

"God Unchanging"
Psalm 102:23-28

There are some constants in life — the proverbial death and taxes among them. Another constant is change. We can be certain that very few things in life are static; most things change. Among the changes in life are cultural norms. Consider the story of one John Fisher and Lizzie Clark, just a little over 100 years ago. Fisher was described as "young, debonair and high-collared," Miss Clark "a demure maid" who looked older than her 15 years. They were strangers on a train near Atlantic City. This is *The New York Times* description:

Miss Clark was standing on the platform. He thought she smiled. She got on the car and took the front seat. He beat a ragtime refrain. Then he ran his hand through his hair, brushed two specks from his coat, smiled a pensive smile, and took the seat beside Miss Clark and remarked in feeling tones "that it looked like rain."

Hardly were the words uttered when the conductor bore down, attracted by the girl's signals of distress.

Off to court in Camden, N.J., went the debonair Fisher. The charge: flirting. *He got 60 days in jail* — for telling a girl that it might rain! A man screaming obscenities will barely cause heads to turn on the New York subway today. "It must have been the feeling tones that did Fisher in."

One constant in life is change. "Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time; what we really want is for things to remain the same but get better." (Sydney Harris)

That may be our desire, but in the last two months we seem to have experience the opposite — nothing has stayed the same and most things have gotten worse: the economy has plummeted, people have lost jobs in record numbers, we are physically distant from friends and family, massive numbers of people have gotten sick and died, and relationships are being challenged because of unusual closeness (we can't get away from each other). Then there are different opinions about what to do about Covid-19 — how safe or how endangered are we and did the government act rationally or irrationally?

Among all the things that change, we need stability. This morning we are reminded of our unchanging God by a suffering psalmist. We don't know his exact circumstances, but he's evidently dying, and he is despairing. Psalm 102 is a personal lament psalm, but it is also a psalm of hope and confidence. The psalmist's life is ending (literally), but God is absolutely, and eternally unchanging in all that He is. He is immutable.

Theologians describe immutability this way: God's immutability "is that perfection of God by which He is devoid of all change, not only in His Being, but also in His perfections, and in His purposes and promises...and is free from all accession or diminution and from all growth or decay in His Being or perfections."

The Psalmist says it this way:

As we look at this psalm, we see *two realities* of life.

1. We are Changing — and UNSTABLE (vv. 23-24)

- ✓ Our lives are full of AFFLICTION
- ✓ Our lives are WEAK and SHORT (v. 23)
- ✓ Our lives are DEPENDENT, not INDEPENDENT (v. 24)

2. God is Unchanging — and DEPENDABLE (vv. 25-27)

- ✓ God's POWER does not change (vv. 25-26)
- ✓ God's NATURE does not change (v. 27)
- ✓ God's PROMISES do not change (v. 28)

1. We are Changing — and UNSTABLE (vv. 23-24)

• Our lives are full of AFFLICTION (v. 1)

- ✓ Notice the superscription to the Psalm — *a prayer of the afflicted*.
 - The word **prayer** is a general word for prayer, and especially for making requests of God, but it is used frequently as a prayer of lamentation, someone's cry to God in his suffering.
 - The psalmist emphasizes that by the word **afflicted**. He is someone who might be suffering financially, but even more for oppression that comes from someone else (e.g., 37:14; 86:1, 14)
 - He also points out that he is **faint**, i.e., he is sickly and weak (61:2) — perhaps because of the effects of sin — like Jonah in the belly of the fish (2:7).
 - So he **pours out his complaint** — he is not just talking to God, but he is so overwhelmed, he is constantly complaining; the words are gushing out (used regularly in Job [9x] and Psalms).
- ✓ We will see in a moment that the lament in this psalms is both personal (vv. 3-11) and corporate — for the nation (vv. 12-22). It might have been his personal suffering while the nation was exiled in Babylon. That's a reasonable guess, but we don't know for certain.
- ✓ What we do know is that the Psalm is born out of the reality that we live afflicted lives — both from forces outside of us, and the flesh inside of us. The Psalmist is on a quest for hope within his changing, suffering circumstances.
- ✓ Your life is that way too, isn't it? Even apart from COVID-19, you know suffering and difficulty. You know the pressure of unpaid bills, unexpected illness, untimely death, 2:00 a.m. phone calls, strained and broken relationships, aloneness, houses and cars that need repair, and more.
- ✓ To live in this world is to experience suffering. Romans 8:19, 22 is our reality. COVID-19 has brought that reality to the forefront. Our lives are *full* of suffering.

