

## ◇ CHAPTER SEVEN ◇

# GOD UNCHANGING

**T**hey tell us that the Bible is the Word of God—a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. They tell us that we shall find in it the knowledge of God and of his will for our lives. We believe them; rightly, for what they say is true. So we take our Bibles and start to read them. We read steadily and thoughtfully, for we are in earnest; we really do want to know God.

But as we read, we get more and more puzzled. Though fascinated, we are not being fed. Our reading is not helping us; it leaves us bewildered and, if the truth be told, somewhat depressed. We find ourselves wondering whether Bible reading is worth going on with.

### **Two Different Worlds**

What is our trouble? Well, basically it is this. Our Bible reading takes us into what, for us, is quite a new world—namely, the Near Eastern world

as it was thousands of years ago, primitive and barbaric, agricultural and unmechanized. It is in that world that the action of the Bible story is played out. In that world we meet Abraham, and Moses, and David and the rest, and we watch God dealing with them. We hear the prophets denouncing idolatry and threatening judgment upon sin. We see the Man of Galilee, doing miracles, arguing with the Jews, dying for sinners, rising from death and ascending to heaven. We read letters from Christian teachers directed against strange errors which, so far as we know, do not now exist.

It is all intensely interesting, but it all seems very far away. It all belongs to *that* world, not to *this* world. We feel that we are, so to speak, on the outside of the Bible world, looking in. We are mere spectators, and that is all. Our unspoken thought is—"Yes, God did all that then, and very wonderful it was for the people involved, but how does it touch us now? We don't live in the same world. How can the record of God's words and deeds in Bible times, the record of his dealings with Abraham and Moses and David and the rest, help *us*, who have to live in the space age?"

We cannot see how the two worlds link up, and hence again and again we find ourselves feeling that the things we read about in the Bible can have no application for us. And when, as so often, these things are in themselves thrilling and glorious, our sense of being excluded from them depresses us considerably.

Most Bible readers have known this feeling. Not all know how to counter it. Some Christians seem to resign themselves to following afar off, believing the Bible record, indeed, but neither seeking nor expecting for themselves such intimacy and direct dealing with God as the men and women of the Bible knew. Such an attitude, all too common today, is in effect a confession of failure to see a way through this problem.

But how can this sense of remoteness from the biblical experience of God be overcome? Many things might be said, but the crucial point is surely this. The sense of remoteness is an illusion which springs from seeking the link between our situation and that of the various Bible characters in the wrong place. It is true that in terms of space, time and culture, they and the historical epoch to which they belonged are a very long way away from us. But the link between them and us is not found at that level.

The link is God himself. For the God with whom they had to do is the same God with whom we have to do. We could sharpen the point by

saying *exactly* the same God; for God does not change in the least particular. Thus it appears that the truth on which we must dwell, in order to dispel this feeling that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the position of men and women in Bible times and in our own, is the truth of God's *immutability*.

### Not Two Different Gods

God *does not change*. Let us draw out this thought.

1. *God's life does not change*. He is "from all eternity" (Ps 93:2), "the eternal King" (Jer 10:10), "the immortal God" (Rom 1:23), "who alone is immortal" (1 Tim 6:16). "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2). Earth and heaven, says the psalmist, "will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But *you remain the same*, and your years will never end" (Ps 102:26-27). "I am the first," says God, "and I am the last" (Is 48:12).

Created things have a beginning and an ending, but not so their Creator. The answer to the child's question "Who made God?" is simply that God did not need to be made, for he was always there. He exists forever, and he is always the same. He does not grow older. His life does not wax or wane. He does not gain new powers nor lose those that he once had. He does not mature or develop. He does not get stronger, or weaker, or wiser, as time goes by. "He cannot change for the better," wrote A. W. Pink, "for he is already perfect; and being perfect, he cannot change for the worse."

The first and fundamental difference between the Creator and his creatures is that they are mutable and their nature admits of change, whereas God is immutable and can never cease to be what he is. As the hymn puts it,

*We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish—but naught changeth Thee.*

Such is the power of God's own "indestructible life" (Heb 7:16).

2. *God's character does not change*. Strain, or shock, or a lobotomy, can alter the character of a person, but nothing can alter the character of God. In the course of a human life, tastes and outlook and temper may change radically: a kind, equable person may turn bitter and crotchety;

a person of good will may grow cynical and callous. But nothing of this sort happens to the Creator. He never becomes less truthful, or merciful, or just, or good than he used to be. The character of God is today, and always will be, exactly what it was in Bible times.

It is instructive in this connection to bring together God's two disclosures of his name in the book of Exodus. God's revealed name is, of course, more than a label; it is a revelation of what he is in relation to us.

In Exodus 3, we read how God announced his name to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM" (v. 14)—a phrase of which "Yahweh" (Jehovah, "the LORD") is in effect a shortened form (v. 15). This name is not a description of God, but simply a declaration of his self-existence and his eternal changelessness; a reminder to mankind that he has life in himself, and that what he is now, he is eternally. In Exodus 34, however, we read how God "proclaimed his name, the LORD" to Moses by listing the various facets of his holy character. "The LORD, the LORD (Yahweh), the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children" (vv. 5-7).

