

January 15, 2012

Malachi 3:6 / Hebrews 13:7-8 / Isaiah 61:1-3

Most Pressing Questions Series (#2) - The Old Testament, the New Testament,  
and the Unchangeable Nature of God

Last week, as we began our series of messages on the most pressing questions people wanted me to address, we considered the existence and eternity of God -- "*How do we know He exists, and where did He come from?*" They're common questions coming from non-believers.

Yet this week, as we come to the second question. And I want you to know I've been asked this question, or questions similar to it, FAR MORE than I've ever been asked about the existence of God -- obviously because I deal mostly with church people, and church people have (for the most part) already resolved that first question before they ever get here!

Yet as people who are familiar with what the Bible says and teaches about God, the questions of church going people lie in different areas. And thus, one of the most common questions church people ask, has to do with the notable difference in the way God deals with people in the O.T. / as compared to the way he deals with people in the N.T.

So let me read the question I'm going to try to answer today -- remembering that most Christians have (at one time or another) either thought about it / asked it / or been asked about it when sharing their faith with others. It goes like this:

***"Given that God is unchangeable, how does one equate the warlike, killing God of the Old Testament with the peaceful, loving God of the New Testament? / If you had two people who had never read the Scriptures -- ask one to read only the OT and the other to read only the NT, and then compare their view of God. What is the Bible trying to teach us by this?"***

Ever considered that, or asked that? Because it's a question that never seems to go away! In fact, in the early church, Marcion (who was later labeled a heretic) was so unsettled by the apparent difference between what he called the God of the OT and the God of the NT that he actually deleted the OT from His

Bible along with all OT quotes in the NT! (His Bible was very small! Smaller, in fact, than the Readers' Digest Condensed Version!)

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Likewise, in the 1800's, **Charles Spurgeon** lamented that many ministers would read sections of the OT in the morning service (either responsively or as a sermon text) and totally skip over any reference whatsoever to God's wrath, anger, judgment or commands to kill -- and focus only on the happy, uplifting, peaceful parts of the Bible. (Like Guideposts Magazine, where you would NEVER know any of that stuff is even in the Bible.)

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And the same is true today. As Richard Dawkins recently said: "**The God of the old testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction; jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak / a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser / a... homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal... megalomaniacal... capriciously malevolent bully.**"

Yet of Jesus (whom he at least respects) he says: "**Jesus was a great moral teacher... and somebody as intelligent as Jesus would have been an atheist if he had known what we know today.**"

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In fact, just this week I was watching a FOX NEWS clip from 4 months ago, where FOX NEWS anchor **Bill O'Reilly** and atheist **Bill Maher** spoke of the Bible. Maher had said Americans were too dumb to make good decisions, and he backed up his point about us being dumb by citing the fact that 60% of all Americans believe the Noah's Ark story is literally true.

O'Reilly says: "That's allegorical, Bill. I'm sure you know its allegorical... these are parables designed to teach us a greater truth..."

Maher: "Ok, what about the part of the Bible that says that if you see your neighbor working on a Sunday (Sabbath) you should kill him? Is that a parable or is that literal?"

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O'Reilly: "I don't know, where does that come from? Romans? Ecclesiastes?"

Maher: "No Bill, it's in Deuteronomy. It's a law. If you see your neighbor working on a Sunday you should kill him..."

O'Reilly: "I'm not familiar with that part of Deuteronomy..."

Maher: "But if it's your perfect holy book written by God, why is there stuff in it that makes no sense or is immoral?"

O'Reilly: "I respect the Bible and take it as an allegorical book. But I'm a Christian, so the New Testament is what I believe in."

Then, looking somewhat perplexed, Maher says: *"But they were both written by God, weren't they? They're both two chapters of the same book, right?... I love the way you Christians... always want to get behind the happy half of the Bible, where Jesus walks on water and turns it into a fishing trip with the guys..."*

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You see, whether you like it or not, many Christians are embarrassed about things in the OT, and in particular, the nature of God as recorded there. And let me say, if you do make it a habit to share your faith (as Jesus commands us to do) sooner or later you will be asked similar questions.