Our lives are full of affliction — from day to day, we do not know what awaits, and it leaves us unstable!

• Our lives are WEAK and SHORT (v. 23)

- ✓ When he says **weakened**, he means we are “bowed down and humbled” — he is “brought down.”
- ✓ He is pointing to the fact that he is weakened to the point that his strength and life is shortened —
 - It is a reminder that life is transitory (e.g., 90:9-10; 1 Pt. 2:24)
 - Life is short because *God* has decreed only a certain number of days — **He** has weakened me...
- ✓ The psalmist's lament is for his short life, but this is the second time in this psalm he has voiced that complaint (cf. vv. 3-11) —

- His life is like a shadow, disappearing quickly like *smoke* (v. 3) and *evening shadow* (v. 11)
- He is full of feverish anxiety (and likely physical fever, v. 3) — *my bones burn*
- He experiences adversity that leaves him weak and hungry (v. 4)
- He is emaciated — literally skin and *bones* (v. 5)
- He is alone in his suffering, like an *owl* in the *waste places* (v. 6) and *lonely bird* (v. 7)
- It gets even worse — because it was generally thought that illness was a sign of God’s judgment (as Job’s three friends unwisely believed), his enemies accuse him and persecute him (vv. 8-9)
- He is overwhelmed with weeping (depression? v. 9b) and is concerned that he is suffering because of God’s anger against him (v. 10)
- “Fever wracks his body and has left him utterly demoralized. It has stolen his appetite and capacity for sleep and now he is nothing but skin and bones.” [Allen, 14.]
- Sum it all up and his days are like a shadow that is here and then gone (v. 11a). His life is being consumed like grass that will soon be gathered and burned (v. 11b; Is. 4:13-14).
- Life is short and gone.
- I belong to the YMCA — everyone there is attempting to put off and avoid the inevitable. You might say “he looks *good* for 40,” but shortly it will be “he looks *pretty* good for 60,” and soon, “80? Yup, looks about right...” Yes, our lives change. In the vigor of youth, we don’t perceive it so well, but we are declining in weakness — our days really are short.
- ✓ This lament is not just for himself, though. In vv. 12-22, his lament moves from being personal to corporate — for the nation of Israel:
 - When he talks about *Zion* (vv. 13, 16, 21), he is referring to the nation of Israel and to the covenant relationship God has with His people. These are the people God has promised to preserve for eternity, and they also have suffered.
 - He asks for God to be *gracious* to Israel (v. 13), indicating some calamity has happened for which they need God’s grace.
 - Verses 14-15 remind that the people love even the very stones and dust of Israel and Jerusalem and evidently the nations have done something to harm her (v. 15), so the psalmist longs for God to act to keep and preserve the nation.
 - He asks for the people to be set free from their imprisonment (v. 20) — an indication they may have been in captivity (perhaps in Babylon).
 - The point seems to be that his suffering is a subset of the greater suffering of God’s people. The nation is suffering, and he also is particularly hurting and suffering.
- ✓ It is also a reality that our personal suffering is often not alone. Others of God’s people are also suffering. We feel alone, but we are not alone. Our suffering is not uncommon or unique. It is common to man. That’s true of all suffering, and it’s true now in Covid-19.

