

The Purpose Of Prayer Is To Change God's Mind (Part 1)

By Bruce Riding

1. INTRODUCTION

When we read in the Scriptures that God repented (Exod 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6), many Christians get decidedly uneasy. Has God sinned that He needs to repent? How can God's repentance be compatible with His being steadfast, unlike fickle human beings and capricious pagan gods, both of whom are continually changing their minds? How can God's changing His mind be reconciled with God having an eternal plan, decided and settled in eternity past (Acts 4:27–28)? Many Christians agree with Plato, who believed that someone or something changes only to become better or to become worse (Rep. II). Since a perfect being cannot be improved or diminished, he argued, therefore God must be completely unchanging. As a result, one side of these apparent contradictions are usually ignored or watered down. How can we resolve these quandaries without twisting the Scriptures, but remaining true to all of the Bible?

2. THE SCRIPTURAL DATA

The Hebrew of Exodus 32:14a and Amos 7:3a, 6a says: *n̄hm yhwh Jehovah repented*. Various versions of the Bible translate *n̄hm* as follows:

God repented	KJV, RSV
God relented	Amplified, Living, Moffat, NEB, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV
God changed his mind	Living, Moffat, NASV, NRSV
God turned from	Amplified, Living
God withdrew His threat	New Living

The Hebrew for “God appeared/seemed to change His mind” would be: *ny' yhwh ln̄hm*, which is clearly not what the Bible says. The word *ny'* “he appeared” or “he seemed” is not in any of the texts. There are three categories of objections that need to be answered so we can have no qualms about God's repenting.

3. GOD DOES NOT NEED TO REPENT OF SIN

Virtually every time the Scriptures call human beings to repent, it is to change our minds from our sinful errors to God's truth (Ezek 14:6). It is to “do a U-turn” from selectively obeying only some of God's commands to humbly submitting ourselves to every one of His laws, and striving to obey them all (Matt 11:20). God, however, is perfect. He has not committed any transgressions, so if God does any repenting, any changing His mind, it does not involve repenting of sin in any way whatsoever.

Firstly, Plato was wrong—changing is not always from better to worse, or from worse to better. God, indeed anyone, might change from loving us in one way to loving us in another way. This is the answer and the resolution. This is the message of Isaiah 40:1–2. God repented or changed from loving Israel and Judah by chastising them to loving them by forgiving and restoring them.

So far, I have only dealt with the fact of God's repentance in answer to our prayers. I have not addressed the question: “Why does God want people to pray for what He has planned?” One reason parallels how, as parents, we get our children to ask politely for what we already have for them. After they receive whatever it is, we insist they say “Thank you!” I suggest it is similar with God. He is reminding us that all we have, even what we “earn,” is a gracious gift from Him (Deut 8:18). He is

reinforcing that all asking should be with thanksgiving (Phil. 4:6). Other scholars will have uncovered many other reasons as well.

When Christians do pray for something in God's will and it happens, there is always the thought that it would have happened anyway, so what was the value of prayer? Was it just a coincidence? This is the importance of the "waw consecutive." The Hebrew letter *waw*, usually translated "and," expresses connection in Hebrew narratives. It is translated "So" in Exodus 32:14 following Moses' prayers in Exodus 32:11–13. "Then Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, and said: '...' So the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people." God's relenting is "consecutive" to, or in answer to Moses' prayer.

Lest anyone think these are only isolated incidents with Moses and Amos, and the only times God has repented in all the history of the universe, we should examine Jeremiah 15:6 "You have forsaken Me," says the LORD, "You have gone backward. Therefore I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you; I am weary of relenting [n \dot{h} m repenting]!" This can only mean that, in the past, God had repented so many times of the punishment He could have inflicted on Israel, but changed His mind and course of action by remitting the punishment altogether, that He was, in modern Australian idiom, "sick

and tired" of doing it. Behind this anthropomorphism, since God never actually gets weary, there must stand innumerable instances of God repenting, changing His mind and altering His strategy from chastising and punishing His wayward people to once again forgiving their sin and sparing them whatever disciplining and reprimanding He could have justly inflicted upon them. Hosea 11:8–9 would have been one such case. There must be innumerable more instances since Jeremiah's day ca.600 BC until the present day. I expect that there will also be inestimably more instances until Jesus returns.

4. CONCLUSION AND APPLICATIONS

The Bible is accurate, containing no contradictions real or imaginary, only paradoxes that remain beyond human comprehension, like God being a Trinity. My overwhelming purpose in these articles is to encourage Christians to pray more, as God has planned for us to do, and has planned for Himself to answer. Like Moses and Amos, we can and should pray that God will change His mind and His course of action, from loving our nations by chastising them to loving our nations by leading them to faith in Jesus Christ. That way, our Lord Jesus will have a more fitting bride both now and on That Day in Eternity. So, Pray! Pray! Pray!

- *Bruce Riding is a retired Presbyterian minister, living in Melbourne*