

sky, while the sun, moon and planets travel in outer space, but the heavens themselves are largely unchanged.

However, even the heavens and the earth change, especially at the beginning of this age and its end. Both heaven and earth were created, brought into existence out of nothing: "Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the work of thy hands" (25). Both heaven and earth will be radically transformed at the second coming of Jesus Christ: "They shall perish ... yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed" (26). They will not be annihilated but renewed as the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

Heaven and earth were created by the Almighty out of nothing (Ps. 102:25) and will be gloriously renewed at the end of this age (26), "but thou art the same" (27) for Jehovah is the unchangeable God! The Most High is "the same" as He was or is in His eternal timelessness as the uncreated Creator. Absolutely no change has happened in Him in the past and it never will in the future. He is immutable before the creation, after the creation, in the psalmist's day, in our day, and when He transforms the heaven and the earth at the last day, for "they shall be changed: but thou art the same" (26-27)!

James declares, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (1:17). "Variableness" has an astronomical use, referring to the heavenly bodies. Even the stars change, increasing or decreasing, but with God there is "no variableness." "Shadow of turning" is also a phrase taken from the world of astronomy. The heavenly bodies cast shadows and there are shadows on the moon. But with God there is "no variableness" and not even a "shadow of turning." After all, He is "the Father of lights." This is another astronomical allusion, this time to the sun. As the infinitely blessed and perfect One, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5). With the God who is light and "the Father of lights," there can be "no variableness" or even a "shadow of turning," for He is absolutely and infinitely unchangeable.

Malachi 3:5 speaks of Israel's sorcery, adultery, false swearing, oppression and lack of fear of the Lord. We could add to this all the sins of the church of all ages, including our own iniquities. If ever there were a reason for God to change by stopping to love the church and starting to hate the church, here it is. Yet what do we read? "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (6). This is certain proof that the true and living God is absolutely unchangeable! Our salvation in Christ is forever sure for the God of eternal election, effectual redemption and irresistible regeneration will not and cannot change.

*Rev. Stewart*

### **Covenant Protestant Reformed Church**

83 Clarence Street, Ballymena, BT43 5DR • [www.cprc.co.uk](http://www.cprc.co.uk)

Lord's Day services (11 AM & 6 PM) live video stream: [www.cprc.co.uk/live-streaming](http://www.cprc.co.uk/live-streaming)

Pastor: Angus Stewart, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, N. Ireland, BT42 3NR • (028) 25 891851

[pastor@cprc.co.uk](mailto:pastor@cprc.co.uk) • [www.youtube.com/cprcni](https://www.youtube.com/cprcni) • [www.facebook.com/CovenantPRC](https://www.facebook.com/CovenantPRC)

# *Covenant Reformed News*

May 2022 • Volume XIX, Issue 1

## **The Unchangeable God (1)**

Change is an intrinsic part in our created and fallen world. There are changes in the weather, the economy and technology. Some changes in the nations are especially distressing and even lethal: wars, diseases and famines. We could say that the news is almost all about change.

Consider the many changes in your own life. You were once a tiny unborn baby in your mother's womb. Some nine months after your conception, you were born. You grew from infancy through childhood and your teenage years until you became an adult. In old age, our hair begins to thin or fall out and our strength fails.

There are changes in one's family life, such as leaving one's parents to go to university or to start one's first job. Human life usually involves getting married, having children and seeing them leave home. The later years of many involve grandchildren, bereavement and even widowhood. There are other changes too, such as unemployment or health problems, for you or your loved ones or both!

We also experience great changes, both up and down, in how we feel: angry, sad, unhappy, distressed or lonely at one time but calm, encouraged, uplifted or joyful at another. Even in our relationship to the God of our salvation, at times we are close to Him while at other times we seem far away.

The pen man of Psalm 102 writes a lot about change, distressing change. The heading reads, "A Prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his complaint before the LORD." He was reproached by his "enemies" (8) and was experiencing "trouble" (2): "For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin" (3-5).

God's heavy hand was upon him. All his grief was "because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down" (10). In various ways, Psalm 102 also indicates that the church was experiencing dark days too. The psalmist's comfort in all this is especially one divine attribute or perfection: God's unchangeableness or immutability. This is instructive for us too!

