

Does God Ever Repent?

by Harry Ironside

God's promises and covenants are irrevocable, and He will not change His attitude towards those who have entered into a covenant with Him.

Scripture: Numbers 23:19

Topics: "God's Promises", "Unchanging Nature of God"

Description

Harry Ironside explores the concept of God's repentance, emphasizing that while God may change His actions in response to human sin, He does not change His promises or covenants. He illustrates this through the story of Balaam, who, despite his intentions to curse Israel, was compelled by God to bless them, affirming that God's gifts and calling are irrevocable. Ironside contrasts God's unchanging nature with human tendencies to repent, highlighting that God's covenant with Abraham remains intact regardless of Israel's failures. He reassures believers that God's grace and promises endure, and His love is unwavering, even in the face of human disobedience. Ultimately, Ironside emphasizes that God's purpose of grace will never be altered, providing comfort to those who trust in Him.

Transcript

In the history of Jehovah's dealings with the people of Israel there is perhaps no story more affecting than that of Balak's effort to induce Balaam to curse them when they were encamped on the plains of Moab. The faithless prophet who loved the wages of unrighteousness was eager to comply with the wicked king's request, but was hindered each time he attempted to curse the people, by the Spirit of God. At last he confessed his inability to do the thing for which he had been called to Moab and instead of cursing Israel he blessed them, and foretold their glorious future in such a manner as to stir the ire of Balak, and to move the hearts of God's saints to devout thanksgiving. He introduced the narration of the divine purpose concerning the tribes of Israel, with the remarkable words: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it" (Num. 23:19-20).

This is surely a marvellous declaration. It tells us that once God enters into an unconditional covenant with any people He will never call back His words. And He had definitely confirmed just such a covenant with Abraham. This was before the giving of the Law. The legal covenant they had a part in, and they failed to keep what they had promised. Only a few days later we read of the terrible sin of Baal-peor. On the ground

of law they forfeited everything, and that covenant God Himself abrogated. But His covenant with Abraham was pure grace. He was the only contracting party. Whatever Israel's failures, He could not break His promise. He had bound Himself by an oath and He would not and could not repent, or reverse His decision. His attitude of grace through the promised seed would persist throughout the ages.

How comforting this is to the heart of one who has turned to Him for refuge. He may be assured that "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29). A careful reading of the entire dispensational section of the Roman Epistle, chapters 9, 10, and 11, in which we have, respectively, God's past, present, and future dealings with Israel, will make this doubly clear. Yet it is singular how many read with blinded minds and fail to get the truth that the Holy Spirit seeks to reveal. Only recently a tract was mailed to me on the subject of salvation. The writer sought to show that, while in past ages, even in what he called "the Pentecostal dispensation of the early part of the book of the Acts," repentance had a place in the preaching of the Gospel as then made known, a very different Gospel was revealed to Paul in his later years, in which repentance had no part. And to prove his amazing theory he quoted as a proof text the words above referred to, "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance."

The interpretation he gave to this verse was that now God gives salvation to believers whom He calls by His grace, on the basis of sovereign mercy alone, and altogether apart from any repentance on their side. Do my readers exclaim, 'What almost unbelievable ignorance?' Yet I have heard others affirm the same foolish thing. It shows how carelessly even good men sometimes read the text of Holy Scripture.

The Apostle's argument is clear as crystal. God made certain promises to Abraham. Israel sought those blessings by works of law and failed, so they forfeited everything on that ground. Temporarily the nation is set to one side, and is partially blinded to the true meaning of the very Scriptures in which they glory. Meantime God is active in grace toward Gentiles, saving all who believe. In the same way He is now saving individual Jews, though the nation as such is no longer in the place of the covenant. But by and by when Israel shall turn to the Lord, they shall be grafted into their own olive tree again and brought into fulness of blessing. And the proof that it must be so is this: When God gives a gift or makes a promise to bless He will never reverse Himself. He will not change His attitude, for His gifts and callings are without repentance. It is the same as the declaration of Balaam, "He is not a man that he should lie nor the son of man that he should repent."

