

SERIES ON THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE  
Scripture Reading: James 1:13-27

Sermon #6  
February 26, 1984 Text: James 1:17

## GOD'S ETERNAL UNCHANGEABLENESS

L. Dwight Custis

For the past several Sundays we have been considering some of the attributes of God: the grace of God, the power of God, the righteousness of God, the wisdom of God, and the love of God. I am doing this as a foundation for considering the great doctrine of salvation, or, as these doctrines are sometimes referred to, the doctrines of grace. These doctrines have to do with man's sin, and the effect that sin has had on man. They have to do with the Biblical doctrine of election, and with the purpose of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, designed, as it was, for the salvation of those whom He has chosen. The doctrines of grace have to do with the way in which God, in His marvelous grace, moves upon the hearts of His elect people, drawing them to Himself, making them want to be saved, and enabling them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then we will be considering also the evidence of salvation, that those who are truly born again by the power of God will persevere in the faith, persevere unto the end.

These are truths which are contrary to the ways that men think about salvation, and certainly contrary to a lot of the teaching that we hear today concerning the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But this is what we ought to expect. God said long ago, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8, 9). The Gospel reveals God's thoughts, not man's. Therefore, it is necessary that we understand something about God in order that we may see why salvation is the way it is.

Today I want to take up another of God's attributes: His eternal unchangeableness. The statement is made in the seventeenth verse of James chapter 1, that God is "the Father of lights, with whom is no variability, neither shadow of turning." One writer has expressed it this way: "With Him there can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning" (Bavinck, The Doctrine of God, p. 146). One of the modern translations renders it that "there is not the shadow of a change in God." In Malachi chapter 3, verse 6, the prophet Malachi gave us the words of the Lord when He said, "I am the Lord, I change not." And in Hebrews 13:8 we read that "Jesus Christ," Who in His divine nature is exactly like God, is "the same yesterday, and today and forever."

Another word for unchangeableness is immutability. And this attribute, or characteristic, of God is linked in Scripture with God's eternity. We are treading Page 2

in deep water when we talk about the unchangeableness of God.

However, the doctrine of the unchangeableness of God is never clearer than in the Old Testament usage of God's name, Jehovah. In our King James translation, the word Jehovah is translated LORD. You can identify it because it is a capital "L" and then the "ORD" is in smaller capitals. You will find this literally hundreds of times all through the Old Testament.

Now I want you to turn to the book of Exodus, chapter 6, where we can get some background on the name, Jehovah, and then go on to note something about this very unusual attribute of God. In Exodus chapter 6 and beginning with verse 2: "God spake unto Moses and said unto him, I am the Lord." (Notice the capital L and the small ORD, also in capitals, in the King James text.) This is the way the word Jehovah is indicated in the King James, as I have explained to you. The word is Jehovah in the Hebrew, or, as some think it should be pronounced, Yahweh. But to continue: "And I appeared unto Abraham, and unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them." Now that does not mean that you will never find the name Jehovah in the book of Genesis; you find it many, many times in that book. But it means that the emphasis in the book of Genesis was not on that Name. It was not until the ministry of Moses that this Name comes into prominence. The emphasis, as you can see in Genesis, was on God Almighty. But in the book of Exodus, and from there on, there was going to be a special emphasis upon the name Jehovah.

The word Jehovah is formed, as I have told you many times, from the Hebrew verb, "to be." Literally, Jehovah means, the One Who is. It means not only that He exists now, but it means that He has always existed; it means that He always will exist. It means that what He has been in the past, He is now. And what He is now, He will be forever. God never had a beginning, and He will never cease to exist. God never improves because He is perfect. Neither can He ever become less than He is now, nor than He has been in the past. So we see that in this attribute God is unique. There is nobody else who can be described in this way. There is no other like He is. This is what He had in mind when He said through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 46:9, "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me." It is this truth of the immutability of God that is involved in the I am's of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John. When He said, "I am the bread of life," He was implying by this, "I have always been the bread of life, I am now the bread of life, I always will be the bread of life, and there is no one else who is the bread of life." So this is a truth which you find running through the Word of God. God never will become something or someone else from what He has been. He will always be the same. And this applies to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Now what does all of this mean with reference to God? I want to take up at least three wonderful truths related to the immutability of God which I trust will help us to understand this great aspect of our Lord's nature.

