**Repentance of God**

We are admonished to repent if we find ourselves guilty of sin against God. Repentance in this sense is a change of heart that leads us in a different direction in our lives.

In the wording of the King James Version, God repented on at least ten different occasions. While God indeed changed His mind in each of these accounts, the nature of His “repentance” differs fundamentally from our godly sorrow over sin and resolve to make necessary changes. The simple fact is that God is holy and righteous and cannot be tempted with sin by reason of His very nature (James 1:13). So, what do the Scriptures mean when they say that God repented?

**God feels regret.** Genesis 6:5-6 tells us that “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.” There is much we are incapable of understanding about the foreknowledge of God, but it seems clear that He made us with free will and desires that we use that freedom responsibly and wisely. He feels profound disappointment and grief when we engage in self-destructive behavior.

1 Samuel 15 tells of king Saul’s failure to obey the Lord’s clear instructions resulting in the rejection of his reign by God. The last sentence of chapter 15 says, “The LORD repented that He had made Saul king over Israel.” Saul could have put his faith and trust in God but trusted in himself instead and God felt sorrow and regret over it.

**God relents.** There are times when God determines to bring about punishment on a group of people because of their rebellion against Him and His authority. There have been occasions in the past when He had already pronounced His judgment and impending retribution only to see genuine remorse and repentance on the part of those He was about to destroy. Considering He is sovereign ruler of all, He is well within His rights to change His plans, and extending mercy is certainly consistent with His gracious nature.

God had sent the prophet Jonah to inform the inhabitants of Nineveh that the destruction of Jehovah was upon them because of their wickedness. Jonah resisted precisely because he knew of God’s mercy and was afraid the Ninevites might repent and be spared! As it turned out, Jonah’s fears were well founded. All of the Ninevites did, in fact, repent in sackcloth and cried out mightily to the LORD! When He saw their works, “God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and He did not” (Jonah 4:10). This tendency to relent is simply part of the divine nature. “’As I live!’ saith the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live.’” (Ezekiel 33:11)

**God changes His mind because we ask Him to!** We have already seen that God sometimes reverses earlier plans to punish based on the penitent attitudes of the condemned, but the Scriptures show that He changes His mind for other reasons as well.

In 2 Kings 20, good king Hezekiah lay mortally ill and the LORD sent the prophet Isaiah to inform him that he was about to die. Before Isaiah made it out of the palace, Hezekiah had turned his face to the wall, wept bitterly and pleaded with God to extend his life. As Isaiah was about to leave the palace, “the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘Return and say to Hezekiah the leader of My people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life…’”’ (vs 4-6). When Isaiah arrived, it was God’s will that Hezekiah die. After Hezekiah’s prayer, it was God’s will that he live. As a result of prayer, God changed His mind.

In short, God cares. We serve the God who feels real grief when we reject Him, mercy when we repent before Him and compassion when we make our petitions of Him. According to His sovereign will, He can change His mind, and that is to our benefit.

**Repentance of God: What are the implications for me?**

* It is my greatest desire that I never conduct myself in such a way that Christ regrets having sacrificed so much on my behalf. Those who have tasted the good word of God yet have fallen away “again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame” (Hebrews 6:6). May that never be the case with any of us.
* The story of our redemption is based on the fact that our God takes no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked. He wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). If we strive always to live humbly before God with a sincere penitent heart when we fail Him, we will find that He is quick to forgive and welcome us back (1 John 1:9).
* James stressed that the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much (James 5:16). God doesn’t have to rely on the miraculous to change His mind and change outcomes based on the fervent prayers of the faithful. We must “ask in faith without doubting” and leave the rest to God. He is sovereign and doesn’t need anyone’s permission to change His mind.

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