

# Clarity Trumpet

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## Does God Ever Change His Mind?

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A popular speaker of the Reformed persuasion recently spoke on the subject of prayer to a church group which shared his theological leanings. He opened his message with this question directed to his audience: “Does prayer really change anything?” He received a resounding “NO” from the audience, which is the answer he himself agrees with.

My question is, “Does the thought that your prayers to God may not change a thing concern you at all? Are you disturbed by the possibility that God has arranged things so that it only *appears* as if prayer matters in the outcome of things, but that it really doesn’t?”

### The Basis for Believing that Prayer does *Not* Change Anything

As with so many humanly conceived theological positions, logic -- not Scripture -- is the basic reason for rejecting the possibility that prayer may change events, outcomes, or people. The reasoning even *seems* Scriptural in nature and goes something like this: *God is an eternal Being, all-knowing, immutable (unchanging), seeing the end from the beginning. Therefore, it is unthinkable that He could or would ever change. If He could change His mind about anything He wouldn’t be God. He would be as fickle as His created beings.*

Once you buy into this seemingly flawless logic you must -- if you are going to be completely consistent -- conclude that neither prayer, nor anything else, ever changes anything. We are told that the “changes” that occur in response to one’s prayers are only *apparent* changes. God had the outcome already planned before the individual even thought of praying.

### A Fly in the Ointment

There are, however, some troubling consequences if such logic is embraced. What may appear to be flawless logic, upholding God’s sovereign character, is in fact quite flawed and portrays a God that is neither real nor sovereign.

An unbending rule to follow if you are to ever develop a Biblical view of God is to ***depend solely upon Scripture***, and nothing else

-- not logic, not illustrations, not church tradition, not theological schools of thought, not your favorite Bible teacher or preacher, not your alma mater, not your feelings -- nothing but the Bible alone. Others may scoff at such an approach as being naive or as springing from your own arrogance. “Who are you,” they may say, “to think you can discover what God is like all by yourself? Greater minds than yours have wrestled with the deep

theological problems of Scripture and they are not all in agreement. Why should you think your isolated view is to be believed over those who have had more thorough training than you?”

Logic again rears its ugly head. Man’s reasoning powers have been given him by God, but it is God Himself who reminds us to *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not* (don’t depend on) *on your own understanding* (Proverbs 3:5). Problems begin to rapidly escalate when we adopt “the wisdom of this world” (I Corinthians 1:19-21), or begin to trust in our “own understanding” of things in our attempts to understand God and His ways.

So instead of *blending* our logic with Scripture, or trying to make Scripture *fit* our reasoning, we will turn to the Bible and let it speak on this subject. We will begin with what seems to have happened and work our way to what clearly did happen -- all from the Bible *alone*.

### It Seems God has Changed His Mind at Times

- God *apparently* changed His mind concerning the creation of man. The Bible says, “And the LORD *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He *was grieved* in His heart (Genesis 6:6).

- It *seems* He was in the process of changing His mind with Abraham concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20-33).

- It *seems* God changed His mind about blessing Jacob. It appears that He was not going to bless him but because of Jacob’s wrestling and prevailing, He did (Genesis 32:24-30).

- God *apparently* changed His mind regarding Eli and his house. The record is found in I Samuel 2:27-32ff. Verse thirty is especially revealing: *Therefore the LORD God of Israel says: “I said indeed that your house and the house of your father would walk before Me forever”; but now the LORD says: “Far be it from Me; for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.”*

- He *apparently* had a change of mind or heart concerning Saul being the King over Israel I Samuel 15:10, 11 states, *Now the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, “I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments.”* Then in the last of verse 23 Samuel conveys God’s message to Saul: ***Because*** (cause and effect) *you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king.*

- *Perhaps* the Lord had a change of heart concerning the destruction of Nineveh; at least the people thought so (Jonah 3:4-10; 4:2).

### God Promised to Change His Mind at Least Five Times

- Concerning any nation which He *intends* to destroy, ***if*** that nation “*turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it*” (Jeremiah 18:7, 8).

- The opposite is also promised: “*And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it*” (Jer. 18:9, 10).

