

James 1:13-18 Do Not Be Deceived: Truths About Trials, Temptations, Sin, and the Character of God (part 3: God Does Not Change)

I've been to Australia a number of times through the years. And I've travelled around a bit. But one place I've never been is to the big rock in the Northern Territory called Uluru, also known in English as Ayers Rock. And I am sure it is pretty much the same as it has been since it was formed. It hasn't changed. Both to the Aborigines and the British settlers of Australia, it has been an immovable piece of history. One of the ways the Bible describes God is by calling Him a "Rock." When young David fled from King Saul he often found refuge inside the heart of a rock. In 2 Sam. 22:2-3 he says, "**The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge . . .**" In Ps. 19:14 "Rock" is even used as a proper name for God as David again says, "**Oh Lord my Rock and my redeemer.**" One of the characteristics of a rock is that it does not change; it is stable, reliable. In this way God is like a rock; He does not change.

In the context of James' letter, the people are suffering and they are sinning by questioning the character of God in his goodness. So, James says in v. 17, "**Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.**" In other words, God is good; and, his goodness will always be, because He does not change. In fact, God cannot change. It is his character not to change. And if He could change, He would not be God. I have only one main truth: God cannot change. This truth is one of God's attributes. It is who He is. It is also called the "immutability of God." I want to show this truth from Scripture and from logic itself. Then, I have two objections and some final applications.

I. TRUTH: God cannot change. We see this first in our text today. In v. 17 James says, "**there is no variation or shadow due to change.**" And before this he calls God, the "Father of lights." Here, James is making a comparison between creation and creator. "**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth**" (Gen. 1:1). God stands outside his creation. He is not created. We are. This earth is. The sun, moon, stars, and all the heavenly bodies (lights) of the universe is created. And, since they are created, they are not God. We are not God. We change. We are born, we grown up, we get sick, we get better, outside forces change us, we come we go, we change jobs, we make more money, less money, we learn, we become "experts" in our field of work, we are nice one day, mean the next, we fall "in love" and "out of love," we change our views, for better or the worse, one year one political party is charge, the next another. Change is the source of great stress in our lives. And such is the case in every culture, every language, every society.

The heavenly bodies change. Our universe is always moving, and as the scientists say, always expanding. There is constant change. The lights of the universe are always casting shadows. Think about the sun hitting a tree. At the beginning of the day, there is a long shadow. At midday, the shadow is very small, or not at all when the sun is directly overhead. In the afternoon, the shadow is long again; always changing. But God is described as the "Father of lights." He is His Own Light. He has no shadow. For his light illuminates all things. In Rev. 22:5, **speaking of heaven, John says, "And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."** And it is interesting that Jesus says of himself, "**I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me**

will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). We live in a universe where the ONLY “thing,” or better, the only “ONE” who is not changing is God. If He could change, He would cease to be God. Why? Think about it. All that changes ceases to be what it was before the change (even if only a slight change). If God were to change, He would either: 1) Make a change for the better; or 2) Make a change for the worst. And since He is God, holy, and the most perfect and of the most value, He cannot improve upon himself. And if He were to change for the worse, He would lose something in his being. He tells Moses his name is “I am.” And that which truly *is* remains. That which changes was something and will be something else. God cannot change!

This truth is taught everywhere in Scripture. Ps. 102:25-27: **“Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.”** Is. 51:6: **“Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.”** Mal. 3:6 **“For I the LORD do not change . . .”** 1 Sam. 15:29: **“And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret . . .”** The verses are numerous. God does not change. This means He is always the same. He is who He is. He is also unchangeable in his will, his plans, his decisions. What He says He will do. His gifts and calling are irrevocable. He completes what he has begun. And this is what James is saying in v. 17.

II. Two Objections

Objection 1: The Relenting God. Often in Scripture, we see that God changes his mind. In Exod. 32, through his prophet Moses, God announces judgment on Israel for their idolatry with the golden calf. But Moses seeks the favor of God, calling on Him to “relent” (in Heb. *nacham*, to change his mind). Moses reminds God of his covenant promise to bless his people. And in response God does not bring judgment. (We see this example with Israel other times. See Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:1-6.)

Another example is Jonah. Jonah goes to the great city of Nineveh and pronounces the judgment of God upon their wickedness. He says, **“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** (Jonah 3:4). But, at the end of 40 days, judgment does not come. Why? The people repent and God withholds judgment. And Jonah is upset. He didn’t like those people, the enemies of Israel. In Jonah 4:1-2 he says, **“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”** This is so interesting. He knew that God is a God who “relents.” (Let me say, if God were not a God who relents from this perspective, we would not be here today. His mercy toward those who repent, those who are humble, those who know they have sinned against a holy God, will find a God who does give them what they deserve.)

So, what do we do with this objection. There is a lot I could say. But, one way of explaining this very difficult doctrine is by considering the will of God from two perspectives. The first is God's will of decree. God's decretive will does not change. If you've ever read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, this is the "deep magic" behind the stories, that which cannot be changed. This is God's eternal plan for all things, his will to create, to allow the fall, to save a sinful people, to make all things new again one day. This includes all things that come to pass in between. This includes the moving of history to accomplish his will, the rise and fall of nations, religions, civilizations, etc. From this perspective, God does not change. Num. 23:19: **"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"**

But from another perspective which is also true, we see what some have called his "perceptive will." This is God's will of command. It is always a sin to break the law of God, to disobey his commandments. And from this perspective, God announces blessings on obedience and curses upon disobedience. Examples abound. These are conditional. And God reserves the right to cancel or reverse them depending on obedience, depending on repentance and faith. In this way God "relents." But, his relenting is always subservient to his will of decree. According to Jeremiah 18, God is the potter, we are the clay. God's relenting is his sovereign decision. His right to withdraw his announced judgments and blessings is part of his sovereignty. And his sovereignty over all things takes into account human actions and prayers. In this way, GOD DOES NOT CHANGE, yet it is his CHARACTER TO RELENT.

