

Does God change his mind?

We must start with a Biblical understanding of God's attributes and establish what is certain. God neither changes (because he is perfect) in his being (character) or his decrees (purpose). The Bible is clear and unequivocal in this (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 102:26; Jer 4:28; Mal 3:6; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 6:17-18; Jm 1:17). The passage in 1 Samuel expressly tells us that God cannot change his mind. If God ever did this he would cease to be perfect and therefore cease to be God. No scripture which seems to teach this, does teach this or God is not God and his word is a lie. Whenever God does anything, it is perfect and faithful and the fulfilment of his eternal unchangeable plan (Isa 25:1).

So what do we make of passages which appear to teach that God relents or grieves, such as: Gen 6:5-7; Exod 32:9-10; 1 Sam 15:11; Jer 18:7-10, 26:3, 13; Jon 3:3-5, 10? Each text should be carefully examined in context for a full answer, but we can make these observations in general:

1. Any apparent change in God's actions are only ever the fulfilment of his eternal, predestined plan. There is no real change in God. He does what he determined from the beginning.
2. God reactions to man's wickedness are always the same, there is no change; evil is judged and condemned, moral good is praised; God is just. This explains Jer 18:7-10; if God says that a nation is to be condemned but that nation repents, then God will not condemn the good choice of the nation. If God says that a nation is to be established, but it then does evil, it will be judged. This also explains Jonah's message to Nineveh. The message appears to be absolute (imminent destruction) but since it didn't occur then Jonah's message (only summarised in his short book) included the implication that judgment would be withheld on repentance. Thus the message was 'you have 40 days to repent or destruction will follow'.
3. God does not decree things from eternity in reaction to foreseen human behaviour. For instance, he chooses to give faith to the elect in eternity, but not in response to any foreseen good that they may do.
4. Though God willed the conditions on Earth, including allowing evil to exist, to fulfil his divine plan, he is grieved by the evil that is done since he is good. Thus Christ was sent to Earth to die, and this grieved the Father.
5. God's words to the contrary are sometimes designed to bring about the purpose God actually intended (e.g. Exod 32:9-10). By threatening destruction, God drew Moses into his planned intercession; thus teaching us about the need of a mediator.
6. The Bible uses anthropomorphisms about God to highlight a point (hands, feet, eyes etc.) but also uses anthropopathic terms, ascribing human emotions to God. This explains some difficult texts.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version © Thomas Nelson 1982

Does God change his mind?

We must start with a Biblical understanding of God's attributes and establish what is certain. God neither changes (because he is perfect) in his being (character) or his decrees (purpose). The Bible is clear and unequivocal in this (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 102:26; Jer 4:28; Mal 3:6; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 6:17-18; Jm 1:17). The passage in 1 Samuel expressly tells us that God cannot change his mind. If God ever did this he would cease to be perfect and therefore cease to be God. No scripture which seems to teach this, does teach this or God is not God and his word is a lie. Whenever God does anything, it is perfect and faithful and the fulfilment of his eternal unchangeable plan (Isa 25:1).

So what do we make of passages which appear to teach that God relents or grieves, such as: Gen 6:5-7; Exod 32:9-10; 1 Sam 15:11; Jer 18:7-10, 26:3, 13; Jon 3:3-5, 10? Each text should be carefully examined in context for a full answer, but we can make these observations in general:

1. Any apparent change in God's actions are only ever the fulfilment of his eternal, predestined plan. There is no real change in God. He does what he determined from the beginning.
2. God reactions to man's wickedness are always the same, there is no change; evil is judged and condemned, moral good is praised; God is just. This explains Jer 18:7-10; if God says that a nation is to be condemned but that nation repents, then God will not condemn the good choice of the nation. If God says that a nation is to be established, but it then does evil, it will be judged. This also explains Jonah's message to Nineveh. The message appears to be absolute (imminent destruction) but since it didn't occur then Jonah's message (only summarised in his short book) included the implication that judgment would be withheld on repentance. Thus the message was 'you have 40 days to repent or destruction will follow'.
3. God does not decree things from eternity in reaction to foreseen human behaviour. For instance, he chooses to give faith to the elect in eternity, but not in response to any foreseen good that they may do.
4. Though God willed the conditions on Earth, including allowing evil to exist, to fulfil his divine plan, he is grieved by the evil that is done since he is good. Thus Christ was sent to Earth to die, and this grieved the Father.
5. God's words to the contrary are sometimes designed to bring about the purpose God actually intended (e.g. Exod 32:9-10). By threatening destruction, God drew Moses into his planned intercession; thus teaching us about the need of a mediator.
6. The Bible uses anthropomorphisms about God to highlight a point (hands, feet, eyes etc.) but also uses anthropopathic terms, ascribing human emotions to God. This explains some difficult texts.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version © Thomas Nelson 1982