But what then shall we say of such a Scripture as Genesis 6:5-7: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man, whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them"? Here God is distinctly said to repent, and His attitude toward man is completely changed. In place of longsuffering mercy He acts in condign judgment, blotting out the corruption and violence of the antediluvian world by destroying the human race with a flood, excepting that Noah and his house were saved in the ark. Is there a contradiction here? Do Genesis and Numbers teach oppositely the one to the other? We may be sure they do not.

In the first place, we need to remember that the same human author, Moses, who wrote the one book wrote the other also. He evidently saw no discrepancy, nothing incongruous or contradictory, in the two statements. And in the second place, back of Moses was God. The human writer spoke as he was moved by the Holy Spirit. Therefore we know there can be no mistake or erroneous conclusion.

Is not the explanation simply this: In Genesis we have a figure of speech in which God is represented as reasoning like a man. This is what theologians call an anthropomorphism, that is, God, acting in the manner of man. And it has to do, not with a promise made or a covenant of grace given, but with His attitude toward a sinful race. They had plunged into evil of the most repellent nature; so much so that God Himself abhorred them. He changed in His behavior toward them and destroyed them instead of preserving them alive in their vileness and corruption. Often has He thus dealt with sinful nations and individuals.

But where His pledged word has been given, He never repents. "I am the Lord, I change not; therefore the sons of Jacob are not consumed." How wondrous the grace that shines out in words such as these! Not all the waywardness of His people can make Him change His mind, once He has given His promise, or cause Him to alter His attitude toward them when He has entered into covenant with them.

It is because of Christ and because of His redemptive work that He, the Holy One, can thus bless a sinful nation. And concerning Christ Himself, who has become the Mediator of the New Covenant, He declares: "The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" (Psa. 110:4). Thus has our blessed Lord been confirmed as "a surety of a better testament" than that of legal works. He is the Man of God's purpose, who represents all His people before the throne in heaven, and in whom all the promises of God are "yea and amen."

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the "exact expression of his [that is, God's] character" (Heb. 1:3, literal rendering); therefore we are not surprised to find that there is no such thing as repentance in His attitude toward the Father or toward mankind. Horace Bushnell years ago, in his *Character of Jesus*, drew attention to the essential difference between His piety and that of all others who profess His Name. We are sinners, and we must come to God as such if we would ever be saved at all. Therefore we come to Him confessing our iniquities and bowing before Him in repentance. It was thus the publican in the parable came. "God," he exclaimed, "be propitious to me the sinner." Propitiation was made on the cross. But our attitude of soul must still be the same as his. We come confessing we are without merit and trusting in Him who is the propitiation for our sins. Until we take this position before God we cannot really know Him as Father, and so enter into fellowship with Him.

But the piety of Jesus was on a totally different basis. He never confessed a sin either against God or man, in thought or word or deed. He taught others to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." But He could never join with them in the use of such words. In fact, nothing brings out more clearly the essential difference between Him and us than the amazing fact that He is never found praying with anyone. Some of our most blessed experiences are enjoyed as we bow reverently and penitently before God with fellow believers, together acknowledging our mutual needs and confessing our common sins. But He never had any such experiences. He prayed for others, not with them, because His relationship was different from ours. He was "the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." And He prayed as the Son in manhood, who was nevertheless ever dwelling in the bosom of the Father. Hence He never shed one tear over His own sins or shortcomings, for He had none. He wept for those of others, but never for His own. His was "piety without one dash of repentance," to quote Bushnell again. He never sought for forgiveness. He never owned the need of grace. For He was ever the unblemished, spotless Lamb of God, perfect without and within, who came into the world to offer Himself without spot unto God, for our redemption.

If any have not yet sensed the vast chasm separating His holy humanity from our poor, fallen, sinful nature, let them weigh these things carefully. "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). But He definitely challenged His bitterest foes to give evidence that He had come short in anything. "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" To this day none have ever been able to reply to this challenge by pointing out one flaw in His life, one defect in His character, or one error in His judgment. He never retracted anything. He never said, "I am sorry." He never apologized for any offense committed. He could say, "I do always those things that please him." And it was this very perfection of His character that fitted Him to make expiation for our guilt. God "hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor.5:21).

