonical corpus, as the One who “is not a man that He should repent” and who “will not lie or change His mind.” The exegete who takes both sets of texts seriously, rather than selecting one at the expense of the other, will be driven to precisely the distinction we have been maintaining: genuine relational responsiveness at the phenomenological level, without ontological mutability at the level of the divine being itself.

V. Immutability and Impassibility: Does God Have Emotions?

Closely related to the question of divine immutability is the classical doctrine of divine impassibility, one of the most debated and most frequently misunderstood attributes in contemporary theology. Impassibility, in its classical formulation, is the doctrine that God does not suffer passion in the philosophical sense: He is not subject to involuntary emotional states imposed upon Him from outside His own being, does not undergo the fluctuation of mood that characterizes creaturely emotional life, and is not passively acted upon by events in creation in a way that destabilizes or diminishes His eternal blessedness.

It is essential to clarify what impassibility does not mean before we address what it does mean. It does not mean that God is emotionally inert, psychologically blank, or incapable of any form of what we might call “emotional” engagement with His creation. The Scripture is too full of the language of divine love, divine joy, divine grief, divine anger, divine compassion, and divine delight for that reading to be sustainable. The God of Scripture is not the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover who contemplates only himself in eternal self-referential beatitude; He is the living God who loves His people with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), who rejoices over them with singing (Zephaniah 3:17),

who grieves over their sin (Genesis 6:6; Ephesians 4:30), and who is jealous for their exclusive devotion (Exodus 20:5).

What impassibility does mean, in its historic Reformed formulation, is that God's emotional engagement with creation, however genuine it is at the level of relational reality, is not of the same character as creaturely emotion. Creaturely emotions are, in large part, responses to conditions that the creature did not choose and cannot fully control, involuntary affective states that arise from the creature's interaction with an environment it does not govern. I feel grief because something has happened to me or to someone I love. I feel fear because something threatens me that I cannot prevent. I feel surprise because something occurs that I did not know was coming. In each case, the creaturely emotion is a response to a condition that is, in some sense, imposed from outside.

But God's "emotional" engagement with creation is of a fundamentally different character. His love, grief, joy, and anger are not responses to conditions that were imposed upon Him from outside; they are the free, sovereign, eternally purposeful expressions of who He is in His immutable character, as He relates to the world He has sovereignly ordained and continues to sovereignly govern. When God "grieves" over human sin, He does not grieve as one who is surprised, overwhelmed, or destabilized by an outcome He did not foresee and cannot control. He grieves in the manner of the eternal, omniscient, sovereign God, with a grief that is entirely consistent with His immutable being, His sovereign purpose, and His undiminished blessedness. The grief is real; the passivity and the destabilization that characterize creaturely grief are not.

The historic Reformed position, expressed in the Westminster Confession's affirmation that God is "without ... passions" (WCF 2.1), a formulation directed against involuntary, creaturely-style passion, not against all divine affective engagement, is the most careful and most biblically faithful articulation of this distinction. God has what we might call "pure actional affections", genuine expressions of His moral character in relation to the world, without having creaturely-style passions that impose upon and alter His eternal being. This distinction is demanding, and it does not resolve every question; but it is the distinction that the full biblical testimony demands of us.

VI. The Pastoral Significance of Immutability: Promises Unbreakable, Love Unchanging, Purposes Unstoppable

Having worked through the theological precision that the doctrine of divine immutability requires, we arrive at what is, in many ways, the most immediately transformative aspect of the doctrine for the life of faith: its pastoral significance. The immutability of God is not a cold philosophical perfection that interests the academy without touching the soul; it is the living, warm, urgent ground of every promise, every hope, every comfort, and every assurance that the gospel of Jesus Christ extends to believing sinners.

A. His Promises Are Unbreakable

Every promise God has ever made, to Abraham, to David, to the church of Jesus Christ, to every individual believer, rests upon the immutability of the One who made it. A

promise is only as reliable as the character of the one who makes it; and the One who made these promises is the God who does not change. He cannot discover new information that would lead Him to revise His commitments. He cannot be overcome by weakness that would prevent Him from keeping them. He cannot grow weary of keeping them, or find in Himself a reason to retract them. “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?” (Numbers 23:19, NASB 1995).