Objection 2. The Incarnation of Christ. If God cannot change, the incarnation of Christ is illogical. Since God cannot change, the incarnation is impossible. For this implies change. Think of Jesus' words, **"If you've seen me you've seen the Father"** (John 14:9). Or, how do we understand these words from Paul: **"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . ."** (Col. 1). Or Heb. 1:3, which says, **"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power."** And how do we understand such verses when we read that Jesus was **"tested as we are"** (Heb 4:15). Or, that Jesus was hungry. After all, our bodies must have food and water in order to live. And what about the cross? Jesus body was changed as it went from health to suffering and death. This must be one of the greatest objections to a God who cannot change. And if we as Christians claim that Jesus is God, then what do we do with such truths.

Well, it is important to understand what God DID and DID NOT do in the incarnation. Many think that Christians believe God became a man. But, God did not change into a man. This is SO important! For if God could change INTO a man, then everything I've just said about the immutability of God is false. This would mean that God could change. But, in the incarnation of Christ, God TAKES ON flesh. He does not CHANGE INTO flesh. There are still 2 natures, distinct, separate in being, yet united into one person. And it must be so. Otherwise, how can we

know a God who is wholly other, completely separate from his creation, holy in his being, one who is light, one who cannot cast a shadow?

This means that when Jesus laid down his life on the cross, God, in his essence as the immutable One, did not suffer; He did not lose his life; He did not cease to live for 3 days. But, because of the incarnation, God “taking on flesh” as the Son of God, he did suffer, his body did change, death came to him. And in this most beautiful, brilliant, magnificent, most wise act of change, WE can know Him. We can be saved! As our sin leads to death, so the death of Christ, leads to a change in us from DEATH to LIFE. Isn’t this what James is saying in vv. 13-18. Our desires, when they are lured, take the bait of sin, which leads to death. Death is born. But, God, who is GOOD, and is the ONE who gives good gifts, is the ONE who gives birth to life. And this life is found in the SON. For a God who cannot change, the incarnation is the ONLY way to save those who change. Because God cannot change, the incarnation is necessary in order for us, as sinners to know Him

Transition to application: There is mystery. After all, we are not God. And we must remember that even in the Bible, God speaks to us through language, language we can understand (Ex: a mother talking to her 1 year old). There is SO MUCH we do not know! But, there are some very important applications flowing from this doctrine.

III. Applications.

Application: God is completely trustworthy in all his attributes. Immutability is essential to all God’s attributes. If God could change, so could all his attributes. Then, He would not be God. But since He cannot change, neither can any of his attributes. For example, God is holy. Therefore, He cannot be anything else. God is righteous; He can never be unrighteous. God is just; He can never make an unjust decision. God is love; He can never throw this aside. God is good; He will always be good. God is gracious and merciful and longsuffering. He is all powerful, which means He cannot be defeated or make a rock that is too big for him to move. He is all seeing, which means we cannot hide; He sees all. He is all-wise; He can never make a bad decision. His knowledge is exhaustive, literally; for He gives existence to knowledge. And since God cannot change, these things (and more) will always stand.

Application: If God cannot change, God will do what He says He will do. He will fulfill his promises. I think this is the main emphasis of James. The reason we can endure suffering in this world is because God does not change. He will only give good gifts. He will not all of a sudden give us something bad. And He will lead us all the way to heaven.

Application: He is the only ONE to be worshipped. God is not like us, and to make him in OUR image is sin. And to worship anything other than him, is idolatry. Everything changes because everything is created. But God is not created. He does not change. He is immutable.

Application: If God cannot change, we are not consumed. In Mal. 3:6 we read: “**For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.**” The context of this verse is the rebellion of Israel. They are sinners. They rebel over and over and over and over. Yet, God has promised not to destroy, but to deliver them and forgive their sins. And God

cannot change his promise. The same goes for us. And we know that his promise is affirmed in the sending of the Son. 2 Cor. 5:21: **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Rom. 5:8: **“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** 1 Pet. 3:18: **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit . . .”** 1 John 4:10: **“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”** This truth assures the mercy of God. It assures the grace of God. It assures the blessings of God found in his Word. God is not fickle, one day loving us, one day not.

Application: God’s immutability is displayed in the promise of Christ. (It is interesting that the qualities we see in God are the qualities that describe Christ.) Jesus says, ***“I am the light of the world . . . I am the bread from heaven . . . Someone greater than Solomon is here . . . Someone greater than the temple is here . . . Come to me all you who labor and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest . . .”*** The very things the Bible says about the unchangeable God, it also says about Christ.

At the end of the day, all our hopes, all our desires, all our thoughts about a future day when this world will be changed and all things made right relies on the TRUTH that God cannot change. He is the ONLY constant. He is the unmoved mover, the ONE who works all things according to the counsel of his will. From the sin and fall of Satan and the fall of Adam to the return of Christ and the consummation of all things out time now is merely a VERY SMALL parenthesis in the timetable of God’s Sovereign plan to make all things right. Sin is in the world. And it needs change in order to exist. But God does not change. And because of this, He will fulfill his glorious purpose in this world.