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Hebrews #43

The Excellence and Encouragement of an Unchanging Christ
Hebrews 13:7-9

Change is inevitable in virtually every sphere of our existence. Next year we will witness a change in the presidency of the United States, and with it, regardless of who is elected, will undoubtedly come changes in our economy and our foreign policy and how much we pay in taxes. All of us who live in Oklahoma know that if there is anything that is change-less about the weather in our great state it is that it changes not just daily but hourly! Our jobs change. Our bodies change. Our circle of friends changes. Change can be unsettling and even frightful, but the reality of it will never change. As someone once said, ***the only changeless thing about life on this planet is that everything in it and about it changes.***

I can handle change like that. The older I get, the less disturbed I am by changes in our political climate or in fashion or in the stock market. Like you, I've grown accustomed to the consistency of that sort of change. ***But what I can never get used to is the way people change.*** I don't mean change in their appearance or age or marital status or financial condition. I'm talking about ***how people change from good to bad to worse.*** I'm talking about the way people make promises and then break them. I'm talking about the way people pledge their loyalty to us and then disappear. I'm talking about people who once were honest but now lie and steal and cheat. ***The unreliability of people, due to changes in their moral character, is one of the most devastating and crushing realities in our world.***

Think about your husband/wife. When I talk with couples who are struggling, I often hear things like: "He's different. He didn't use to be like this. When we first got married he was always so attentive to my needs. He always put me first and was so sensitive to ask how I was doing and how I was feeling. But in recent years he's become so self-absorbed. He won't listen to me. He no longer respects my opinion. We always have to do what he wants, go on vacation where he prefers, watch his favorite TV shows. What happened to him? I just wish I could have my original husband back again."

If for no other reason, that is why I'm so encouraged and uplifted by what I read here in Hebrews 13:8 – ***"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."*** But what does our author mean by this statement and what possible relevance does it have for you and me today? Most of you are in the midst of one crisis or another, some profound and disturbing change in your life or

in the lives of your children or extended family or in the career path on which you once launched out. So why should we care about what appears to be an abstract theological statement about the unchanging nature of Jesus Christ?

What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is *always the same*? If you're not familiar with it, the technical theological term for this is *immutability*. So what does it mean when we apply words to Jesus like "unchanging" or the "same" or "immutable"?

What our Author does not mean

Perhaps it would help to explain what we don't mean. When we say that Jesus is always and ever the same and that he never changes we aren't thinking of immutability in the way we apply that term to *the Rock of Gibraltar*. Gibraltar, at least for as long as I can remember and I'm sure this would be true for the centuries preceding our lifetime, has always been the same. There it is off the southwestern tip of Europe on the Iberian Peninsula, jutting forth in all its greatness, unmoved, seemingly unchanged in any meaningful sense. The wind and the waves continue to pound against it, but it remains. I suppose erosion may have altered it a bit, but not in any substantial way that would lead us to conclude that it is no longer the Gibraltar we've always known and admired.

But Gibraltar is a rock. It is inert matter. It doesn't feel or think or exert itself in any meaningful sense. So *I would never compare the immutability of Jesus Christ to Gibraltar*. Jesus is alive and feels and thinks and responds to circumstances.

Ok. What about *gravity*? Gravity never seems to change. I've never experienced the sensation of levitation in which I suddenly began to float without the use of wires or pulleys or a jet engine. Gravity is immutable, or so it would seem. Is that what we mean when we say that Jesus never changes? Or what about my *computer*? The only time it might change is if I install new software. But aside from that, so long as it doesn't break down it will always do what I instruct it to do when I type certain keys or commands.

But again, just like Gibraltar and gravity, computers are not capable of experiencing emotions such as joy or fear or gratitude or hope or delight or love or hate. None of these immutable objects in our world can interact with us as persons. So it would be misleading to suggest that Jesus is the "same" in the way or sense in which Gibraltar or gravity or computers are always the same.

Our author is not suggesting that there is no sense whatsoever in which Jesus doesn't change. The fact of the matter is that there was a time when the Son of God was purely spirit, the second person of the Trinity, living in unbroken and joyful fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But then things changed and he became incarnate as a human being whom we call Jesus. But then things changed yet again as he was raised from the dead and glorified, being exalted to the right hand of God where he now lives and rules as sovereign Lord over all things.