The author of Hebrews presses this truth with particular urgency in 6:17–18, speaking of the two immutable things, God’s promise and His oath, by which He has guaranteed the hope of His people: “In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:17–18, NASB 1995). The immutability of God’s purpose is the ground of the immutability of His promise; and the immutability of His promise is the ground of the strong encouragement, the robust, unshakeable, storm-resistant hope, that He extends to His people.

B. His Love Is Unchanging

The love of God for His people is not a fluctuating affection that rises when they are faithful and falls when they sin. It is the immutable love of the immutable God, a love that is grounded in His own eternal, sovereign, electing purpose and that therefore does not depend upon the worthiness or consistency of its objects for its continuance. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have drawn you with lovingkindness” (Jeremiah 31:3, NASB 1995). The everlasting love is the immutable love; and it is this love, not a love that must be constantly earned and re-earned, that draws the sinner to God and holds the believer in God through every season of failure and doubt.

This is the love that Paul declares in Romans 8:35–39 to be inseparable from the believer: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The comprehensive catalog of potential separators, nothing in the created order, nothing in time, nothing in spiritual reality, cannot sever the believer from God’s love, because that love is grounded in the immutable character of the God who loved us before time began (Ephesians 1:4) and who does not change.

C. His Purposes Cannot Be Thwarted

The immutability of God’s purposes is the theological anchor of all Christian hope in a world that seems, at every moment, to provide fresh evidence that things are out of control. Kingdoms rise and fall. Tyrants prevail and evil seems to advance. The church is persecuted and the gospel is opposed. The righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. And yet the immutable God governs all of it according to the counsel of His own will, pressing His eternal and unchanging purpose through every obstacle and every

opposition, bending the wrath of men and the cunning of demons to the accomplishment of ends that were settled in His sovereign decree before the foundation of the world.

Isaiah 46:9–10 is the most majestic biblical declaration of this truth: “Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (NASB 1995). The God who declares the end from the beginning is the immutable God, the One whose sovereign purpose stands firm from before creation to after consummation, who sees all of time in a single eternal act of omniscient, sovereign intention, and who has guaranteed the outcome by His own immutable character. Job’s confession is the believer’s anchor: “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2, NASB 1995).

VII. The Doxological Response: Resting in the God Who Is Always the Same

The immutability of God is, in its final and deepest dimension, not a doctrine to be analyzed and filed but a reality to be inhabited, a truth upon which the soul may rest with the full weight of all its need, its fear, its grief, its hope, and its longing. In a world where everything changes, where relationships shift, where health fails, where financial security evaporates, where the cultural and political ground beneath our feet seems to move without warning, where even our own emotional states fluctuate with circumstances we cannot control, the immutability of God is the still point at the center of all the turning.

The great hymn tradition of the church has understood this with a pastoral depth that our theological definitions sometimes lack. The opening stanza of the hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”, Isaac Watts’s magnificent versification of Psalm 90, captures the doxological response to immutability as perhaps no other piece of Christian writing has: “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.” The God who was the help of past ages is, precisely because He is immutable, the hope for years to come. The shelter He provided in former storms is the shelter He will provide in future storms. The One who has been our eternal home from age to age is the One who will be our eternal home in all the ages that remain.

And the Lamentations of Jeremiah, perhaps the most anguished book in the entire Old Testament, written in the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem’s destruction, grounds the most fragile and hard-won hope in precisely this attribute. In the middle of the most desolate book in Scripture, Jeremiah writes: “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:21–23, NASB 1995). The lovingkindnesses never cease; the compassions never fail; they are new every morning. This is the immutable love of the immutable God, experienced as fresh grace at every dawn, precisely because it flows from a Source that does not vary,

does not diminish, and does not run dry. Great is His faithfulness, because He is who He is, always, without alteration, without decline, without the shadow of turning.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Malachi 3:6

“I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”

James 1:17

“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”

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?”

