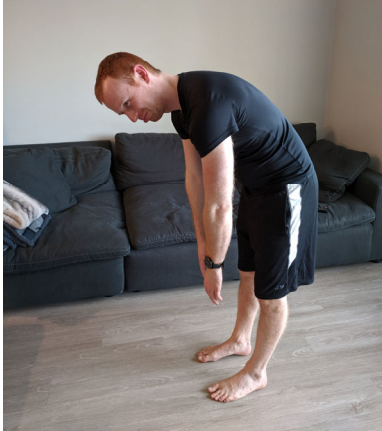
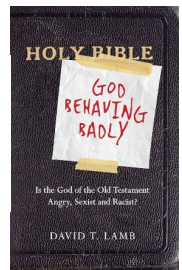


God Behaving Badly – Lesson 7: Is God rigid or flexible?



A quick review

Week 1 – Introduction

Week 2 – Is God angry or loving?

Week 3 – Is God sexist or affirming?

Week 4 – Is God racist or hospitable?

Week 5 – Is God violent or peaceful?

Week 6 – Is God legalistic or gracious?

We have been looking at biblical texts across the diverse genres of OT literature.

We have tried to understand passages in the context of the culture they were written in and their historical context.

We have seen that OT qualities of God are also manifested in the behavior of Jesus.

Here is a quick summary from last week's topic: Is God legalistic or gracious?

These laws/instruction/teaching were given 1000s of years ago, so applying modern norms to them makes no sense.

In the ANE people were not governed by legislation, that is, they were not governed by laws like our modern ones.

God did not give the Torah to the church. God gave the Torah to Israel to help them be Israel.

We talked about the Torah falling into three categories: 1) wisdom literature, 2) suzerain contract, and 3) ritual text.

I argued that none of the Torah is binding on us today (I could be wrong) and that our standard for ethical behavior is higher than what it was in the Torah.

Let's start with a discussion

Is stubbornness or inflexibility a good or a bad quality?

How do you reconcile a sovereign God who is in control of everything and who knows everything (past, present and future) with a God who changes his mind?

See Scott's previous class for one view on this topic

Let's look at a Hebrew word

The Hebrew word most commonly used for this topic is “naham.” It can mean to:

1. Change one's mind
2. Regret
3. Show compassion

There are a number of scriptures about God NOT changing his mind.

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, **who does not change like shifting shadows.**

Num 23:19 “God is not human, that he should lie, **not a human being, that he should change his mind.** Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”

Context: Balaam declared to Balak, king of Moab, that God promised to bless Israel and he would not change his mind.

1 Sam 15:29 “He who is the Glory of Israel **does not lie or change his mind;** for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.”

Context: Samuel is telling Saul that God will not change his mind about taking the kingdom from Saul and giving it to David.

There are a number of scriptures about God NOT changing his mind

Ps 110:4 The Lord has sworn and **will not change his mind**: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

Context: God will not change his mind about this promise.

Mal 3:6 **“I the Lord do not change.** So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

Does not use the word naham (it uses shanah) to state God does not change and that Israel will not be destroyed.

How would you summarize the main points in these passages?

Note: The immutability in these verses involves a promise or commitment by God to bless his people.

Key takeaway: God does not change his mind about blessing his people.

There are a lot more scriptures indicating that God changes his mind.

2 Kings 20:1-6

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, **“This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”** ² **Hezekiah** turned his face to the wall and **prayed** to the Lord, ³ **“Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.”** And **Hezekiah wept bitterly.**

⁴ Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: ⁵ **“Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.’”**

There are a lot more scriptures indicating that God changes his mind.

Ex 32:9-11 ⁹“I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ **Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.** Then I will make you into a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God ...

Ex 32:14 Then the Lord **relented** (NIV, ESV)/**changed his mind** (NSB) and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Context: Moses convinces God to change his mind after the golden calf incident.

There are a lot more scriptures indicating that God changes his mind.

Num 14:11-20 (After Israel refused to enter the Promised Land)

Num 14:11-12 ¹¹The Lord said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? ¹² **I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them,** but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”

In verses 13 – 19 Moses makes the argument that God’s reputation will be damaged if he destroys his people.

Num 14:20 The Lord replied, “I have forgiven them, **as you asked.**”

There are a lot more scriptures indicating that God changes his mind.

1 Chron 21:15 And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the Lord saw it and **relented** (**“naham” - changed his mind**) concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was destroying the people, “Enough! Withdraw your hand.”

Context: Curtailed the punishment for David taking a census

Ps 106:44-45 Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he **relented (changed his mind)**.

- **Other verses show specific incidents, but this psalm describes a broader pattern or general characteristic of God as a God who relents.**

We see God changing his mind a lot in prophetic literature

In Jeremiah he says that he is tired of relenting, implying that he has been relenting for centuries.

Jer 15:6 “You have rejected me,” declares the Lord; “you keep going backward, so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you— **I am weary of relenting.**”

We see God changing his mind a lot in prophetic literature

Amos 7:1-3

¹This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the late crops were coming up. ² When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!"

