

Does God Change His Mind?

Hezekiah 38:1-5 *In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.'*

Why did God change His mind?¹

Some say God cannot change his mind without contradicting his unchanging nature. They say that maybe God intended all along to heal Hezekiah. Withholding that news from Hezekiah, then, served to stimulate the intensity of his prayer. In this view, Hezekiah didn't change God's mind. But prayer helped him discover God's purpose so he could align his life and actions to it.

Others, however, have another view. They agree that God doesn't change his mind the way people do. But they suggest a sovereign God can predetermine to change his course of action in response to our prayers. His ultimate purposes are unchangeable, they say, but he builds options into his purposes from the start. They see flexibility in the outcome to accommodate the various responses of people. In this view, God is something like a traveler who plans a destination but allows freedom to change the route or make spontaneous side trips along the way. God's methods, they say, aren't necessarily set in concrete: people's actions can make a difference in the way God works.

The bible recounts other examples of times that God seemed to change his mind: After saying he would destroy Nineveh, he didn't because they repented (Johan 3:10-4:2). Earlier he had intended to destroy the Israelites but did not when Moses interceded for them (Exodus 32:9-14). On the other hand, God did not seem to respond to David's repentance (2 Samuel 12:13-23). And he told Jeremiah and Ezekiel that he would not even listen to requests of leniency for Judah (Jer. 7:16, 15:1; Ezek. 14:12-14).

Can Our Prayers Cause God to Change His Mind?²

God does not change, but he will adjust his decrees to fit our response. The Bible contains many examples of this--the Hebrews on the outskirts of Canaan (Num 14:11-23); Hezekiah's repentance on behalf of Israel (2 Chron. 29:3-10, 36); the

¹ THE QUEST STUDY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® 990 (The Zondervan Corporation 1994).

² Id. at 121.

sparing of Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-10).

God's will is dynamic. As with any interpersonal relationship, god's relationship with humanity involves give and take. God accommodates his responses to ours; we adjust our responses to God's. So it can be said that on this level, God sometimes changes his mind in response to our prayers.

At the same time, God's will is determined. There are decrees and promises he has made that do not change. He kept his covenant with the Israelites (Deut. 7:7-8) and keeps his new covenant with us (John 6:37-40, 44).

God wants us to follow his will obediently. He has predetermined ways he would like us to respond, but we have the choice to do them or not (Psalm 143:10; Heb. 10:35-39; 1 Thes. 5:16-18; 2 Peter 3:9).

These three aspects of God's will work together. It is not possible for us to understand how, but God is ultimately in control. We might compare the relationship between God, his will and his people to a chess match between a novice player and a master. The novice can make any move he chooses and the master will respond accordingly. But the master will always be in control of the game. The analogy is limited and cannot be pressed further: God's people "win" when the Master's will is done.