- God promised to **relent and not destroy** “all the

cities of Judah” if they would listen to Him and turn from their evil way (Jeremiah 26:1-6, esp. v. 3, and vs. 13 and 19).

- He promised that **He would have relented** of the “disaster” which He had brought upon “the remnant” of Judah if they would simply “abide in the land” (Jeremiah 42:1-22, which they refused to do (43:1-7)).

- God promised to **relent** (change His mind) of “the harm” He *intended* for Israel if they would turn to Him with all their heart -- fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12-14).

### Scripture Records that there have been Times when God Did Indeed Change His Mind

- God clearly changed His mind *when* Moses prayed to Him, and *because* Moses prayed (*cause and effect*), concerning His intention to destroy Israel to build a great nation beginning with Moses (Exodus 32:9-14). God’s own commentary on this event is found in Psalm 106:23: *Therefore He said that He would destroy them (Israel) had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach to turn away His wrath, lest He destroy them.* Pretty clear, isn’t it?

- In the midst of destroying 70,000 men as a result of David’s sin of numbering the people, **God relented** and “*heeded the prayers for the land, and the plague was withdrawn from Israel*” (II Sam. 24:13-25, esp. v. 16, 25; cp. I Chronicles 21:14-27).

- In response to sinful Israel’s cry for mercy it’s recorded that “*for their sake He remembered His covenant, and relented according to the multitude of His mercies*” (Ps. 106:43-46).

- When Amos asked God to cease sending the locust swarms to destroy Israel’s crops “*the LORD relented concerning this. ‘It shall not be,’ said the LORD*” (Amos 7:1-3).

- Again when Amos prayed for God to not allow the destroying fire to continue “*the LORD relented concerning this, ‘This also shall not be,’ said the Lord GOD*” (Amos 7:4-6).

- Hezekiah was told by God to “*Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live*” (Isaiah 38:1). However, later on -- **in direct response to Hezekiah’s prayer** (*cause and effect*) -- God changed His mind and replied to Hezekiah, “*I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; and I will add to your days fifteen years*” (v.5).

### God’s Character Does Not Change; His Methods Do

Despite the vehement objections of some, God is unchanging in His essential character (what He *is*), but changes in His methods with men (what He *does*). There are those who say you cannot separate God’s *being* from His *actions*; if He is unchanging in one, He must be unchanging in the other. However, to reach such a conclusion you have to ignore or explain away a number of Scriptures and insert one’s own logic over those same Scriptures. It is, therefore, unthinkable to these same folks that God’s decisions or actions could ever be contingent upon man’s decisions, actions, or responses to those of God.

God clearly is not fickle; He does not change. Malachi 3:6 states, *For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.* James 1:17 reminds us of the comforting truth that *every good gift and every perfect gift is*

*from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

Yet, it is equally certain that His *dealings* with man do change in at least three ways:

- **When He promises to do something for men if they will act or respond to Him in a certain way.** This *cause and effect* reality literally permeates Scripture wherever you turn. Such promises are real, not imaginary. For instance, when He told Solomon, “*If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will forgive their sin and heal their land* (II Chronicles 7:14). If Israel could not have taken this promise to heart, believed it, acted upon it, and expected the desired result of a healed land, then they should have turned their backs on a God who would make such meaningless promises.

- **When He refrains from doing what was originally intended because men didn’t have the proper attitude, or they changed their attitudes and/or behavior.** One example from each Testament should demonstrate this adequately.

Psalm 81:13-16: *Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. . . He would have fed them also with the finest wheat; and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.*

Matthew 23:37, 38: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate.*

- **When His purpose for one person or group is different than for another.** The classic example is the differences in God’s purpose and dealings with Israel as contrasted to His purpose and dealings with the Church today. With Israel He chose a people to be a unique *nation* before Him; with the Church He has chosen *a unique people from all nations*.