Therefore, in no way should you hear the author of Hebrews denying or questioning the reality of the Son of God taking to himself a human nature. Recall that in John 1:14 we are told that "the Word **became** flesh." That word "became" should be taken quite literally. The second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, did not pretend to be a human being. He did not masquerade as a man. He literally became a man who was given the name Jesus. ***So obviously there was a change in the manner or mode of existence of the Son of God. But he didn't change in any of his attributes or in his character or in his purposes. He "changed" not in the sense that he is no longer God but in the sense that he is now also man.***

There is yet another crucial thing to keep in mind. The Bible says that we used to be enemies of God. We were in rebellion against him. We were alienated from him. We were under his wrath and judgment. God was angry with us. But now we are his adopted sons and daughters. We are in fellowship with him. We are reconciled to him through faith in Jesus. We no longer need fear judgment or divine wrath. So our relationship with Jesus Christ changes when the Holy Spirit regenerates us or causes us to be born again and leads us to faith in Christ. But to say that our ***relationship*** to him changes does not mean that he changes in his essence or his character.

What our Author does mean

So when we say that Jesus is always the same and that he never changes, what we mean is that ***his character and life as God is immutable***. Jesus never lies. He never lied in the past, he won't lie to you today, and you can rest assured that he will tell you the truth next week and next year and next century.

Jesus is immutable and unchanging in his ***love*** for you. His love for you doesn't rise and fall like a thermometer. His commitment to keep his promises never changes. There will never come a day when he says, "You know, I've been thinking. I don't believe that my promise to those who believe in me that I will always make intercession for them at my Father's right hand is a good idea. Things in the world have changed, and I think I need to adapt as well. I've got better and more important things to do than to always be available when Christians draw near to God through faith in me." No, that will never happen.

To say that Jesus is unchanging and always the same means that there never has been a time in the past and never will be in the days ahead when *his assurance to us in the Great Commission* will prove false. You will recall that in Matthew 28 Jesus said, “And I will be with you, even to the end of the age.” What Hebrews 13:8 is telling us is that you need never fear that at some point Jesus will renege on that guarantee. He will never enter into the course of a day’s experience and say, “I’ve lost my zeal for being present with my people. They’ve brushed me off once too often. They’ve failed me and let me down too many times. I’ve been patient up until now, but enough’s enough. There’s a limit to everything, you know. So I’m going to cut them loose and let them fend for themselves a while. Maybe they’ll wake up and be more attentive to my glory and then I’ll renew my commitment to always be with them.”

Let me make this point with even greater force. We saw a couple of weeks ago in Hebrews 13:5-6 that our author grounds his exhortation to live free from the love of money in the truth of *God’s abiding presence*. Don’t be enslaved to the love of money but rather be content with what you have. Why? Because God has made a promise to you, not once, but twice: “I will never leave you. No, by no means ever will I forsake you.” But how can we be sure of that? He may be present with me today, but who knows what may happen next week or five years down the road?

So here in v. 8 he tells us that we need never fear that we will wake up one day and God will be gone, vanished, having left us to ourselves. We know this will never be the case because Jesus Christ who is God is the “same” yesterday, when he first made that promise, as well as today when I need him to be near and close by to me, and in the days and weeks and years ahead when my life starts to fall apart.

In v. 6 he said that the Lord is our “helper.” Great. But how long will that last? What if he runs out of gas? What if I don’t respond to his help as I should? What if he abandons me to my own strength and resources in order to bail out some hapless soul who seemingly needs him more desperately than I do? No, God will always be your helper. Jesus will always be present to make intercession for you as he promised back in Hebrews 7:25. And we know this to be true without the slightest hesitation or doubt because we are assured here in v. 8 that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is always and ever the same.

Therefore, this idea of Christ’s immutability, or constancy, simply asserts that when the circumstances in any situation call for goodness, justice, or love as the appropriate response on the part of our Lord, that is precisely what he will be (or do, as the case maybe). To say the same thing, but negatively, if Jesus ought to be good, just, or loving as the circumstances may demand, or as his promises would require, he will by no means ever be evil, unfair, or hateful.

Or let me put it in slightly other terms. Jesus Christ never changes in his essential being. That is to say, ***he will never gain any new attributes or characteristics. Neither will he ever lose any. Jesus will never grow!*** He doesn't develop. He will never be better than he always has been and is today. In conjunction with our series in Hebrews we've often sung the song, *Jesus is Better*. To say he is immutable or unchangeable or always the same, past, present, and future, means that he is as infinitely good today as he ever will be. He won't be "better" tomorrow. If he were to be better tomorrow than he is today it would mean that today he is less than perfect. Jesus never improves.

He is infinitely good. How can you add to or improve on infinity? You can't! The only way Jesus could change in terms of his character is either by losing attributes or getting worse, on the one hand, or by gaining attributes or getting better, on the other. But he experiences neither. You and I do. We are gradually and progressively changing in our moral being. I hope and pray I'm getting better as time passes. I hope and pray that I'm gaining new features in my personality, like humility and love and compassion and a deeper disdain for evil. But that never happens in Jesus.