## I. GOD'S ATTRIBUTES ARE UNCHANGING

First of all, if God is unchanging, then this means that His attributes are unchanging. There is never any change in His power, in His wisdom, in His grace, in His holiness, in His love, nor in His righteousness. All of these attributes, Doctrines of Grace -- #6 Page

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and all of the other attributes that you can mention always remain the same. God never has been weak, and He never will be. God has never done wrong, and He never will do wrong. God has never been foolish, and He never will be foolish. God has always loved His people, and He always will. He may have to chasten us, but He never stops loving us, nor does He even love us less than He used to love us. God's love is always the same. All of His attributes are perfect. They cannot be improved, nor will they ever be less than they are right now. Listen to what the Psalmist said in Psalm 102, verses 25 through 27. This passage is quoted in Hebrews chapter 1, verses 11 and 12. The Psalmist said this:

Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens  
are the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt  
endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change  
them, and they shall be changed: But  
thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.

Last night I took our hymnal and went through it reading the hymns that are listed under the  
immutability of God. If you have never done that, you ought to do it. That in itself is a great  
blessing. One hymn that is not mentioned there, that speaks of the immutability of God, is the hymn,  
"Abide With Me." And one verse reads like this:

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.

Only the Holy Spirit can really make us understand this wonderful truth of God that God never  
changes. He is the same yesterday and today and forever.

## II. GOD'S WORD IS UNCHANGING

But a second truth that comes out of the immutability of God is that His Word is unchanging.  
David, speaking by the Holy Spirit, indicated this in Psalm 138, verse 2, where he wrote,

I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for  
thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy  
word above all thy name.

Now this is really amazing, is it not? What is God's name? His name is  
Jehovah. He says this over and over again in the Scriptures. He is the One Who is, the One Who  
exists, the One Who is without beginning, the One Who is without ending, the One Who never  
changes throughout all the course of human history. But He has exalted His Word above His name.  
You see, God must have said this so that you and I would realize how unchanging the Word of God  
is. How could He possibly encourage our faith any more than to say that He has magnified His Word  
above His name? The Psalmist said in Psalm 119 and verse 89, "For ever, O Lord, thy word is  
settled in heaven." There is nothing on earth, nor anything that can take place in heaven, that will  
ever change the Word of God. That is the reason we might revise the translations of our Bible, but  
we never revise the Bible. God has never given us a supplement to the Scriptures. God has never  
changed any of His promises. He is faithful to His Word. The Lord Jesus said when He was here  
on earth, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). And  
yet this is what we should expect, that an unchangeable God would give us an unchanging Word.  
Therefore, when we look at the promises of Scripture, when we look at the doctrines of Scripture,  
when we look at the commandments of Scripture, Page 4

when we look at the warnings of Scripture--wherever we look at any part of the Word of God, let  
us remember that this is a Word that is "forever settled in heaven." The unchanging Word of an  
unchanging God. So the immutability of God means that He has given us this immutable Word.

## III. GOD'S WILL IS UNCHANGING

But let me mention a third thing. And that is that God's will is unchanging. Now if God is  
unchanging, obviously His will must be unchanging. He is not making up His mind from day to day,  
and moment by moment, like you and I do. He leaves nothing to chance. Remember there is no  
such thing as good luck or bad luck. Those are man's expressions. Those are not God's expressions.  
The will of God stands from generation to generation. As the Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 1:11  
that we are "predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the council  
of his own will." And that is the reason why the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:11 spoke of the

purpose of God as "the eternal purpose." John 1:12 and 13 says,

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

So you see from this passage of Scripture that those who are born of God are not born of God because they decided to be, but by the eternal, unchangeable will of God they have been brought into the family of God.

The unchanging will of God applies to every detail of our lives, not just to our salvation. Do you remember what Job said, in Job 23, verses 13 and 14, when he was in the midst of all his troubles? He said concerning God,

But he is one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth. For He performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with Him.

David said in Psalm 37, verse 23, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way." When did God make these appointments? Job said, "He has done the thing that is appointed for me, and many such things are with him." When did He order our steps? Obviously it had to be in eternity past, and those things never change. God's will extends to every detail of our lives and to all of the affairs of the universe. This is not fate; this is divine providence. And this is the basis of our peace and of our hope.

So since God is unchanging, this means His character never changes, His attributes do not change, the Word that He has given to us never changes, nor does His will change. And since God is working all things out in accordance with His will, what He determines to come to pass is most certainly going to come to pass. These are truths that are very, very important for us to keep in mind when we think of the doctrine of salvation.

## CONCLUSION

Now what are the practical benefits of knowing that we have an unchanging God?

