

CHAPTER IX

THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD

"For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). Mutability belongs to all creation; immutability belongs to God alone. The visible heavens often change their appearance; sometimes they are clear, at other times they are covered with clouds and darkness. The face of the earth appears different at the various seasons of the year. The earth has undergone one great change by the flood, and will undergo another great change by fire: *"For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up"* (II Peter 3:5-10). The angels in their original state were subject to change, as the apostasy of many of them has shown. The elect angels have not changed, they have been confirmed in holiness but this is not due to their nature, but to the electing grace of God in Christ, Who is the Head of all principality and power: *"I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality"* (I Tim. 5:21). *"And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:"* (Col. 2:10). And when we consider man, the very acme of creation, his changeableness is so evident that no argument is needed to prove it. What man of us has not grieved at human fickleness? Many of us know what it is to be praised today and slandered tomorrow by the same pair of lips.

"Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!
"Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
 Change and decay in all around I see;
 O Thou Who changest not, abide with me!"
 -- H.F. Lyte, 1847

The author of the foregoing lines was not a fool optimist, thinking of this present world as a "Utopia." Nor was he a sour pessimist, viewing the future without hope. But the ground of His hope was in the unchanging God, Who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Gos is Immutable in His Nature

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). God cannot change for worse, for He is the eternally Holy One. He cannot change for better, for He is already the Holy and Perfect One. Time effects no changes with the eternal One. The self-existent, and self-sufficient, and ever-existing God is not bowed down with age, neither is there any faltering to His stately steppings. "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding " (Isa. 40:28).

God is Immutable in His Attributes

The power of God is ever the same, for we read of His eternal power: *"For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:" (Rom. 1:20). There is no increase to His knowledge, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). His love is unchangeable: "Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end " (Jno. 13:1); "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39); "The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." (Jer. 31:3), and His mercy*

endureth forever: "O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever. O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy endureth for ever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him that made great lights: for his mercy endureth for ever: The sun to rule by day: for his mercy endureth for ever: The moon and stars to rule by night: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy endureth for ever: And brought out Israel from among them: for his mercy endureth for ever: With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy endureth for ever: And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy endureth for ever: But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him which smote great kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: And slew famous kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy endureth for ever: And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy endureth for ever: And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy endureth for ever: Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy endureth for ever. Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy endureth for ever: And hath redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy endureth for ever. Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy endureth for ever. O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy endureth for ever" (Ps. 136). His veracity (truthfulness) is immutable, for He cannot lie "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began;" (Titus 1:2). His holiness cannot be sullied (ill-tempered), and His faithfulness never fails. "Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail" (Ps. 89:33). Though there has been such a profusion of blessings bestowed upon His creatures, and so many good and perfect gifts made to them, His goodness is still the same without any abatement.

God is Immutable in His Decrees

The purposes of God are eternal. No new resolutions are ever formed, and no new decrees are ever made by Him, for His counsels are of old. There is no Happy New Year with Him, for He is ever the blessed or happy God. His purpose cannot be frustrated, "The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11). "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand" (Prov. 19:21).

"The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand:" (Isa. 14:24). *"But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth"* (Job 23:13).

Objections Considered and Answered

1. It has been offered in objection to the immutability of God that He must have changed at creation. But this is to confound change with manifestation. As I now write the sun is shining into my study; directly it will be gone, but this does not mean a change in the sun, the sun is the same; there is only a change in its manifestation. Then, too, a change in activity does not imply a change in character or nature. What God's activities were before creation we are nowhere told, but since He ceased from the work of creation He has been engaged in the work of administration and salvation, and in the future He will take up the work of judgment.

This is the day of salvation: *"(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)"* (II Cor. 6:2), *"But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;"* (Rom. 2:5); *"Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead"* (Acts 17:31). This is the day of God's patience, the day in which He tolerates the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: *"What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:"* (Rom. 9:22); the day in which men defy God and seem to get by with it.

The saddest story the writer ever heard from human lips was told him by a young woman whose father committed double homicide and suicide, killing the husband and mother of this daughter, and then taking his own life. According to the story this man had years before renounced his Christian profession, and had become a student of "black art." Confessedly selling himself to the devil, he would often defy God in the presence of his family and boast that God was not "man enough to handle him." And to all appearances he got by with his defiance of God, but in the coming day of judgment God will deal with all such rebels and boasters. *"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death"* (Rev. 21:8). In that day His wrath, now held back, will be manifested. But the changes in Divine activity do not argue a change in the Divine character and purpose.

