

God Is Unchangeable

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[0 : 0 0] All right, well we are working our way through our knowing God series right now and We're trying to do this. We're calling it foundations knowing God We're trying to do a foundation series every semester a short series on on theology really and on knowing God knowing Christ knowing scripture All sorts of things like that. So of course we're working through doctrine of God here and tonight we come to The statement that God is unchangeable. So we're gonna think about that together. God is unchangeable Let me pray and then we'll dive in. Lord we ask for help as we think about you And we know God that we can't know you unless you reveal yourself And so we give thanks for your revelation and we also ask for illumination that the Holy Spirit would help us in our hearts to know and see and Learn and grow in the light of our fellowship with you. And so tonight teach us Lord What you mean by the fact that you are unchangeable speak through your word to us and show us the implications and the reality of

The fact that you don't change and so we ask for that help in Christ's name. Amen All right, so we're doing the series because First down one we know that we have fellowship with God and we want to know the God that we fellowship with and Just like any anytime you are in a relationship You don't you don't progress in that relationship Without knowledge of the other of the person that you're in relationship with and so we're in covenantal relationship That's the way we think about our relationship with God And so we want to grow in our knowledge of him and part of that is Engaging the mind so in this series and all these foundation series. We're really Listening to the command of Jesus when he tells us The old commandment in a new form love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength So Christ gives a very clear command that The mind of the Christian actually has to be engaged in the knowledge of God just like the will the emotional life

All of it has to be engaged in the knowledge of God So we're thinking about this and really trying to grip the mind in order to change our affections as well So let me start by saying this It is difficult to talk about God It's difficult to think about God and it's difficult to talk about God and that's actually a good thing not a bad thing and What I mean by that is two things one that God is so other so absolute in Contrast to our creatureliness That when we talk about him we must do it in inadequate ways we have to We can never capture him with our speech with our reflections with our thought and so a lot of times the theologians will Stay stuff like this that you can never Comprehend God you can only apprehend and that's a way of getting at this distinction between

Knowing God as God knows God which is completely something that we can't even imagine and Knowing God as we know God which is a very creaturely way of knowing God And so that that's the first thing the second thing is this at the same time Our knowledge of God is completely inadequate in one sense and at the same time we say true things about God also and Both of those things are true actually simultaneously And that's been kind of the Christian confession for century after century That we know we say true things about God because God has told us what to say about him Right, so how do we know that we speak true truly of God because God tells us what to say And he tells it to us in the revelation of God and mainly in holy scripture and in the revelation of Jesus Christ, right?

so the Bible is it's very important to think about the Bible in this way because the Bible is God's word to us about him in human words Right, so we don't believe the same thing that Islam believes about the Quran right where the Quran is actually God's word directly dictated an angelic speech Rather we think that the Bible we know that the Bible is God's word in the form of human words speaking through human beings By way of inspiration and so John Calvin when he talks about that He says that every single sentence of the Bible everything every single thing that God says to us about himself is Baby talk that's Calvin's really exact way of putting it He said that anytime you read a statement about God in the Bible and read any word in the Bible It is God Lispering to you like a mother Talks to their baby It's kind of him getting on one knee and saying look you can't understand the adult talk

[4 : 59] Which is how God knows himself, but let me give it to you and baby talk and so our Artheology in some sense is baby talk. It's baby talk about God because it's creaturely and he's absolute And so only he knows himself as he truly is fully and we know in very limited ways very limited ways And yet we know truly at the same time because it's God who gives us the baby talk Okay, so that's what we're doing here and That's actually a good thing because it means that God is absolute and we have a God that we can depend on He's that big. He's that great that our speech about God is inadequate if it wasn't then he would be a God we could capture And contain all right now that leads us directly into what we're saying today I want to just give you three things three things We confess we believe that God is unchangeable Unchangeable and so let me say three things that that means and why it really matters for us three things Okay, so first let's read together. We'll just have a verse for each of these and we'll flip around so