Reflections on the Immutability of God

Although these next two texts speak specifically of God the Father, they apply equally to the other two persons in the Godhead, both the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:

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

"I the Lord ***do not change***. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (Mal. 3:6).

Or consider these statements:

"In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But ***you remain the same***, and your years will never end" (Ps. 102:25-27).

"Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps. 90:2; cf. 93:2).

Let's think for a moment about the plans or purposes of God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. To deny immutability to God's purpose or plan would be no less an affront to Christ than to predicate change of his being, life, and character. There are, as I understand, only two reasons why God would ever be forced or need to alter his purpose:

(a) if he lacked the necessary foresight or knowledge to anticipate any and all contingencies (in which case he would not be omniscient; contrary to the claims of open theism); or

(b) assuming he had the needed foresight, he lacked the power or ability to effect what he had planned (in which case he would not be omnipotent).

But since Jesus Christ is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no error or oversight in the conception of his purpose. Also, since he is infinite in power (omnipotent), there can be no failure or frustration in the accomplishment of his purpose.

The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to his creatures, as well as the more conspicuous events of redemptive history, are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God's being or purpose. They are, rather, *the execution in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God*. For example, the abolition of the Mosaic Covenant was no change in God's will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of his will, *an eternal will which decreed change* (i.e., change from the Mosaic to the New Covenant). Christ's coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the Old Testament scheme. They were but the realization (historical and concrete) of what God had from eternity decreed.

"The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10-11; cf. 110:4).

"The Lord of hosts has sworn: As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Isa. 14:24).

"Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,

declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Isa. 46:9-11).

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand" (Prov. 19:21).

"But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does" (Job 23:13).

"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

"But Sam, doesn't it say in the book of Jonah that when the people of Nineveh repented from their sin that God 'changed his mind' about his decision to judge and destroy them?" Yes. But ironically enough, this is actually ***a proof that God does not change***, that he always honors his promises and acts in perfect harmony with his character. Why do I say this?

Consider the fact that God has clearly revealed in his Word that ***unrepentant people will be judged and people who repent will be shown mercy***. Right? Well, if that is true, there is no way that God could have judged and destroyed Nineveh once they repented. As long as they remained unrepentant and in rebellious unbelief, they were subject to divine judgment. But when they repented and turned to God from their sinful ways, God's character demanded that he receive them with mercy.

Thus we see that it is a principle of God's immutable being (as revealed by him in Scripture) that he punishes the wicked and rebellious but blesses and forgives the righteous and repentant. If God were to reveal himself as such (as, in fact, he has done), only to punish the repentant and bless the rebellious, this would constitute real change and thus destroy immutability. God's declaration of intent to judge the Ninevites because of their sinful behavior and wickedness is *based on the assumption that they are and will remain wicked*. However, if and when they repent (as they did), to punish them notwithstanding would constitute a change, indeed reversal, in God's will and word, to the effect that he now, as over against the past, punishes rather than blesses the repentant.

There's still more. ***Our author in v. 8 doesn't mean that since Jesus is grieved with you because of your sin on Tuesday that he can't rejoice with you after you repent on Wednesday.*** To say that Jesus is the "same" at all times doesn't mean that his relationship with you and me is static and unaffected by our sin or, conversely, by our obedience. Of course, our sin doesn't affect our eternal relationship with him. He is always and forever committed to us when we come to faith in him and regardless of the ups and downs of our lives we remain forever and eternally his. But that doesn't mean his feelings remained unaffected or unchanged. Would you want a Savior who was so indifferent to your sin or to your obedience that he never felt anything when you obeyed him or disobeyed him?

So don't ever think that what Hebrews 13:8 means is that last Tuesday, when you fell into sin, Jesus was grieved by what you did and that on Wednesday, when you repented and asked his forgiveness, he said, "Sorry, but once grieved, always grieved. After all, I don't change. I'm always the same. So once you messed up and I grieved, I stay that way forever." No!

Yesterday, Today, and Forever

Now, let's take a moment and consider the importance of these time references: yesterday (or the past), today (or the present), and forever (the future). Why does he say this?

First of all, it's absolutely crucial that Jesus be the same yesterday or in the past as he is today because it was in the past, some 2,000 years ago, that he revealed to us what he is really like. It was while he was on the earth that he put on display the nature and character of his heavenly Father.