It is true that, as Captain of our salvation He was perfected through sufferings (Heb. 2:10). As to His nature He was perfect throughout. From babyhood to His death upon the cross He was the Holy One. But if He would become our Redeemer He must win the title by His sufferings. Only in this sense could He be said to be perfected. He who had always commanded, deigned to take the servant's form and "to learn obedience" as He walked this scene in holy subjection to the Father's will. "I came," He said, "not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." And such delight did the Father have in this perfect devotion of Jesus that He twice opened the heavens to declare, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."

Surely the more we contemplate with adoring love His matchless perfections, the lower we will bow in humiliation before Him, confessing our sins and repenting, like Job, in sackcloth and ashes. It was the revelation of the wisdom and majesty of God that brought the patriarch of old to that place. How much more may we be humbled as we behold His love and holiness meeting in Christ. In Him "Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." His cross reveals, as nothing else could, our sinfulness and His Holy love. If God has so loved us as thus to give His Son to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, how can we ever doubt His intention to save eternally all who bow in repentance before Him and put in their plea as sinners and trust His matchless grace?

Having "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" He knew all we were, yea, all we would ever be, when He put us in Christ, and nothing now will ever cause Him to repent or to change His attitude toward us. It is not humility to doubt Him, and to wonder whether He will really bring us through to heaven at last. On the contrary, it is downright unbelief. "Hath he spoken, and shall he not do it?" Faith sets its seal to what God has said and rests serenely upon that inviolable pledge knowing that "God is not a man, that he should lie, neither the son of man, that he should repent."

It is true, He will not be indifferent to our sins as believers. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." But he will never cast us off, however severely He may have to chastise us if we persist in willfully disobeying His Word.

The principle on which He deals with erring believers is clearly set forth in Psalm 89:27-36: "Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail.

My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness, that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me."

He hath promised His Son to take all to glory who put their trust in Him. He will discipline them if wayward; but He will never cast them off, for the blood of the cross has settled the sin question eternally for all who believe.

Listen to Paul's exultant words (Rom. 8:38-39): "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." What is there that is neither a thing present, nor a thing to come? What is there that is included neither in life nor in death? Could stronger words be used to assure us that God will never repent of His purpose of grace in Christ Jesus?

What we need to see, then, is that He who created man might well repent that He had made him when He saw the depth of wickedness into which the race had fallen, and so He determined to blot them out in the judgment of the flood, as later on His patience came to an end with the corrupt inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain after He had (to use another Biblical anthropomorphism) come down to see if they were as bad as had been reported. He gave Canaan to seven great and powerful nations, but when at last the iniquity of the Amorites was full, He used the armies of Israel to destroy them. As Moral Governor of the universe He has used one nation to chastise another, and then in turn punished the people thus used, when they too became as vile as, or worse than, those they had destroyed. In all such instances it may be said that "it repented the Lord that he had made man," or permitted certain blessings to be lavished upon him. But when He gives His pledged word to deliver and to bless, He never repents. His promises are irrevocable, because based on what He is Himself, not on what man deserves.

In the stirring little book of the prophet Hosea, God is portrayed as still yearning over Israel, even after He has decreed their judgment. Likening them to the cities of the plain, destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah, because of their wickedness, He cries, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboiim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city" (Hos. 11:8-9). This is most heart moving. He who will never repent when He promises blessing is pictured as repenting concerning the predicted doom of His people. He would, as it were, alter His attitude toward them if they would but change theirs toward Him. It is enough to stir the soul to its depths; yet on Israel's part there was no response, and judgment had to take its course.

But the future holds promise of a glorious recovery. All, even of the rejected nation, who have personally sought His face in blessing will have part in resurrection glory. So God gives the gracious assurance of Hosea 13:14: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes." Nothing shall ever take place in all the ages to come that will invalidate or alter His settled purpose of grace. Repentance shall be hid from His eyes. That is, He will never, by any possibility, change His attitude toward those whom He has redeemed to Himself.

"His is an unchanging love,

Higher than the heights above,
Deeper than the depths beneath,
True and faithful, strong as death."
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