This proclamation supplements that of Exodus 3 by telling us what in fact Yahweh is; and that of Exodus 3 supplements this by telling us that God is forever what at that moment, three thousand years ago, he told Moses that he was. God's moral character is changeless. So James, in a passage that deals with God's goodness and holiness, his generosity to men and his hostility to sin, speaks of God as one "with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1:17 RSV).

3. *God's truth does not change.* People sometimes say things that they do not really mean, simply because they do not know their own mind; also, because their views change, they frequently find that they can no longer stand behind things that they said in the past. All of us sometimes have to take back our words, because they have ceased to express what we think; sometimes we have to eat our words because hard facts refute them.

The words of human beings are unstable things. But not so the words of God. They stand forever, as abidingly valid expressions of his mind and thought. No circumstances prompt him to recall them; no changes in his own thinking require him to amend them. Isaiah writes, "All flesh is

grass. . . . The grass withers. . . . But the word of our God will stand forever" (Is 40:6-8 RSV). Similarly, the psalmist says, "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. . . . All your commands are true. . . . You established them to last forever" (Ps 119:89, 151-52).

The word translated *true* in the last verse carries with it the idea of stability. When we read our Bibles, therefore, we need to remember that God still stands behind all the promises, and demands, and statements of purpose, and words of warning, that are there addressed to New Testament believers. These are not relics of a bygone age, but an eternally valid revelation of the mind of God toward his people in all generations, so long as this world lasts. As our Lord himself has told us, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn 10:35). Nothing can annul God's eternal truth.

4. *God's ways do not change.* He continues to act toward sinful men and women in the way that he does in the Bible story. Still he shows his freedom and lordship by discriminating between sinners, causing some to hear the gospel while others do not hear it, and moving some of those who hear it to repentance while leaving others in their unbelief, thus teaching his saints that he owes mercy to none and that it is entirely of his grace, not at all through their own effort, that they themselves have found life.

Still he blesses those on whom he sets his love in a way that humbles them, so that all the glory may be his alone. Still he hates the sins of his people, and uses all kinds of inward and outward pains and griefs to wear their hearts from compromise and disobedience. Still he seeks the fellowship of his people, and sends them both sorrows and joys in order to detach their love from other things and attach it to himself. Still he teaches believers to value his promised gifts by making them wait for those gifts, and compelling them to pray persistently for them, before he bestows them. So we read of God dealing with his people in the Scripture record, and so he deals with them still. His aims and principles of action remain consistent; he does not at any time act out of character. Our ways, we know, are pathetically inconstant—but not God's.

5. *God's purposes do not change.* "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind," declared Samuel, "for he is not a man, that he should change his mind" (1 Sam 15:29). Balaam had said the same: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Num 23:19).

Repenting means revising one's judgment and changing one's plan of action. God never does this; he never needs to, for his plans are made on the basis of a complete knowledge and control which extend to all things past, present and future, so that there can be no sudden emergencies or unexpected developments to take him by surprise. "One of two things causes a man to change his mind and reverse his plans: want of foresight to anticipate everything, or lack of foresight to execute them. But as God is both omniscient and omnipotent there is never any need for him to revise his decrees" (A. W. Pink). "The plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps 33:11).

What God does in time, he planned from eternity. And all that he planned in eternity he carries out in time. And all that he has in his Word committed himself to do will infallibly be done. Thus we read of "the immutability of his counsel" to bring believers into full enjoyment of their promised inheritance, and of the immutable oath by which he confirmed this counsel to Abraham, the archetypal believer, both for Abraham's own assurance and for ours too (Heb 6:17-18). So it is with all God's announced intentions. They do not change. No part of his eternal plan changes.

It is true that there is a group of texts (Gen 6:6-7; 1 Sam 15:11; 2 Sam 24:16; Jon 3:10; Joel 2:13-14) which speak of God as repenting. The reference in each case is to a reversal of God's previous treatment of particular people, consequent upon their reaction to that treatment. But there is no suggestion that this reaction was not foreseen, or that it took God by surprise and was not provided for in his eternal plan. No change in his eternal purpose is implied when he begins to deal with a person in a new way.

6. *God's Son does not change.* Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8), and his touch has still its ancient power. It still remains true that "he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb 7:25). He never changes. This fact is the strong consolation of all God's people.

#### We Are to Be Like Them

Where is the sense of distance and difference, then, between believers in Bible times and ourselves? It is excluded. On what grounds? On the

grounds that God does not change. Fellowship with him, trust in his word, living by faith, standing on the promises of God, are essentially the same realities for us today as they were for Old and New Testament believers. This thought brings comfort as we enter into the perplexities of each day: amid all the changes and uncertainties of life in a nuclear age, God and his Christ remain the same—almighty to save.

But the thought brings a searching challenge too. If our God is the same as the God of New Testament believers, how can we justify ourselves in resting content with an experience of communion with him, and a level of Christian conduct, that falls so far below theirs? If God is the same, this is not an issue that any one of us can evade.