God's unchangeableness is presented very starkly here, not only against unsettling changes for the psalmist and the church, but even over against the two things which seem most stable in our world. What are they? The earth beneath us and the heavens above us. Underneath us, the earth is solid and firm. The things on earth change: trees lose their leaves, animals die and houses are built on new tracts of land. But the earth itself is constant. The heavens are a model of constancy too. Yes, clouds move in the

## Mercy and Judgment Upon Israel

These passages in Numbers 14 are used by some to teach a divine mercy upon reprobate individuals: “The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. And the LORD said, I have pardoned according to thy word” (18-20). “Surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it” (23). “I the LORD have said, I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die” (35).

The argument is, “Moses prays that God would forgive Israel and not utterly destroy them after the 10 spies brought back the bad report. God forgives Israel according to the greatness of His mercy, even though they are an evil congregation (and remain evil till the whole generation dies in the wilderness). Notice (1) God’s forgiveness here to these reprobate individuals is non-salvific (though they were spared from divine judgment at that moment, they all eventually perished in the wilderness); (2) Moses pleads in his prayer that God is merciful and forgiving by His very nature even to these reprobate.”

The questioner raises a very important issue. Not only here in Numbers but also in many other passages, it appears that Lord is, at the same time, promising salvation and threatening eternal judgment to the same people. That, of course, cannot be the case. He cannot pardon men and send them to hell. If the Lord had pardoned all those who sinned at Kadesh by rejecting the report of Joshua and Caleb, and by refusing to enter Canaan, then they would not have perished in the wilderness. By the same token, if they perished in the wilderness under the judgment of God, then they were not pardoned. Pardon for sin is absolute. If God pardons someone’s sins, then He has justified that person and there is no possibility of that person perishing under His wrath.

Nor is there any such thing as a “non-salvific” forgiveness. That is the same as saying that there is a forgiveness which does not forgive and a salvation which does not save. If a judge pardons me, then I am free from all the legal consequences of whatever crime I committed and I can never be charged again with that crime. If I am sent to prison or executed for my crimes, then I have not been pardoned.

Nor is delay of judgment a kind of forgiveness but the opposite, for the impenitent sinner has more time to sin (Rom. 2:5). If delay of judgment is a kind of forgiveness, then God has spent six thousand years forgiving those whom He intends in the end to destroy. If a judge delays my punishment for a crime, setting another date for sentencing, that is not in any sense of the word a pardon but only a delay.

That God is merciful “by His very nature” is true but He is not such to the reprobate or to those who perish everlastingly. If that were true, He would be denying Himself, denying His own righteous nature, when He punishes them everlastingly.

This does not answer the question of how God, almost in the same breath, can speak of forgiveness and of judgment to those who have sinned. The answer is that God is not speaking to an individual but to a nation, to the church of the Old Testament (Acts 7:38). That nation, the church of the Old Testament, like the church of the New Testament, is always a mixed multitude. There are in the church those whose sins are forever pardoned but there are also those who perish unpardoned under the judgment of God. Because they are mixed together, the Word of God, both His promise of pardon and His threat of eternal condemnation, comes to all, though the promises are exclusively for the benefit of those who are chosen of God and redeemed by Christ’s blood.

This is the teaching of Romans 9:6-7: “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” Notice that Paul is insisting that God’s Word cannot fail, in this case neither His word of pardon nor His word of judgment. His Word of pardon does not fail, when He promises pardon to Israel, for those who have merely the name of Israel are not really the Israel whom God is addressing. It does not fail either because “the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (8), counted not only as true children of Abraham but as children of God, whom He in His love always pardons through the cross.

There are always those in the institute church who worship alongside believers and who cannot even be distinguished from them in many cases, but who are not really that church which is the body of Christ, “the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:23), which obtains peace and pardon in Him, while those who remain hypocrites and unbelievers in the church never obtain it. “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (according as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day” (Rom. 11:7-8).

Does this mean that the word of pardon has no application at all to those who perish? It does not mean that. Those who perish must hear the word of God’s pardon to their own condemnation. God is “by His very nature” a merciful God, and the proclamation of His mercy to all makes those who hear and do not believe His mercy guilty before Him and most worthy of His just judgments.

Does this mean that God’s word of judgment has no application to those whom He pardons? No! The word of judgment must be heard by those who are pardoned, not because they will ever come under the eternal judgment of God (thanks be to Him for the gift of His Son!), but because they too have sinned, and must repent and turn from their sins, as they always do by the Spirit’s irresistible grace.

The Word of God’s pardon and His judgment of sin come to all who hear the Word, and it is the Word itself which does the sifting, hardening and bringing under God’s judgment those who have only the name of Israel or church, and bringing peace and pardon to those who, according to His eternal election, by the blood of Christ and through the work of the Spirit, are God’s own.

*Rev. Ron Hanko*