I think we have Bibles out somewhere if you'd like to grab a Bible there's some of these chairs over here if you want one Psalm 102 Two verses three verses from Psalm 102 Psalm 102 verses 26 to 28 says this They will perish But you will remain that's the earth the heavens and the earth they will all wear out like a garment You will change them like a robe so God will change Creation like taking off a robe and They will pass away, but you God are the same And your ears have no man you God are the same So there we've got the doctrine laid out by the psalmist right really clearly You are the same and he's directly contrasting God to the heavens and the earth You are not like the heavens and the earth they pass and they will pass But you are the same you're always the same Now last week Derek taught or last week two weeks ago Derek taught that God is

Eternal and infinite there was the spirit eternal and infinite those were the three attributes that he looked at What does it mean to say God does not change and In some ways all we need to do is replay the talk that Derek gave two weeks ago Actually, that would be enough to treat the statement that God does not change right So let me I do this every time I teach here and it usually fails, but let's try What what does it mean to change?

period Anything anything and anything anybody can shout out. What does it mean to change? To grow right so you move from something you're not to something you become right so in the in older speech when it when we talk about change we think of potential So right to be able to change is to have potential right so Rock has potential to roll and you have potential to grow and we can talk about that potential in thousands of ways Potential to grow in stature potential to grow in wisdom whatever it might be that those are all forms of change Yeah, right. What else can we say about change anything? There's no wrong answer here I don't it's hard to get the idea of change wrong. I think so To become something different absolutely now The question then is what are the conditions in which one has to be in order for change to take place and there's basically two

Conditions now this sounds complicated at first, but it's actually really really easy and obvious once you hear it You are a creature of change if you live in space and time Right anything that is in space and in time Changes it has to so if you live in time, there's always change taking place Your your taking time is changing all the always in relationship to you, which means you're also changing in relationship to it So if you're if you are if you live in space time then you're changing Okay, and we all live in space time And most things do and that means that everything Derek said last week is really just the definition that God does not change Because the doctrine when we say when we say God is eternal Do you remember anybody remember what that means?

[9 : 46] It means that God has no relationship to To change to when we say God is eternal that means he is not bound by Time and when we say God is infinite it's just saying God is not bound by space so Everything we say about God is basically taking who we are and what we are in negating it first I'm bound by space and time and God is not therefore. He is eternal and infinite and that means if you're not bound by space and time then you are Unchangeable And so the Bible says God's unchangeable. It means he's not bound by space and time It's literally just to say once more he is eternal and infinite. It's really the same thing Now actually what that teaches us to bring this point home and move on Is that when you start to look at any single attribute of God and you tug on it a little bit What you find is that you're actually saying the same things about God over and over again through the lens of every other attribute

So you can let's say we laid out 10 attributes of God and we picked one to talk about Immediately we have to talk about the other nine. They're all completely connected So to say God is unchangeable is the same thing as saying he's infinite eternal immutable and his being witness Wisdom goodness power justice glory. I think I've got the order wrong on that confessional statement, but we're always saying really the same things and that is to say that one of the most foundational statements we say about God and Derek mentioned this last time is just to say God we confess God is simple and That is a special word in theology that refers to the fact that God is not like me That's really what it means God is simple and the meaning of God is simple and the meaning of that is that he is not complex like I am and What does it mean to be complex? It means to be made up of stuff You know to have what are you? You're you're you're one person

Nevertheless, you are full of parts all of you You know, you've got arms and legs. You've got hair. You've got feet but also you've got soul and in that soul you've got intellect will emotions All sorts of divisions and they don't all agree with each other You know, you know, your soul is kind of cut up in pieces when your emotional life doesn't make sense with your intellectual life when you're crying but your reason tells you it doesn't make any sense Right that that means that your soul is actually in some sense in pieces. It's not one thing and God is not complex in that way. He's simple simple meaning He is His being just is he's not made up of a bunch of different parts and so every time we say he's infinite. He's eternal. He's love He's justice We're really just using human language to try to talk about something we cannot comprehend Which is the fact that he is And if he is then he's unchangeable

And that's what it means to say he's simple or unchangeable or infinite or eternal They're all really to say the same thing Okay, and of course you think about that and you say I don't understand what that means and exactly right exactly You know what? We don't understand what that means and that's exactly the point the fact that he and so this is the first little application and we move on a Couple things one is We don't understand that Because he is absolute and we are creaturely and that is a good thing. That is good news tonight. It's good news He's not like the other gods of the other religions Who are graspable?