Hebrews 13:8

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Immutability	The divine attribute affirming that God does not change in His being, perfections, purposes, or promises. He is not subject to development, deterioration, revision, or alteration of any kind. Declared explicitly in Malachi 3:6 (“I, the LORD, do not change”), James 1:17 (no variation or shifting shadow), Numbers 23:19, and Hebrews 13:8 (the same yesterday, today, and forever).
Actus Purus	Latin for “pure act.” A classical theological description of God’s mode of being: He is fully and perfectly actual, with no unrealized potential, no capacity that has not been fully expressed, no movement from potentiality to actuality. Actus purus grounds immutability: because God has no potentiality to be actualized, He has no movement to make and therefore does not change.
Ontological Immutability	The unchangeableness of God’s being, essence, and perfections, the most fundamental dimension of the doctrine of immutability.

	Distinguished from the related claim about purposes and promises, though grounded in and inseparable from it. Affirms that God's inner being is not altered by His engagement with creation, by creaturely prayer, or by historical events.
Relational Responsiveness	The genuine, real, and morally serious engagement of the immutable God with the changing conditions of the creation He sovereignly governs. God hears prayer, responds to repentance, grieves over sin, rejoices over His people, and relents of announced judgment when conditions change. Relational responsiveness is real at the phenomenological level without implying ontological mutability in God's being.
Impassibility	The classical doctrine that God does not suffer involuntary passion imposed from outside His own being. Does not mean God is emotionally inert or incapable of affective engagement with creation, but that His affective engagement is of a fundamentally different character from creaturely emotion: it flows freely from His immutable character rather than being imposed from outside. Affirmed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (God is "without body, parts, or passions").
Anthropopathism	The attribution of human emotional states (grief, regret, anger, relenting) to God as accommodated expressions of the genuine moral and relational seriousness of His engagement with creation, without implying that God literally experiences those states in the creaturely, passivity-involving way. The language of God "regretting" in Genesis 6:6 and 1 Samuel 15:11 is anthropopathic, governed by the explicit theological correctives of 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19.
Nacham (נָחַם)	Hebrew verb meaning to be sorry, to repent, to relent, to have compassion, to be comforted. Used both of God (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11; Jonah 3:10) and of humans. When used of God, it is anthropopathic language describing His genuine relational engagement with changing moral conditions, governed by the explicit biblical qualification that God "is not a man that He should repent" (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29).
Open Theism	A contemporary theological movement that argues God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge of future free human decisions and that He genuinely learns, changes His mind, and revises His plans in response to creaturely actions. Open theism interprets the problem texts (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11; Jonah 3:10) as literal rather than anthropopathic, resulting in a genuinely mutable God. Rejected by classical and Reformed theology as inconsistent with the full biblical testimony to divine immutability and omniscience.
Shanah (שָׁנָה)	Hebrew verb meaning to alter, to change, to be different. Used in the negative in Malachi 3:6: "I, the LORD, do not change (lo shanah)." The most direct Old Testament declaration of divine immutability,

**Parallagē
(παράλλαγή)**

grounded immediately in the covenant implications of God's unchanging character for the preservation of His people.

Greek word in James 1:17, meaning variation, alteration, or parallax. Referring to the apparent change in position of a celestial body when viewed from different angles. James declares that the Father of lights has no parallagē, no variation, no shift in position, no apparent or real alteration when viewed from any angle of human circumstance. Unlike the lights He made, God casts no shifting shadow.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the God of Scripture does not change, not in His being, not in His perfections, not in His purposes, and not in His promises, and that this immutability is not a cold metaphysical abstraction but the most practically significant truth about the God with whom we have to do. We must believe that the passages in which God is described as “regretting” or “relenting” are anthropopathic, genuine, inspired, accommodated descriptions of God’s moral and relational engagement with His creation, and not evidence that the God of the Bible is genuinely mutable in His being or uncertain in His purposes. We must hold together, with equal firmness, both the ontological immutability of God’s being and the genuine relational responsiveness of His engagement with creation, refusing to sacrifice either truth on the altar of the other. And we must believe that the immutability of God is the theological foundation of every covenant promise, every gospel assurance, and every act of Christian hope in the face of a world that changes without ceasing.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The immutability of God should produce in us a peculiar peace that is not available from any other source. It is not the peace of a world that has finally become stable, the world never becomes stable; the earth shakes and the mountains fall into the sea (Psalm 46:2), but the peace of a soul that has found its rest in the One who is unchanging amid all the change. There should be a longing for the kind of communion with the immutable God that Jeremiah found even in the ruins of Jerusalem: the recall to mind that “THE LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail.” Let the immutability of God be not merely a theological position we affirm but a devotional reality we inhabit, the still point around which all the turning of our lives finds its orientation and its rest.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Ground your assurance in the immutability of God, not the consistency of your performance.** When doubt assails and your own spiritual inconsistency threatens to undermine your confidence before God, return to Malachi 3:6: I, the

LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. The ground of your standing is not what you have done but who He is. His covenant love does not fluctuate with your spiritual thermometer. Rest in the unchanging God.

2. **Pray with the confidence that God's character is the most reliable reality in the universe.** Because God does not change in His perfections, you pray to a God whose compassion is always the same, whose willingness to hear is always the same, whose ability to act is always the same. You do not pray to a God who might be less compassionate today than He was yesterday, less powerful than He was last year. You pray to the Father of lights, in whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. Let this truth energize your prayer with a confidence that your own spiritual state, however fluctuating, cannot ultimately undermine.
3. **Stake your hope on the immutability of God's promises.** The great promises of Scripture, justification by faith (Romans 5:1), adoption into God's family (Galatians 4:5–6), the indwelling of the Spirit (John 14:17), the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15:20–23), the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21:1–5), are only as reliable as the character of the One who made them. And the One who made them is the One who does not change. These promises will be kept because the Promiser is immutable. Build your life on them.
4. **Use the immutability of God as an apologetic for the reliability of Scripture.** The Bible's claim that God has spoken, that His word is true, authoritative, and permanently in force, rests upon the immutability of the God who spoke it. His word does not expire, does not require updating, and does not need to be revised in light of changing cultural circumstances, because the God who spoke it does not change. When you are pressed on the relevance of ancient Scripture for contemporary life, the immutability of God is the foundation of your answer: the God who spoke then is the same God who speaks now, and His character is the same.
5. **Meditate on Lamentations 3:21–23 in seasons of desolation.** The great affirmation that "THE LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning" was written in the smoking ruins of Jerusalem, by a man who had watched everything he loved destroyed. It is not a fair-weather confession; it is the hard-won theological anchor of a soul that has found, in the most devastating circumstances imaginable, that the immutable God is more reliable than the world's stability. Memorize these verses. Pray them. Use them in your darkest hours.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The immutability of God means that the God who called you to Himself, who justified you by faith in His Son, and who gave you His Spirit as a pledge of your inheritance, that God has not changed His mind about you. His purposes for you were settled in eternity, and no failure on your part can revise them. Rest in the unchanging God who called you with a calling that does not depend on your consistency.

For the one walking through grief or loss: Jeremiah wrote Lamentations in the ruin of everything he had known. And in that ruin, he found the immutable God to be the one reality that the destruction could not touch. “Great is Your faithfulness” is not a declaration that circumstances are good; it is a declaration that God is good, always, without variation, and that His mercies are new every morning precisely because He is the same every morning. In your loss, the God who was faithful yesterday is the God who will be faithful today.

For the one who doubts: The problem texts, Genesis 6:6, 1 Samuel 15:11, Jonah 3:10, are genuine exegetical challenges, and honest questions about them are not evidence of weak faith. Work through them carefully, using the canonical controls the Scripture itself provides (1 Samuel 15:29; Numbers 23:19). The God who inspired both the anthropopathic language and the explicit qualifications of it is the God who invites your honest inquiry and who is not threatened by the rigor you bring to His Word.

For the pastor and teacher: The immutability of God is the theological foundation of all pastoral comfort. Every promise you declare from the pulpit, every assurance you offer to the grieving, the doubting, the failing, the dying, rests upon the immutability of the God who made those promises. Preach this doctrine. Let the people of God know that their hope is not anchored in their own consistency but in the unchanging character of the God who does not lie, does not revise, and does not break His word.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Think of a relationship in your life that you have found to be reliably consistent, a person whose character and commitments have not changed even when circumstances changed. What made that consistency so valuable to you? How does this human experience of reliable constancy point toward, and yet fall infinitely short of, the immutability of God?