His purpose with **individuals** may also differ. For instance, His purpose for Peter was clearly different than His purpose for John (John 21:18-22), and His design for the foundational leaders of the Church (apostles and prophets) is different than for any of the other members of His Body, the Church (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Having said all of that, it is extremely important to realize that --

### There are Some Things about which God will *Not* Change His Mind

- God’s love for righteousness and hatred for sin (Psalm 5:4; Habakkuk 1:13; Revelation 21:27).

- Salvation being only through His Son (Acts 4:12; John 14:6).

- Salvation being a gift, not received as a result of human works, efforts, or merit (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 6:23).

- Salvation being eternal -- never lost once it is received (John 5:24; 6:37, 39, 47).

And the list goes on and on.

### Students of God’s Word, Beware!

Those who are of the persuasion that God never reacts to man, but always acts independently of whatever man may or may

not do, must have explanations for the hundreds of Scripture passages that plainly contain the *cause and effect equation*. In Galatians 6:7, for instance, we are told, *Do not be deceived God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*

Some of the ways of skirting around such clear Bible statements are so twisted and complicated that I wouldn't even attempt to explain them to the reader in this short paper, but I will comment on two.

- In all the verses that speak of God changing His behavior toward man because of man's attitude, faith, or behavior, we are told that it was really God who caused the change in man; so He's never really changed anything. As an example, according to this logic, when Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah it was God who caused them to repent. His plan never was to judge or destroy them; it was always to deliver them.

Such is the extreme to which human logic will take us in defense of a tradition or a theological bias. In opposition to such conclusions, Jonah 3:10 could not be more pointed: *Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.* Strange wording indeed if God never had any intention of judging the city.

- Another common way of explaining away what seems crystal clear in Scripture is to remind us that God is so awesome that there is no way for mortal man to comprehend Him, so in order to convey His truth to us He has used *terms of accommodation*. That means He has used words or phrases that we would understand even if those words and phrases do not accurately describe how things *really* were or are.

An example of using terms of accommodation is seen in II Chronicles 16:9: *"The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him."* The question is raised, "Does God have eyes? If He does, are they anything like human eyes?" Probably not, we are told, but for us to understand how God could *see* something without eyes He **accommodated** our inability to fathom such a possibility by using a term we would understand.

Undoubtedly there are things in Scripture which describe God which we either **cannot fathom** (*omnipresence*, for instance), or which we may **perceive as being figurative** in nature (such as descriptions of God as having "feathers" or "wings" in Psalm 91:4 -- a *poetic portion* of Scripture.) Since this verse is poetry we *might* be justified in questioning its literalness).

### **God's Integrity: The One Thing We Dare Not Question**

God normally says exactly what He intends to say, and He means precisely what He means to communicate. If He speaks allegorically the context usually makes it clear.

If in attempting to understand Him more fully we find ourselves diluting the literalness of His promises, His commands, His power, or His personal care over us, we need to examine where our thinking is taking us. This diluting process is often done unknowingly. We read a passage like Matthew 10:29, 30 and we are awed by what Jesus said. "Surely," we reason," this cannot be literally true." And what did He say?: *Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

However, before you explain away the literalness of

such a statement (and, grant you, it is mind-boggling), take a moment to remind yourself that the statement is intricately linked to **God's personal care for His children**. We have nothing to fear *because* we "are of more value than many sparrows" and He is even aware when one of *them* falls to the ground (vs. 27-31). If He does *not* know about the sparrows, if He does *not* know the very hairs on our heads, by what stretch of the imagination do we suppose that He is concerned about (or even aware of) our personal problems. The literalness of the one rises or falls on the literalness of the other.

### **Does God Ever Change His Mind? (Does Prayer Change Anything?)**

*Absolutely, positively YES!* We have a God who does *sympathize with our weaknesses*, One whom we can trust. *Therefore* we are to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15, 16).

In being moved to change or redirect His treatment of those in need does God ever change in His character? Certainly not. But He can and does *feel* for His own, He *is able to give aid to those who are tempted* -- those who are tried or tested (Hebrews 2:16-18). He is *moved with compassion* for those who are *wearied and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd* (Matthew 9:36).

This all-knowing, sovereign God has arranged things in this way and, whether we can put it all together in our thinking or not, we need to bow before Him in thankfulness that it is so.

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