That's precisely why it's futile to make an idol of him To put him into wood and stone as a medium He's he's too big for that. He's too absolute his simplicity. Just want to allow it And so it's good news today that we have a simple God an unchangeable God now There's more specific reasons we're gonna come to those in the next two points. So let's go to point two Point two and let's flip over to a nut the next verse Malachi three six The last book of the English Bible Malachi three six it says What does it say it says?

[14 : 21] For I the Lord do not change Okay, so That's a straightforward verse for I the Lord do not change therefore you a children of Jacob are not consumed I the Lord do not change it says now This when we say God is unchangeable secondly It's not just about trying to speak well about God's essence, which is what we're just trying to do we're trying to Talk in human terms baby talk about the essence of God It's not just about that And this is where we come to see that that's true We don't confess God is unchangeable just to try to do a theological exercise not at all and Here he Malachi tells us why God tells us why through Malachi, okay?

So let's look at the context just the next verse is all really and all we need to look at for that The Lord do not change therefore you a children of Jacob are not consumed From the days of your fathers you have turned away from my statutes. You've not obeyed you not kept the you've not kept the law Return to me and I will return to you says the Lord of Hosts, but you say how shall we return?

Will man Rob God let me stop there What's the context here in which it says maybe we can have I think you can say this in just a couple words What's that? What's the what's happening here? Why why does God say I do not change?

In response to what who's he comparing himself to there? Us yeah, yeah, certainly us more specifically in this context, right? It's Israel already talking about Israel, but human beings Yeah, and but more we can get more specific He's talking about the people that he's in covenant relationship with So he's specifically speaking here of people that he has bound himself to by a covenant an everlasting relationship and they to him and He's saying I don't change, but you do Meaning you humans that I have covenanted with you know a covenant is just to say you have a religious relationship with God He knows you and you know him that's a covenant and and He's saying here. I don't change Children of Jacob my covenant people, but you do and the way you change is that you break the covenant You break the conditions of the covenant you break the laws you don't honor me you make idols you disobey me constantly

You're a bunch of rebels and yet What's the conclusion I Lord do neither Lord do not change therefore you are not consumed And you see what he's saying he's saying that because I don't change and Because I promised and covenanted myself to you in grace and mercy You are not consumed even though you absolutely deserve to be So that's what he's saying here now. He's comparing himself subtly to the gods of the ancient Near East and he's saying that Israel know that if if you were worshiping a demonic figure which the gods of the ancient Near East often are their capricious their little G gods meaning they're actually rebellious spirits against the true God and Any God that the nation's worship is a God who judges

[17 : 57] Directly immediately And he's saying but because I don't change I show mercy And so in other words what what God is doing here is he's appealing to his covenant promises and Saying that the essence of God the unchangeability of God's essence Manifest when he comes down into the world and it becomes the fact it becomes the God who keeps covenant And so the second dimension of the immutable we unchangeability. We also call this by the way immutability God God does not change also can be just called immutability. It's the same meaning It's so important because it is the foundation of all covenant relationship All right, so understand understand what we're saying. We're saying this If God was changeable there would be no grace If God was changeable there would be no cross If God was changeable you would not have a savior nor salvation But it's God's immutability his unchangeability that

Grounds all of the covenants of mercy and grace Because in every single one of them you break it and he keeps it He doesn't judge you even when you break the covenant and Jesus Christ comes through that through that covenant of grace that covenant lineage And so his covenant faithfulness, you know, that's something we talk about that's something Christians talk about is something the Bible talks about Covenant faithfulness is a product of the immutability or unchangeability of the living God Which means that when God is unchangeable in his essence and he comes down into creation He keeps it that way. He retains his attributes. He does not change Even when he condescends Okay, he's always unchangeable All right, so we can give thanks for the doctrine of God's immutability Because if you if you don't have that reality you don't have Jesus And so it's a big deal Grace is the product of the unchanging promise of the unchanging God. All right thirdly and finally

So God's essence is immutable God's covenant grace is the product of his immutability and then finally I'm gonna flip over to James 117 James 117 is a very famous verse For this idea it says every good and perfect gift is from above Coming down from the father of lights With whom there is no variation or shadow Due to change All right this verse I've always found tricky With God there is no variation or shadow Due to change and he is the father of lights Do you see the metaphor that's being used here?