Well, the first one that I would mention, is that of comfort. If you want some Scripture to prove that, I would suggest that you read from Genesis to Revelation. Doctrines of Grace -- #6

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You will find all kinds of comfort to encourage your heart. But let me mention a passage or two in connection with each one of the practical benefits I am about to mention, and then you can take it from there. I hope that you will take these practical benefits that I am going to mention and observe them in your own reading of the Scriptures so that you can see that when we come to the great doctrines of Scripture, these are not things that are given by God just to satisfy our curiosity,

but these are given to establish us in the faith. They are given to encourage us in our walk and to change our hearts and our lives. I trust that we will not be able to consider these wonderful themes without experiencing real changes in our lives.

Now a very, very familiar Scripture, perhaps the most familiar Scripture in the Bible, which has to do with comfort is Psalm 23. It begins with, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Now what David was literally saying was, "Jehovah is my shepherd, I shall not want." He was saying that this unchanging, eternally existent God, is my shepherd--the One Who is without beginning, the One Who is without ending, the One Who today is the same that He always has been, the One Who does not need to improve because He is perfect, the One Who cannot deteriorate or die--this Jehovah was his Shepherd. And therefore it is not surprising to see that he said, "I shall not want." If this God

is my God, then I can be sure that every need that I have is going to be met. It may not be met the way I think that it should be. But, you see, there is no deficiency in this eternal God. He is my Shepherd because He has claimed me to be His sheep, and He has given me His promise that He is going to supply all of my need. When you read on down through that Psalm, you see how David was delighting in that wonderful truth. And though he even walked "through the valley of the shadow of death," he said, "I will fear no evil." Why? Because "thou art with me." Who is with him? Jehovah was with him. And we have His promise that He will never leave us nor forsake us. Some feel that in the name Jehovah is also the idea that God is the ever-present One. And even if it is not contained in His name, we certainly have His promise that that is the case.

Turn to Isaiah chapter 41 and notice some wonderful words in this chapter--Isaiah chapter 41, verse 10:

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God:  
I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee  
with thine right hand of my righteousness.

If we did not have any other promises in the Bible but these, they would be sufficient to get us through.

Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed  
and confounded: they shall be as nothing; and they that strive with  
thee shall perish. Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them,  
even them that contended with thee: they that war against thee  
shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought. For I Jehovah thy  
God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will  
help thee. Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I  
will help thee, saith Jehovah, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of  
Israel (Isa. 41:11-14).

When God says, when Jehovah says, "Fear not," then there is no reason to fear. And here He has covenanted, He has entered into an agreement with us, that He is with us, that He will strengthen us, that He will help us, that He will defend us against our enemies. And we are just like Jacob, worms in His sight. And yet the Page 6

Lord says, "The Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee."

So the truth that we have an unchanging God is a truth of immeasurable comfort. If you need comfort--remember the word comfort means encouragement, it means to receive the strength to go on--if you need comfort, then remember that it is Jehovah Who gives you that comfort in realizing what a wonderful God He is.

But let me mention another thing. When you begin to understand this wonderful truth of the unchangeableness of God, it will make a worshipper out of you. I do not think that you can read over these passages of Scripture which speak of Jehovah as our unchanging God without finding your heart drawn out to the Lord in worship. And most of us do not worship as much as we should. Perhaps the reason that we do not is because we fail to spend enough time just simply contemplating the wonder and the glory and the majesty and the eternal unchangeableness of our God. Let me read these verses to you from Psalm 95:

O come, let us sing unto Jehovah: let us make a joyful noise to  
the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with  
thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For  
Jehovah is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand  
are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he  
made it: and his hands formed the dry  
land. O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the  
Lord our maker.

It was the Psalmist's contemplation of Jehovah that caused him to call others to worship Him.

Psalm 100 is a wonderful Psalm that deals with the worship of this eternally unchanging God.

Make a joyful noise unto Jehovah, all ye lands. Serve Jehovah with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Know ye that Jehovah he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people (Jehovah's people), and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates (Jehovah's gates) with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name. For Jehovah is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.

The next time you read through the Psalms, notice that word LORD, and notice how many, many times the Psalmist finds his heart drawn into worship and prayer and thanksgiving and praise when he contemplates the fact that our God is an everlasting and an unchanging God.

A third thing that we need to recognize is that this is the reason for our obedience and our holiness. Will you turn to the book of Leviticus, the nineteenth chapter?

This past week I received a letter from Tim Huggins, and as usual Tim was rejoicing in the Lord, thankful for the way the Lord has so wonderfully restored him and is blessing him in the ministry over there in Japan. Tim said that he had gotten our Bible reading calendar and that he was reading the Bible through. He said that he had noticed in his reading, over and over again, that little expression, "I am the LORD."