And you will need to have some sort of honest, sensible answer prepared to address their concerns. And please, don't give the, "I'm a Christian so I only go by the NT," answer given by Mr. O'Reilly. That doesn't cut it.

So, without any further delay, let me seek to answer the question before us to the best of my ability (knowing full well, that people far more capable than I will ever be, have struggled to do so)!

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And **FIRST**, let me reiterate the point the questioner states as one of the primary problems that feeds into the whole dilemma -- the fact that God is unchangeable (or as theologians put it, He is "immutable"). If He weren't, we could use O'Reilly's argument that *"we as Christians just go by the N.T."* That would be an easy out until one remembers that for God to be God He cannot change. A point the Bible makes undeniably clear.

As God stated through the prophet Malachi (chapter 3, verse 6): **"I the LORD, do not change."** / Or as other versions also correctly put it: **"I am the LORD, I DO NOT CHANGE."** He wants everyone to know, that as God, it is impossible for Him to change -- because change would obviously imply imperfection / or deficiency / or inadequacy / or the need for improvement or growth in God.

And the very thought is preposterous!

The word "LORD" in that verse (spelled with all capitals in your Bible) signifies that the Hebrew term used there is, "Yahweh" or "Jehovah." The name God gave Himself in Ex. 3:14 -- "I AM" (as we saw last week).

The One who had no beginning and will have no end. / The uncreated / all-wise / all-knowing / all-powerful / unspeakably holy Creator -- who is so pure and so glorious and so infinite in His Being -- that no one (whose sins are not atoned for) can look upon Him and live.

THAT God -- the God of the whole Bible, and not just the NT -- says: **"I am the LORD, I DO NOT CHANGE."** It's a verse our friend Debbie Polce (John Polce's wife) calligraphied for Nancy and I. And I have it hanging on the wall next to my bed, so that whenever I go to sleep at night or wake in the morning, that truth is staring me in the face: **"I AM THE LORD, I DO NOT CHANGE."** It couldn't be stated any more clearly!

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And the Israelites should have rejoiced in that! Because as He goes on to say in the next verse: **"So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed."** And what He means is this: Their sin was so grievous, and so continual (and always has been) -- that the only thing which kept Him from destroying them completely (as a people) was His unchangeable nature.

He had chosen them. He had chosen to love them and bless them with His favor. / And He had sealed that divine prerogative of love with a covenant promise to Abraham that was as unchangeable as He Himself is!

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You see, to the Israelites there could be no more sure promise than this: **"The LORD Almighty has sworn by Himself..."** That is, He made a promise, and swore it by His own unchangeable nature! Which means it's coming to pass is as sure as His unalterable nature! Nothing could be relied on more! What God swears by Himself WILL come to pass and nothing will stop it!

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Therefore, despite their ongoing, unmitigated sin, and how much they DESERVED to be completely obliterated as a people because of it, God will spare a remnant. He will not allow them to be destroyed. Not because they deserve His protection or salvation, but because He is the unchangeable God who made a promise that's as unchangeable as He is.

And the same, by the way, is true for all true believers. Our saving grace is NOT that we are faithful and blameless and righteous and thus deserve His love. It's that the God who **"chose us in Christ Jesus, before the foundation of the world,"** has promised or covenanted with us to **"complete the good work He began in us, unto the day of redemption."** And His promise is as unchanging and unchangeable as He Himself is.

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You see, in US, change is not only possible, it's desirable! One of the primary purposes of God in redemption is to **"sanctify"** believers / or to change us and make us more like Jesus. / It's to **"conform us into the likeness of His Son,"** says Paul. We should want to change / or want God to change and heal and transform and grow us in godliness. In humans its always desirable!

But the same is NEVER true of God. Because as I've already pointed out, the need for change implies that that person or Being is in some way inadequate, defective, imperfect or lacking something in their present state (lacking strength, or compassion, or knowledge, or wisdom, or in-sight, or righteousness, or information, or love) -- things which IF ADDED TO THEM would make them better, or shore up their defects, inadequacy or personal lack.

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I have often asked people in classes or personal conversations: Is there anything God does not know? And the answer, according to the Bible, is "no." / If God is perfect (and perfection means without the need for change or improvement ) it would have to be, "no" / since gaining information that He didn't have before would add to Him and change Him.

If God gained knowledge He didn't have before, He would obviously become smarter, and more knowledgeable, by discovering things He didn't know before and thus be different or change. And again, the very thought of that is preposterous!

That's why the Bible goes to great lengths to convince us that God is omniscient or all-knowing. That there is nothing He does not know. His omniscience is not simply a "nice attribute." It's all tied up in the perfection, immutability or unchangeable nature of God. It's what He must be if He is to be God.

You see, there are no surprises for God. As Isaiah puts it, "**He makes known the end, from the beginning.**" From the very beginning God told us what would happen at the end of time as we know it, because He already knew at the beginning what was going to happen at the end (and everywhere in between, as well)!

God never gets caught off guard. For Him there are no unforeseen surprises! / No one slips one by Him or puts one over on Him. / He knows our thoughts before we think them / our feelings before we feel them / our decisions before we make them / and our actions before we carry them out.

**"Every day of our lives was written in His book BEFORE any one of them ever came to be,"** says David in Psalm 139. And as Jesus adds in order to drive home the same point, **"He knows what we need before we even ask"** Him for it in prayer.

He knows **"the number of hairs on our head"** (today as opposed to yesterday!) / And He has such a comprehensive grasp of everything that's going on in the world, that **"not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from the will of our Father in heaven."** It can't happen unless God wills it.

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God knows everything! And even if we didn't have all these numerous passages to tell us so, we could know that simply because He says, **"I am the LORD, I do not change."**

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Which brings us to our SECOND point: The fact that God Himself is immutable or unchangeable / and His promises are immutable or unchangeable / does not mean that He cannot choose to do things differently (in accordance with His omniscience). God not only CAN change what He does, He declares beforehand that He will!

Which means that people reading the O.T. Scriptures should have expected it! "See," says the Lord in Is. 43:19, **"I am doing a new thing..."** / And likewise, in Jer. 31, God speaks of a **"New Covenant"** He will make with His people, whereby He will forgive the guilt of their sins / and write His law on their hearts / and move them (or cause them) to know Him -- from the greatest to the least.

The same is true of Joel 2:28-29 where He promises that unlike OT times, where the Holy Spirit was essentially restricted to prophets, priests and kings, a time was coming when things would be far different. Thus we read: ***"In the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even upon my menservants and maidservants will I pour out my Spirit in those days."*** It was something God had never done before.

So the message is clear: ***The unchangeable or immutable nature of God and His promises, DOES NOT MEAN that He cannot change the way He chooses to interact with people.***

And in my opinion, that goes a long way to explain the differences any objective person will see when they read the Bible and notice (in light of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom) that God deals with people differently in the O.T. / than He does in the N.T.

I would even go so far as to contend that if you don't see it / or haven't wrestled with it / you've actually missed one of the clear messages that God wants to convey to us as we move from the Old Covenant or Old Testament to the New Testament!

And there's probably no better passage than Isaiah 61:1-3 to tell us why God interacts differently with sinners in the N.T. as opposed to the O.T. There we read of Jesus: ***"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of the vengeance of our God..."***

So what does that verse tell us? It tells us that in and through Jesus, God was offering to people a "year," or a "time period," or an "age" of "His favor" or "His grace."