Anybody got it? What is it? He's the father of lights and He doesn't make shadows God doesn't make shadows What's the contrast I Shouldn't have asked this question. This is one of those bad. You don't do this when you're teaching moments. I always do this the contrast here is God and the and the lights right so what are the lights the lights are the Sun the moon the stars and when the Sun's out and the Sun and we well we move Sun moves a little too, but we move What happens when you're standing if you stand still in one place out in the middle of the afternoon for three hours?

What do you notice about the ground around you? The shadows moving right so he is the father of lights the Sun men and stars and With him there is no shadow Meaning as God moves about he doesn't he doesn't cast a shadow That's what it's saying Therefore God unlike the Sun Moon and stars does not change So God doesn't move around like the Sun and therefore doesn't cast a shadow like the Sun does That's what it's saying there And so this is a classic New Testament statement of the immutability of God. God doesn't change like the heavenly bodies God's not Cyclical he's not moving a bet round in those ways. He doesn't change now I want to read that verse to actually create a problem for us and Let's go to this is the one one section point three that we're gonna read just a few passages very quickly Numbers back to the Old Testament to numbers 23

[22 : 53] Numbers 23 verse 19 And numbers 20 3 19 is another classic it says God is not a man that he should lie or a son a man that he should change his mind So it's saying that not only is God's You can't say that God's mutable based on his condescended Presence So even if God is working in the world, you can't say that he's like the Sun Casting shadows. He doesn't change even though he comes into the world. That's James Then you come back to numbers and it says also You can't say that he like a human being changes his mind So he doesn't decide to do something and think God that was a bad idea and Turn around and do it do it a different way. He doesn't he's not that he's simple He's not composed of parts his mind is his eternal will They're completely one thing and so it net there's no change there at all now Maybe you can anticipate the problem And the problem that we're gonna create for for three minutes in a dress is found in a

Bunch of places, but let me give you just two two more and that would be Since we're in numbers just flip back to Genesis 6. This is probably the most famous and most difficult of the passages Genesis 6 verse 6 very famously said The Lord Regretted that he had made man and it grieved him to his heart. So then he decides to judge Heaven and earth earth with the flood So the word there is regretted. It's also the word that in Hebrews also just repent It's also the word in Hebrew that just means change the mind So you can translate it that way you can say God changed his mind. He regretted He flipped the script in his mind on this Okay, so then you've got let's just give you let's just give one more Jeremiah 26:13 it's the last one we'll flip to Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds

Israel and obey the voice of the Lord your God and the Lord will relent of The disaster that he has pronounced against you same word for changing the mind or repenting So they're using a very specific translation here relented though if you if you will change the Lord will Repent or repentance really just means to change To he'll relent. He'll back away He'll he'll decide to do something different than he was doing. It's the same verb. It's the same word that we have there So numbers 23 don't think don't everything that the Lord is Is like a man who changes his mind or repentance and Then at least five times in the Old Testament. We've got the same verb Being used of God That he does do that now. What do we say? What do we do with this?