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Perhaps in reading the Pentateuch, and especially the book of Leviticus, you have noticed it. In some passages it is used in verse. Often the only reason that the Lord would give as to why His people should obey Him is because, "I am the Lord." He is Jehovah, the eternal One, the One without beginning and without ending. And therefore, we should see that once this truth really gets a hold of our hearts, it is going to change the way we live. The only explanation that ever has to be given for our obedience to Him is that He is the Lord; He is Jehovah. And notice how obedience and holiness are linked together. You will never find a holy Christian who is not an obedient Christian. "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying (reading the first verse of Leviticus 19), Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I Jehovah your God am holy. Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: (Why?) I am the Lord (I am Jehovah) your God. Turn ye not unto idols, nor make to yourselves molten gods: (Why?) I am Jehovah your God." And if you go down through that chapter, you will notice at the end of verse 10 the Lord said, "I am Jehovah your God." Verse 12, "I am Jehovah." Verse 14, "I am Jehovah." Verse 16, "I am Jehovah." Verse 18, "I am Jehovah." Go through the chapter and you can see this repeated over and over again. And this is not the only chapter where you find it. God wanted this truth to get into their hearts. He was giving them all kinds of instructions for their lives and the reason that they were to do what He was calling upon them to do was that He is Jehovah. He is the eternal, unchanging One. So when we learn this truth, then we will see the reason for obedience, and the way to be holy.

But a fourth practical benefit of knowing that God is unchanging is that it will inspire and encourage our trust in the Lord.

Deuteronomy 33 contains that Psalm which Moses gave to the children of Israel. If they ever moved out of the land, they were to remember this Psalm. They were to sing it, and the truth that was in the Psalm was to be used of God to bring them back to the Lord so that He could bring them back to the land. One of the statements in this Psalm is a line which I am sure most of you know. It is in

Deuteronomy 33:27: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." God may have been so displeased with His people that He would move them out of the land, but He was always their refuge. They were never in any circumstances but what His everlasting arms were underneath them. We may get away from the Lord, may displease the Lord, may grieve Him. But the Lord is always our refuge; the Lord's everlasting arms are always under us. The only reason that things are not a lot worse for all of us than they are is because of those sustaining, everlasting arms of the eternal unchanging God. David said in Psalm 37:3-5,

Trust in Jehovah, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in Jehovah; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto Jehovah; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.

You see, this is the everlasting God, the unchanging God, in Whom we are to trust.

Finally, this will have an effect upon our ministry and upon our service.

One of the most wonderful stories in the Bible is the story of Joshua. When Joshua came to the close of his ministry, and his time with the children of Israel was coming to an end, he said some very challenging things to his people. And one Page 8

of the things that he said was this (and you will find it in Joshua 24, verses 14 and 15):

Now therefore fear Jehovah, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye Jehovah. And if it seem evil unto you to serve Jehovah, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell. And then Joshua said this, and he will always be remembered for these words: "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"--we will serve Jehovah.

Therefore, this God Who gives comfort to us, Who is worthy of our worship, to Whom we come in prayer, Who has a right to expect our obedience and through our obedience is making us holy, this God Who has called upon us to trust Him, is a God Who is worthy of our service.

But as we look at this wonderful attribute, let us see how this applies to salvation, to evangelism, to missions. Does this truth hinder the work of missions? Does it limit us and restrict us in the work of evangelizing the world? What is our mission in the world? Is it to go and get as many as we possibly can to receive Christ as Saviour? Is it our responsibility to convince people of their need? Is it dependent upon us? Is this what these truths are teaching us?

Listen! Nothing is really dependent upon us. To be sure, God has commanded us to go and to preach the Gospel. And the Gospel is being proclaimed throughout the world. But we do not go because the work is dependent upon us. We do not go out to accomplish an uncertain task. We go to find the Lord's sheep. And how do we find them? We go by preaching the Gospel to every creature, trusting Jehovah, this eternal God, to use His Word in the hearts of those whom He has appointed for salvation. That wonderful fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah also says, "So shall my word be"--this unchanging Word of an unchanging God Who is unchanging in His purposes--"So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void." Now that is our hope in preaching and teaching. The Word of God cannot fail. "It shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). How wonderful it is to know that we have an omnipotent God, a God of love, a God infinitely wise, a God perfectly holy, an unchanging God, a God Who is able to do all that He has ordained to be done, a God Whom you and I can trust and worship to the delight and blessing of our own souls.

If anyone here today does not know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour, then let me plead with you to put your trust, your faith, your hope, in Him. There is no other way of salvation. "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12b)--that blessed and wonderful name of God's eternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.