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Malachi 3:1–6. What is the context of God’s declaration “I, the LORD, do not change” in verse 6? Who is speaking, to whom, and about what? What is the precise logical connection between the LORD’s immutability (“I do not change”) and Israel’s preservation (“therefore you are not consumed”)?

3. Read James 1:13–17. What is James’ argument leading up to verse 17? Why does he describe God as the “Father of lights”? What do the Greek words *parallagē* (variation) and *trepō tou aposkiasmatos* (shifting shadow) contribute to the precision of the immutability claim? How does verse 17 function in James’s larger argument about the source of temptation?

4. Read 1 Samuel 15:10–29 in its entirety. Note the declaration in verse 11, the prophet’s response in verses 12–23, and the explicit qualification in verse 29. How do verses 11 and 29 appear to contradict each other? How does verse 29 function as a

hermeneutical control on verse 11? What does the coexistence of both statements within the same narrative teach us about how to read anthropopathic language in Scripture?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- 5.** The lesson distinguishes between God's immutability in being, in perfections, in purposes, and in promises. Explain each of these four dimensions in your own words. Is one of these more foundational than the others? How do they relate to each other?
- 6.** What is the difference between ontological immutability and relational responsiveness? Why is it essential to affirm both? What theological errors result from sacrificing one for the other, and what are the names of the movements that have done so?
- 7.** Explain what the doctrine of divine impassibility does and does not mean. How is God's "emotional" engagement with creation different in character from creaturely emotion? Why is it important to affirm that God's grief over sin, His joy over His people, and His anger at wickedness are genuine while also insisting they are not creaturely-style passions imposed from outside?
- 8.** The lesson argues that the passages in which God "repents" or "relents" (Nacham) are anthropopathic rather than ontologically indicative. What makes this reading exegetically defensible rather than merely a philosophical imposition on the text? What canonical evidence does Scripture itself provide to support this interpretation?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- 9.** Malachi 3:6 draws a direct line between God's immutability and the preservation of His people: "I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you are not consumed." Is this truth currently functioning as an anchor for your assurance, or do you find yourself grounding your standing before God in your own consistency? What specific aspect of God's immutable character do you most need to rest your soul on today?
- 10.** The lesson describes the peace that immutability makes possible as "not the peace of a world that has finally become stable, but the peace of a soul that has found its rest in the One who is unchanging." Are there areas of your life where you have been seeking the wrong kind of peace, the peace of stable circumstances, rather than the peace of the unchanging God? How might the doctrine of immutability reorient your pursuit of peace?
- 11.** Jeremiah wrote "Great is Your faithfulness" in the ruins of Jerusalem. What is the most devastating or disorienting circumstance you are currently facing or have recently faced? How might the explicit declaration of God's immutable lovingkindness, "they are new every morning", be the theological anchor for your hope in that circumstance?
- 12.** Hebrews 13:8 declares that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." In what specific ways does the application of immutability to Jesus Christ, rather than merely to "God in general", make this doctrine more personally accessible and more pastorally immediate for the believer? How does the unchanging Christ

function as the face of the unchanging God for the person who is struggling to hold onto faith?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer with the declaration of Malachi 3:6: Lord, You are the LORD, and You do not change. In a world where everything shifts and nothing holds, You are the still point, the immovable foundation, the Rock that no storm has ever moved and no flood has ever swept away. Your character is the same as it was when You spoke to Abraham in the dark, when You appeared to Moses in the bush, when You raised Your Son from the dead. You are the same today. You will be the same tomorrow. Great is Your faithfulness.

Then bring before the unchanging God the specific areas of your life where change has been most destabilizing, the relationships that have shifted, the health that has declined, the circumstances that have turned, the faith that has wavered. Pray the immutability of God into each of them: Lord, Your love for me in Christ has not changed with my circumstances. Your purposes for me have not been revised by my failures. Your promises to me are as firm today as the day You made them, because You are the God who does not lie and does not change.

Close with the doxological affirmation of Lamentations 3:22–23: The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. And let the final word of your prayer be the confession of Numbers 23:19: Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? He has said. He will do it. He has spoken. He will make it good. To the immutable God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com