It's not that He Himself has changed, and would now overlook sin, or become a somewhat permissive God devoid of justice or wrath. He can't become other

than what He is! I cringe when I hear people say: "God no longer judges people," or "God isn't that way any more." Because God can't change. He's **"the same yesterday, today and forever."**

No. What God did through Christ was display in greater measure the riches of His grace in Jesus, and offer to people -- for a *time* or a *season* -- a period of undeserved divine favor.

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It's similar to what Central or South American governments would do in regard to militants or guerilla fighters before they would launch an all-out offensive to put them down.

They would offer a limited time of amnesty (a grace period we could say) when those men and women could come -- without any reprisal -- and surrender their weapons / and disavow their allegiance to the rebel cause / and mix back into society.

And it always had a specific deadline that it had to be done by, after which they would be considered enemies of the state and subject to the punishment such people deserve. And the same is true here in Isaiah.

Here we are told that Jesus would proclaim, "the year of God's favor" and "the day of the vengeance of our God." So it's not that God has changed. What He's done, is simply initiate a period of grace, or amnesty -- for a short season - - offering favor and pardon to all who would trust in Christ.

Not because there would no longer be a day of judgment, but precisely because the Day of Judgment (or vengeance) was indeed coming! God, out of His desire to see sinners saved, and extend the offer of His mercy to all, has simply opened the gates of His favor for a limited period of time, and beckons all that will come, to come!

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Paul picks up this same theme in II Cor. 5:20, where he pleads with the Corinthians: **"We implore you, on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might**

***become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you."***

And then Paul closes His appeal with these words: ***"I tell you, NOW is the time of God's favor (we're in it!), TODAY is the day of salvation."***

Why does He emphasize that so strongly? Because he knew that a "day" was coming when it WOULDN'T be the time of God's favor, and the Day of salvation (the grace-period for being saved from God's wrath against sin through Christ) will have ended.

All one needs to do is read the book of Revelation to see that God and His holy, hostile opposition to sin has not ended at all -- its only been put on hold until that day when Christ returns and the day of judgment begins. In a sense the Gospel call is always: ***"Come while there's still time."***

So hear me well: ***God does not change from warlike in the OT / to meek and gentle in the NT / and back to warlike in the Book of Revelation! He has simply chosen (long before the creation of the world) / out of His unspeakable mercy and desire to see sinners saved -- to withhold His wrath and extend to all in this limited age of favor or season of grace -- an invitation to come and be saved, before the day of His vengeance begins.***

The day (as John tells us in Rev. 19:15) when Jesus will come and, ***"strike down the nations with the sword coming out of His mouth" / and "rule the nations with an iron scepter" / and "tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty."***

You see, the New Testament does not proclaim a "kinder, gentler God than the O.T." Rather, what it proclaims is a Holy sin-hating God, who chose (from eternity past, out of His great love for offending and undeserving sinners), to extend to all a season of grace that will conclude when Christ returns a second time to initiate ***"the day of the vengeance of our God."***

That's why Paul can say to the unrepentant in Rom. 2:5: ***"Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant hearts, you are storing up wrath for yourselves for the day of God's wrath when His righteous judgment will be revealed."***

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That's why He can say to the Thessalonians: ***"They tell us how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead -- Jesus who saves us from the coming wrath."***

Or again, to that same church: ***"Those who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus... will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people and marveled at by all who have believed..."***

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That's why Paul (pointing to the Jews) can remind the Roman Christians: (lest they forget or get lulled into a spiritual apathy by their sense of thinking they're now His favored one's):

***"Therefore, consider both the kindness and sternness (or severity) of God: sternness (or severity) to those who fell, but kindness to you -- provided that you continue in His kindness."***

And I wish I could go on, but I can't! In fact, I don't need to. For what I've said is sufficient to show that God has not changed one iota! He can't, because He's God! But He CAN (and we must thank Him for it!) change how He deals with us, offering us grace when we deserve wrath.

And we need not only thank Him for it, but avail ourselves of all the benefits of that gracious change -- while it's still available to us! Not only cherishing it ourselves / but inviting others to share in it as well.