And this is important to treat because a lot of people who are questioning Christianity will bring this up This is one of the common things If they know if they know what they're talking about if they know the Bible very well at all This is something that is often brought up Now what we say what we've said for centuries now as Christians And this was something that they were dealing with all the way back in the early church is That we have to always remember that because God's word is God's word. We let it we let scripture interpret scripture And so that's a fundamental rule of interpretation And so when we come across scripture and we see at least three or four major moments Where it couldn't be clear for the text to say God does not change. He does not change. He does not change and he doesn't change his mind And of course, we know that as soon as we start thinking about God that must be the case that it's a logical requirement as well As soon as we see that then we can come back and say, okay We've got a bit of a rule developed

Whereas we need it We need to go and read the rest of the Bible through the lens of what we know about God and its clearest statements And so when it comes to passages like this It's actually a little easier to deal with I think then we might think and this is this is what John Calvin says about it And you can never go wrong by just saying what John says John says that John says that this is actually part of God's baby talk to us That's how he deals with it and that's how most Christians have throughout the centuries is that we need to go across the Bible and Let what God says in clarity about himself be true because it is and Then we need to go through and understand that these narritival places and these are stories these narratives these narritival places are Are speaking to us in very very human ways Calvin says this is where God's baby talk is at its maximum to us So in other words we can go to back to Genesis 6 and say there's no change here in the simple God when he says I regret that I made man instead what's being shown to us there is

[28 : 14] That God hates sin That's the actual doctrine underneath the statement And so we know God doesn't change we know God doesn't change his mind But in the way God has chosen to speak to us through that story He's chosen to say I regret and you grieve me and That's that's baby speech. There's no change in the God who stands outside of space and time In that moment none at all if there was then everything else would fall down everything we believe and We've got clear enough statements to the contrary But instead what's happening in that moment is God saying Let me explain it to you like you would say to another person That sin really is so bad that it grieves me But it doesn't change him in other words his plan has always been the same God knew the flood was gonna happen because his eternal will determined it from eternity And I don't even know what that means. I don't know how to talk about it

But he doesn't change he doesn't change at all And so we we let the clear statements of scripture determine the harder things And especially in these narratives and so here's the last thing I'll say I think this Jeremiah 26 passage that I read actually really helps us because here the same verb is being used God Repents or relents or changes his mind But what does he say he says to Israel if you will bow the knee if you'll put away the idols if you'll repent then I'll come I'll come to you all relent from your Exilic plight that I've put upon you now that doesn't mean that the counsel of God's will has changed from eternity It doesn't have to mean that no not at all. It's simply God exercising the normal thing He always says to humans right and that's be obedient Be obedient and God honors that God wants to respond to that But it has nothing to do with changing the God who stands outside of space and time who's determined all these things From before the foundation of the world

That's not a problem for us at all. I don't think now Let me close with this. Let me close with this One of the reasons that we know that and this is the last word one of the reasons that we know that is Because Jesus Christ came into the world And what we start to learn as we read the Old Testament is that Even though there are moments where God says things like I'm repenting. I'm changing my mind even even though he says that we realize throughout the Old Testament that the underlying story is actually that God has never had a plan B that That starts to come out really clearly over the course of the Old Testament and so in Genesis 50 20 you've got that famous place where Jacob God says through Jacob, you know you my brother's meant to kill me and There was only evil in your heart But God intended this and he intended it for the good And then we come to Romans 8 and we realized that everything God's done is for the good of him who purposed it all and

That maximal good is in the midst of the maximal evil of the cross of Jesus Christ You know, there's been nothing more heinous in human history than murdering the Son of God and nothing that's been Nothing that's even touched upon the salvific nature right nothing that's been more good we can say in the crudest sense than the cross of Christ and So in the cross of Christ we realized that the plan of God has always stayed the same that he's immutable and unchangeable in his Covenantal purposes and we can say that in Christ the unchangeable God took on the changeable Jesus Christ is the unchangeable God who has taken on the changeable. He's taken on a changeable nature He's taken on a changeable body. He died after all that's a big change and that means That Christ is immutable from eternity the Son of God and mutable in history

And that's exactly where the immutable God chooses to save us That's exactly how he chooses to save us The God who stands outside of space of space and time has come into space and time and that's been his plan from the beginning So let me leave you with this meditation one line God is All is and always will be unchangeable and He is and always will be unchangeable in his love Toward you and That's why it's so important Let's pray father. We ask now that you would apply The truth about you to our hearts that we would have assurance assurance because you are unchangeably loving to us And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen