

God Changes God's Mind

Exodus 32:1-14

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Rev. Dr. Anne Dilenschneider

The Lord said to Moses,

“Go down at once!

Your people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt,

have acted perversely;

they have been quick to turn aside

from the way that I commanded them . . .”

Whose people?

God says these are Moses' people and Moses' problem

That's strange . . .

These are God's people!

God is upset, and tells Moses to get out of the way so he can destroy the people:

“I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are.

Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them

and I may consume them.”

Moses would be in a difficult spot

if he didn't know God so well

if he didn't have a personal relationship with this God

But he does have a personal, direct relationship with God.

So he speaks right back to God:

“O Lord, why does *your* wrath burn hot against *your* people,

whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt

with great power and with a mighty hand?”

Moses corrects God,

and reminds God that the people are “your people”

and reminds God that God led these people out of Egypt, not Moses

And then Moses points out that God's current course of action

would be a terrible PR gaffe:

“Why should the Egyptians say,

‘It was with evil intent that [their God] brought them out

to kill them in the mountains,

and to consume them from the face of the earth?’”

Then Moses speaks plainly to God and makes this recommendation:

“Turn from your fierce wrath;

change your mind and do not bring disaster on *your* people.”

He reminds God of the promises God has made:

“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants,

how you swore to them by your own self,

saying to them,

‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven,
and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants,
and they shall inherit it forever.’”

God considers what Moses has said:

“And the Lord changed his mind
about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”
God remembers that these are *his* people,
God remembers the promises God made,
and God changes God’s mind.

God changes God’s mind.

Actually, the Hebrew indicates that God changes God’s mind and heart.
That may sound heretical
but it’s right here in Scripture!

I heard about God changing God’s mind for the first time
during my very first Saturday in Torah study at our local synagogue
with Jewish friends, my colleague Rabbi Berg, and several other pastors.
Over the next 9 years of reading through the first five books of the Bible three times
in English and in Hebrew
with that great group of people,
I discovered that God changes God’s mind and heart
many, many times in the Hebrew scriptures.
I started marking them with Post-Its in my Bible!

But Christians don’t talk about this.
Often we just shrug our shoulders and say,
“Well, it’s God’s will.”
And we don’t engage any further with God.

Why?

As Pastor Jesse Pettengill says:
“Well that isn’t right!
A God who changes his mind messes with our heads.”

It certainly does!

So many of us grew up being told that God knows the past, present, and future
and God does not change,
so we should just be stoic and brave
and put up with whatever happens.

Well, if that’s the case, why bother to pray?
Why engage in conversation with God?
There’s no point,
if it’s all said and done, predetermined.

But that is *not* the Biblical witness –
Not in Hebrew Scriptures

Not in the New Testament.
Believing that God knows that past, present, and future --
and believing God does not change --
does not square with the Biblical witness.

This understanding of an unchanging God comes from Plato and the Greeks.

As Rev. Rebecca Deinsen points out:

We often say that God is omniscient, knowing the past, present, and future,
and that God predestines all things.

But this is understanding of God not supported in Scripture.

This way of describing God is contrary to Hebrew Scriptures.

This way of describing God also contradicts the teaching
of the people closest to Jesus
and the teaching of the early Church
as we know it in the New Testament
and early church writings.

This view of God as knowing and predestining all things
is a Greek, Platonic view

that influenced the great church father,

Augustine of Hippo,

in the 4th century

and, through his writings,

it was adopted by much of the church by the 5th century.

It is *not* a Biblical view.

The Greeks, and after them, the classical theologians of Christianity,
believed that change is a weakness,

so, because could not be weak, God could not actually change.

However, as Rev, Deinsen says:

“a willingness to change is a sign of confidence and mercy,
particularly in relationship to other people.”

Think about this in the context

of your own relationships with your loved ones –

Isn't a willingness to change a sign of confidence?

Isn't a willingness to change a sign of love and growth?

Think about what happens in relationships

where one or both people refuse to change.

Those relationships die.

Change is not a sign of weakness, as the Greeks believed.

The Biblical witness is that the ability to change is a sign of strength.

In fact, after this conversation between Moses and God,

We hear the list of the aspects of God's mercy.

These are the signs of God's care, love, and forgiveness.

God is:

Compassionate before a person sins

Compassionate after a person sins
Giving all creatures according to their need
Merciful, so that people may not be distressed
Gracious if people are already in distress -- assisting, helping
and consoling the afflicted and raising up the oppressed
Long suffering and slow to anger
Abounding in steadfast kindness
And truth
Extending kindness and remembering good deeds for a thousand
generations
Forgiving failings and bearing them with indulgence
Forgiving evil and malice
Forgiving sin and shortcomings
And pardoning. (Ex. 34:6-7)

This is a God who changes in relationship with human beings,
a God who is open to possibility,
a God who hasn't closed any of us off.

