

The Purpose Of Prayer Is To Change God's Mind (Part 2)

By Bruce Riding

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first instalment of this series, I showed that God's repentance is not because He sinned in any way whatsoever. In this part, I ask: "How can God's repentance be harmonized with His being steadfast and reliable, unlike fickle human beings (1 Sam 15:29), and unlike capricious pagan gods (1 Kgs 18:27-29), both of whom are continually changing their minds? However, in Exodus 32:10-14 and Amos 7:1-6, God says He will do one thing, changes His mind, and then does the reverse. Does this mean that God is not as unswervingly resolute as He claims to be elsewhere in the Bible? Does it mean that in prayer we can "twist God's arm" to get what we want from Him?

2. THE OBJECTION REGARDING GOD'S CHARACTER

Positively, God says of Himself in the Old Testament:

"And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent."
(1 Sam 15:29)

Again:

"God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"
(Num 23:19)

Both passages contain the Hebrew word *nĥm* *repent/relent*. This is reiterated in the New Testament—there is no hint of changing, not even a "shadow of turning" with God (Jas 1:17).

How are we to integrate these ideas? One suggestion is, as someone commented on Amos 7:1-6: "The conclusion is irresistible: neither Amos nor the Lord desired, intended, or contemplated the final end of the people." That is, God never really intended to carry through with the menaces of locusts, fire, and destruction of the idolatrous Israelite shrines. They were only "empty threats." The trouble is, if God did not implement either of the first two threats, what then of the third when Israel failed the "plumb line" test and the Assyrian armies invaded less than 40 years later (Amos 7:7-9)? Can Amos's audience be blamed for ignoring it as an idle threat as well?

This is a serious matter. How can God both *repent* (Exod 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6) and *not repent* (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29) and still be consistent? Does this constitute a contradiction within the Bible, with God Himself saying one thing and then doing the complete opposite later? Abstract logic says it is. If God changes His mind, He is not consistent. If God is consistent, He cannot change His mind. End of argument!

The Hebrew for "God appeared/seemed to change His mind" would be: *ny' yhwh lnĥm*, 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. RESOLVING THIS OBJECTION REGARDING GOD'S CHARACTER

In some cases, however, abstract logic is inadequate. What we need to apply here is "relational logic," the logic of how beings—human and Divine—behave and interact not in the abstract, but in real concrete situations. Therefore, let me tell you a story. One of my sons came to me one day with his head hung in shame,

confessing that he had just smashed a window of our house. To be a loving father, I disciplined him for his carelessness, and explained that if he had not owned up, or tried to blame someone else, he would have received a more severe punishment. The following day, he came home from school with his report card showing straight A+'s in all his subjects. So, to be a loving father once more, I again gave him the same discipline. So, had I been a loving, consistent father?

At one level, at the shallow level of actions, I had—I had done the same thing on both occasions. But at the deeper level, the level of character, I had been inconsistent. Actually, I did change my mind and treated him differently on the second occasion. I changed my attitude and subsequent actions depending on what he had done, in order to be reliable at the level of character. Good actions required praise. Bad actions required chastising. This is how God can change His mind and change His method/s of dealing with us at the shallow level of actions, and remain consistent and unchanging at the deeper level of character. When God is said to repent, it is a change in His dealings with people, not a change in His character or purposes.

Incidentally, this confusion lies behind the conflict between the false prophets and true prophets in the Old Testament, both of whom believed God was and would be consistent. The false prophets treated God like Baal and Ashtoreth who had no real character, and were fickle and capricious. The only way these prophets conceived of God's steadfastness was at the level of actions. They believed that, just as God had saved Jerusalem, His people, and His temple in the past, He would do so again, irrespective of their faith and obedience (2 Chr 18:4-27; Jer 28:1-17; Hos 4:5-6). The true prophets, on the other hand, preached that God was consistent at the level of His character. When His people trusted Him, he saved them from and judged their Gentile enemies (Judg 3:7-11), true to His covenants (Deut

28:1-14). However, if Israel acted like Gentiles, then God would treat them like Gentiles, again consistent with His character and the covenants He had made with them (Deut 28:15-33).

4. CONCLUSION AND APPLICATIONS

The Bible is accurate and dependable, containing no contradictions real or imaginary. In particular, there is no contradiction between God's immutability and the fact that He repents. In responding to people's prayers, faith, and repentance, or their changing their attitudes and actions, He changes only His deeds at the shallow level of actions, in conformity with His immutable nature at the deeper level of character.

Secondly, God never makes any "idle threats." He means what He says. Some of them He executes. About some He changes His mind and does not bring them to fruition (Jer 15:6), but He never makes empty threats. This would also remove the unbelievers' argument that goes: "I know God says He is angry with sin and that all sin deserves hell. But because He is loving and ultimately forgives sin, He really isn't angry at all—He's just saying that. It's an empty threat. Therefore I can go on sinning and still expect forgiveness and eternal life." On the contrary, God really is angry with sin. If we do not change and repent, He does not change or repent either, but stays angry with us and will eventually administer His wrath.

Finally, while I could have simply concentrated on a resolution to the paradox of God's immutability and God's repentance, I deliberately included the reason for it—the prayers of His people, particularly those of Moses and Amos. So, Pray! Pray! Pray!

- Bruce Riding is a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, currently living in Melbourne after 40 years of ministry in six parishes in four states.