2. It has been argued also that the incarnation of Christ involved a change in the Divine nature. But the incarnation was an assumption of human nature by the second person of the Godhead. The divine nature was in no wise affected. The Divine nature was not changed into human nature, nor the human nature into the Divine, nor a third nature made out of the two. In the incarnation Christ assumed what He was not, and remained what He was. The incarnation was necessary for His work of making atonement. The divine nature, as such, cannot suffer, so Christ assumed human nature that He might be capable of suffering. *"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man....Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil"* (Heb. 2:9,14). But in His suffering there was no change in the Divine nature.

3. It is objected that the Scriptures represent a change in God by ascribing repentance to Him. *"And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart"* (Gen. 6:6); *"And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death: nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul: and the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel"* (I Sam. 15:35); *"And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies"* (Ps. 106:45); *"The LORD repented for this: It shall not be, saith the LORD"* (Amos 7:3); *"And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not"* (Jonah 3:10). But there are other Scriptures which plainly and positively deny that God repents. *"God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?"* (Num. 23:19); *"And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent."* (I Sam. 15:29). We would not make one Scripture recant before another, but putting all the passages together we conclude that repentance with God is not what it is with men. Repentance on the part of men is on account of sin and involves a change of mind and purpose, but with God, it cannot be because He has sinned, and therefore does not involve a change of mind and will. Repentance with God means a change of manifestation and activity, and this change is always in line with His immutable character and purpose. The immutability of God's holiness requires a change in attitude and treatment when the righteous become wicked. The sun is not changeable because it melts the wax and hardens the clay, the difference is not in the sun

but in the objects it shines upon.

"Nor is the immutability of God, in His promises and threatenings, affected in that the promised good and threatened evil are not always done. For it should be considered, that they are either absolute or conditional. That anything promised or threatened, absolutely and unconditionally, is not performed, must be denied. In all cases where God does not do what He said He would do, a condition is either expressed or implied. *"If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them."* (Jer. 18:8, 9,10). Thus *"For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it"* (Ps. 132:13,14), and the people of Israel should dwell in their land, and eat the good of it; but then it was provided they were obedient to God, abode in His service and worship, and kept His laws and ordinances: *"If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land:"* (Isa. 1:19). But failing on their part. He departed from them, and suffered them to be carried away captive. There was a change of His dispensations, but none of His will. He threatened the Ninevites with the destruction of their city within forty days, that is, unless they repented. They did repent, and were saved from ruin, God repenting of what He had threatened; which, though a change in His outward conduct towards them, was no change of His will; for both their repentance and their deliverance were according to His unchangeable will *"And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown... And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not"* (Jonah 3:4,10). In the case of Hezekiah, II Kings 20:1-6: *"In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live. Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the LORD, saying, I beseech thee, O LORD, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore. And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying, Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the LORD, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the LORD. And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and*

this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake" the outward declaration ordered to be made to him, was, that he should die and not live, as he must have done quickly, according to the nature of second causes, his disease being mortal; but the secret will of God was that he should live fifteen years longer, as he did; which implies neither contradiction nor change. The outward declaration was made to humble Hezekiah? to induce him to pray, and make use of means; whereby the unchangeable will of God was accomplished" (Dr. John Gill).

"God's immutability is not that of a stone, that has no internal experience, but rather of mercury, that rises and falls with ever change of temperature. (The mercury does not change; it only reflects the change in the weather, C. D. C.) When a man bicycling against the wind turns about and goes with the wind instead of going against it, the wind seems to change, though it is blowing just as it was before" (Strong).

4. It is sometimes claimed that prayer changes God. We gladly subscribe to the blessed truth that God hears and answers prayer, but we deny emphatically that prayer changes God. This would make man sovereign and supreme rather than God. This would make prayer dictation rather than supplication. Prayer is a means of grace the results of which are always in harmony with God's will. *"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:"* (1 Jno. 5:14). In prayer we seem to conquer God, but in reality it is He who conquers us. *"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered"* (Rom. 8:26), therefore the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us according to the will of God. We even say in praying, "Not our will, but Thy will be done."