In the Bible, God wants to be in relationship with people.
God changes in response to people's free choices.
Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God changes God's mind and heart repeatedly –
in Genesis, Exodus, Jonah, 1 Chronicles, Amos, 1 & 2 Samuel, Jeremiah
Jesus changes his mind and heart, too --
Remember the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman in the Gospel of Mark

In fact, God often speaks openly about changing.
For example, in the Book of Jeremiah (18:7-10), God says,
“At one moment
I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom,
that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,
but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken,
turns from its evil,
I will change my mind
about the disaster that I intended to bring upon it.
And at another moment
I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom
that I will build and plant it,
but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice,
then I will change my mind
about the good that I had intended to do for it.”

The future depends on the choices people make.
God wants to be in relationship with us,
and, therefore, the future is not closed at all!

This is a much larger God

than the Greek and Roman gods
or the strange Greek “Christian” god
who has to control everything
and doesn’t allow humans to really have free will.

This is a much larger God
“who responds to prayer
and is invested in us;
and the more we are involved,
God is involved,
but only at our invitation
because God honors free will above all” (Diensen)

“This view does not demean God’s sovereignty, power, perfection, or wisdom.
In fact, it enhances it!” (Diensen)

This “God is confident,
takes risks,
invites vulnerability,
and honors free will.

[This] God demonstrates divine power
by empowering us to make our own choices!

Out of love for creation however,
[this] God works our decisions
into an overarching providential structure and plan.” (Deinsen)

This understanding of God
also fit what we know in science
about the ways creation works.

In his book about reclaiming this Biblical view of God,
God of the Possible,
Gregory Boyd writes:

“The old Newtonian assumption that the world moves forward in deterministic fashion
has been replaced in quantum theory
by an understanding of causation
that includes an intrinsic element of indeterminism.

The previous universally held assumption
that science could, in principle, predict everything about the future has
(especially among recent chaos theorists)
given way to the understanding
that an element of unpredictability
is intrinsic to significantly complex systems.

In short, the old assumption
that that the world is stable, solid, deterministic, thoroughly rational,
and an utterly predictable system
has been replaced by a view of the world as a dynamic process
that is to some extent indeterministic and unpredictable (p. 31).”

Or, we could read that last sentence as:

The prevailing assumption
that that God is deterministic, thoroughly rational,
and utterly predictable
does not square with the Biblical view of God as a dynamic being
who is to some extent indeterministic and unpredictable.

“This is a God
who determines some events
but also leaves the future open to the decisions of free agents.”

As Rebecca Deinsen says:

It seems the universe is permeated with a balance
between free and determined events
and predictable and unpredictable occurrences.
Just as science can predict the range of possible behaviors of a quantum particle
but cannot predict its exact behavior,
no one can predict the exact behavior of an individual.
In science, this inability to predict the movement of quantum particles
is not due to a failure in the measuring devices used in quantum mechanics;
this is due to the way things are, the very nature of reality.
Free will operates in the same manner.
It is in God’s own joy and freedom
to allow us to act freely within a given structure
without knowing what we will choose.”

This is the Biblical God who is emotionally connected with human beings:
A God who suffers and gets frustrated, and is joyous and delighted.
A God whose “will” – whose “heart’s delight” –
trusts human free will
and moves always towards the future with us.
We matter to God!

God is engaged in change with us.

God wants to be in real relationship with us.

If we have any doubt of this, we have the witness of David.

In the Psalms he pours out his heart to God
and he doesn’t mince words!

We overhear how David acted in free will and made choices
and experienced emotions,
and suffered, was frustrated, was joyful, was delighted
and was emotionally connected with God and with other people
and changed his mind and heart
and interceded for himself and for others with God.

His words ring so true
and match our experience
of living in relationship with each other and with God

so well
that we turn to them
when we need words ourselves,
when we want to connect with God.

God is engaged in change with us.

God wants to be in real relationship with us.

If we have any doubt of this, we have the witness of Jesus as God Incarnate --
God with us here and now.

The Gospels tell us how
Jesus acted in free will and made choices,
and experienced emotions,
and suffered, was frustrated, was joyful, was delighted
and was emotionally connected with God and with other people
and changed his mind and heart
and interceded for himself and for others with God.

And, in and through Jesus, God made choices and experienced these emotions.

And, taking this a step further,

because we are made in God's image,

and because we carry the name Christian

then acting in free will and making choices

and experiencing all the emotions we feel,

and being emotionally connected with God and with other people

and changing our minds and hearts

and interceding for ourselves and for others with God.

is what it is to be truly human

is what it is to be truly Christ-like

is what it is to be truly made in the image of God.

The only thing that is said and done and predetermined

is that the world – the whole world – is already redeemed.

How we get there is a process,

a dynamic process,

in which God's "will," God's "heart's desire"

is that each of us will engage our own free will and heart's desire

and be in real, full relationship with God,

sharing our emotions,

and our sufferings, frustrations, joys, and delights

and not holding back;

God's heart's desire is that each of us

will be emotionally connected with God and with other people,

will be willing to intercede for ourselves and for others with God

and be willing to change our minds and hearts

in order to grow in relationship with God. Amen.

Note: In Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), "God's will" is actually "God's heart's desire"

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Text:

Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.