³ So the Lord **relented**. "This will not happen," the Lord said.

⁴ This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: The Sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. ⁵ Then I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!"

⁶ So the Lord **relented**. "This will not happen either," the Sovereign Lord said.

We see God changing his mind a lot in prophetic literature

Joel 2:12-14

¹² "Even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning."

¹³ Rend your heart
and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he **relents** from sending calamity.

¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and relent
and leave behind a blessing—
grain offerings and drink offerings
for the LORD your God.

We see God changing his mind a lot in prophetic literature

We also see this in the book of Jonah.

Jonah 3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God **relented** of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah is not surprised that God changed his mind.

Jonah 4:2 He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who **relents** (“naham”) from sending calamity.”

Divine compassion/relenting is precisely what infuriates Jonah so much!

To reconcile these apparently contradictory aspects of God’s character, we have three options:

- 1. We can ignore one of these characteristics and stress the aspect of God’s character we are comfortable with (immutability or mutability).**
- 2. We can rationalize that even though scripture describes God as both mutable and immutable, he is actually only one of them.**
 - God doesn’t actually change his mind, but just appears to change it – it is simply an anthropomorphic description.
 - If the text tells us that God changes his mind, but we conclude that that couldn’t have happened because we know (from Aquinas?) that God can’t change his mind, then we have a problem.
- 3. We can work to understand how these two apparently contradictory, yet biblical, descriptions of God can be faithfully reconciled without downplaying the tension.**

So, how do we reconcile these verses? (Discussion)

God seems unchangeable in certain contexts and changeable in other contexts, so understanding the context is crucial!

In contexts where there is doubt as to whether or not God will be faithful, the text declares that he does not waver from his commitments. For example, God has promised he will bless his people, so he will.

In contexts of imminent judgement from God, when people repent, he changes his mind and shows mercy.

It is not that God is fickle or is inconsistent, but in situations when people deserve punishment, when they repent, he consistently changes from judgement to grace.

So, how do we reconcile these verses?

For anyone worried about the orthodoxy of this discussion, remember that a focus on context is a focus on God's word.

We can't simply base our theological conclusions on one statement God speaks in isolation, but we need to see what he is doing more generally whenever he makes a particular statement.

When we do this, we don't see a contradiction, rather we see a consistent pattern.

"According to the Old Testament, God is predictably flexible, consistently changeable, and immutably mutable, at least in regard to showing mercy toward repentant sinners."

Not surprisingly, Jesus also displays compassionate flexibility during his ministry.

Mark 7:24-30

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ **“First let the children eat all they want,”** he told her, **“for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”** ²⁸ “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹ Then he told her, **“For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”** ³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

What are your thoughts on this passage?

Here is another example of Jesus changing his mind

Mark 6:31-34 ³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, **“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”** ³² So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³ But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, **he had compassion on them**, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. **So he began teaching** them many things.

So, what is the bottom line?

The fact that God doesn't change his commitments and remains faithful to his promises is great news.

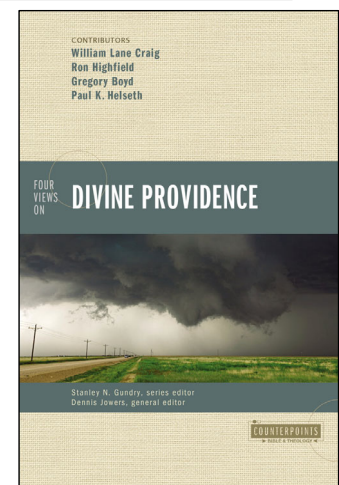
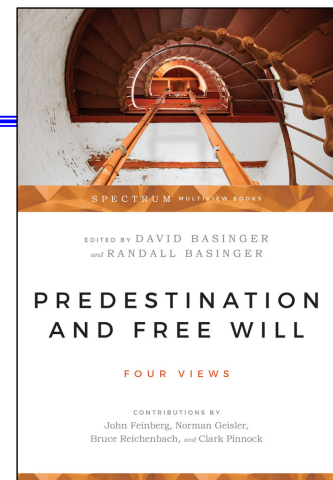
The fact that he extends mercy rather than condemnation to the contrite is even better news.

I read a couple of books on divine providence and free will

Many of the primary arguments are from philosophy, and faithful people can disagree (but some people have very strong opinions).

There are at least four views:

- 1. Calvinism (soft or hard) (named after 16th century theologian John Calvin)**
- 2. Arminianism (based on ideas of the 17th century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius)**
- 3. Molinism (named after 16th century Spanish Jesuit priest and Catholic theologian Luis de Molina)**
- 4. Open Theism (popularized in the 1980s but the idea can be traced to the 4th century)**



Here is a short video that discusses Calvinism vs
Arminianism vs Open Theism (not discussing Molinism)



I need your help

So far, this is what we have talked about:

Angry vs. Loving *Legalistic vs. Gracious*
Sexist vs. Affirming
Rigid vs. Flexible *Racist vs. Hospitable*
Violent vs. Peaceful

What questions do you still have?

What would you like me to discuss next week?