Second, the reason it's important that he be the same today as he was yesterday is because it is now, in the present, that you and I have a relationship with him. We relate to him today on the basis of what we read about him in Scripture as he was in the past. God has orchestrated things so that we know Jesus by reading about him in an inspired and infallible book. But if the Jesus I read about in Matthew or Romans or Hebrews isn't the same today as he was then, of what good is he? How could I possibly trust him or turn to him in times of trouble if I have no assurance that the way he responded to people back then is the way he responds to me and other people today?

In other words, the Holy Spirit takes the truths of Christ as revealed in Scripture and makes them real and personal and present and powerful and precious in our lives now. But if the Christ of today isn't the same as the Christ recorded for us in the Bible, we're doomed!

Third, and finally, if Jesus turns out to be different in the future from what he is today or what he was in the past, all hope is shattered. My hope, your hope, is based on the consistency of Christ, that he will be in ten years and into eternity the same Christ who walked this earth 2,000 years ago, the same Christ who hears my prayers and guides and guards me today.

Although it may not appear at first glance that there is any connection between v. 8 and v. 7 that precedes and v. 9 that follows, such is not the case. Whereas there is nothing explicit to link v. 8 to vv. 7 and 9, no “therefore” or “because” or “in order that,” there is still a very real relationship and a reason why our author made the statement in v. 8 concerning the unchanging character of Jesus.

As for v. 7, the proclamation of the gospel that these people first heard from their leaders who are likely now dead not only played a role in the founding of their church but in their own experience of coming to Jesus in faith. Perhaps that message was beginning to fade from their memories. Our author wants them to know that the Jesus who was made known to them by their leaders is still the same. They may have died but Jesus is very much alive. They may no longer be present to guide them and counsel them, but Jesus is. The same Christ who was made known to them at the beginning of their spiritual journey is still present. Their earthly leaders may have been replaced, but not Jesus. Jesus has not changed since they first heard of him. He sits enthroned in heaven and rules without interruption. Their circumstances may have changed, they may now have new leaders who have authority over them, but Jesus is the same. He never changes.

As for v. 9, we should recall that earlier in Hebrews 5:11-14 our author rebuked them for their immaturity in matters of Christian doctrine. Hebrews 13:9 is yet additional evidence that doctrinal instability was a disheartening reality among these believers. Hence the admonition that they put an end to the influence of false teaching. Literally he says, “do not go on being led astray,” the implication being that they are to call a halt to what is already taking place.

He refers to this false teaching as “diverse”, meaning that it was varied and multi-faceted, possibly one reason why they found it so appealing. It was also “strange” or alien to and incompatible with the teaching about Christ. Some people are instinctively drawn to a wide diversity of doctrines that are strange to the faith. They love the novelty of hearing and then spreading something altogether different. Many of the successful TV “teachers” build their following on the foundation of novel ideas never before seen or heard in the history of the church. Unstable believers are often drawn to this.

So his point is that you must avoid all such multiple deviant doctrines that compete for their belief and trust. But there is only one Jesus and one gospel about him. Truth about Christ doesn't change, because Christ doesn't change.

Paul warns in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). If ever that prophecy was fulfilled it is in our day. Not everyone who visits Bridgeway likes what they hear. They have an aversion to the truth. It makes them uncomfortable. They would rather that I only say things that are soothing to the soul and as inoffensive as possible. Well, I never try to be offensive for its own sake, but that's what truth sometimes does. And there is no more soul-soothing medicine for the soul than the truth of God's Word.

So be vigilant and alert for yourself and your family and your children that what you hear is true. Don't be infatuated with novelties in the church. Don't go running after the latest theological fad. Don't be driven here and there by every wind of doctrine. ***Never forget that the Christ who is the center and essence of all truth is unchanging. Nothing in God's Word about Jesus and what he has done for you needs to be reshaped or reconfigured or adapted to our culture.***

What was once true about Jesus will always be true about Jesus. You don't need some clever recreation or refashioning of biblical truth about Jesus.

Christ is Dependable!

First, what this means, very simply, is that ***Jesus Christ is dependable!*** Our trust in him is therefore a confident trust, for we know that he will not, indeed cannot, change. It is because the Jesus who promised us eternal life is immutable that we may rest assured that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword shall separate us from the love he has for us. It is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, no not even powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39)!

Second, this truth should serve well to ***drive from our hearts all fear and anxiety.*** If Jesus will be the same "forever" then we may rest assured that the promises he made to us "yesterday," in Scripture, will most assuredly come to pass either "today" or at some point in the "forever" of our future with him.

Third, and finally, the truth of the immutability of Jesus Christ means that ***he wins!*** If he is omnipotent now, he will always be. His purposes will never fail and his will cannot be thwarted. No matter how great the setbacks may be that we suffer today, we can rest assured that the unchanging Christ will prevail over all his and all our enemies!