- ✓ The psalmist says all this to affirm the reality that he has no personal stability in life. What he wants out of life — length and strength of life — is going away far too rapidly. He is changing, and it's not a change that is for the better (in his opinion). He's moving towards death (as we all are).

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 || In every way, we are constantly changing — ||

|| — change comes from affliction both inside and outside of us ||

|| — change is evidenced in a slow, inevitable, and relentless decent towards death ||
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• Our lives are DEPENDENT, not INDEPENDENT (v. 24)

- ✓ **Oh, my God...** = The cry is “Eli” — same as Christ on the cross. This name for God typically refers to His strength. And the request of the psalmist demonstrates that — the cry is a plea for additional years — **don't take me away in the midst** of life; allow me to live full days and years! In other words, he has no strength in himself to guarantee more years; God must provide.
- ✓ This verse demonstrates the truth, “He is strong, and I am not.” But not only are we not strong, our lives are dependent on Him — we have our sustenance only in Him (**90:3**).
- ✓ The cry is also a plea for eternal life — **Your years...** — “that's what I want! I want Your eternity.”
- ✓ In **1 Cor. 15:10** Paul reminds us **by the grace of God, I am what I am...** We are nothing without God. He is independent, we are fully dependent on Him in every way. We can do nothing apart from Him.
- ✓ Yes, our lives are changing, and that change demonstrates every day we are not in control.
- ✓ Is it any wonder that the psalmist is lamenting and in seeming despair? Is there any answer? Where is hope? It all sounds fairly dreary so far, doesn't it? Hope is in God, who is unchanging...

2. God is Unchanging — and DEPENDABLE (vv. 25-27)

• God's POWER does not change (vv. 25-26)

- ✓ The psalmist reminds us **of old You founded** the **earth** and **heavens** — He established and fixed them in place so they would operate according to His plan and purpose. It was His wisdom and strength that put them in their place. He would have us remember **Gen. 1:1**. (Cf. **Ps. 8:1, 3, 9**)
- ✓ Thousands of years ago, He established and set in motion the entire created universe and sustains it all by the word of His power (**Heb. 1:3**).
- ✓ Everything in the universe changes (note v. 26), but the God who created the world has not changed — nothing in Him is diminished. Notice verbs in v. 25 — **You founded** (past) and **are the work** (present) — He *has* created and He *is* sustaining. His eternal power has not diminished.
- ✓ When you look at the heavens on a clear night, you can feel microscopically small; you can also rest in contentedness that your trying circumstances are under His sovereign power —

“Nothing is too hard for Him. If God were stunted in might and had a limit to His strength we might well despair. But seeing that He is clothed with omnipotence, no prayer is too hard for Him to answer, no need too great for Him to supply, no passion too strong for Him to subdue; no temptation too powerful for Him to deliver from, no misery too deep for Him to relieve. ‘The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?’ (Psa. 27:1).” [Pink, *Attributes of God*]

- ✓ It is true that the world is decaying, creation is groaning, people are dying, but that does not mean that any of that is outside God’s power and authority —
 - One day, *everything* in the world as we know it will cease to exist — ***they will perish*** (26a); but creation will be transformed by God into a new Heaven and new earth (26b) — He will put new garments on this old and worn out creation, satisfying its very longing (Rom. 8:22).
 - The world is changing. The world will be transformed again. But *God* will not change.
 - The psalmist is changing. His life is ebbing away. His flesh is decaying. But *God* will not change.

“The attributes of God can no more change than deity can cease to be. His veracity is immutable, for His Word is ‘forever settled in heaven’ (Psa. 119:89).” [Pink, p. 38.]

- Because He is eternal and infinite, God is incapable of changing. God cannot acquire new attributes and He cannot grow or develop or diminish in any of His attributes. What He was in eternity, He remained when time began, through all the history of time, and will be at the end of time and into the future eternity (**Heb. 13:8**), which is the point of v. 27 —

• God’s **NATURE** does not change (v. 27)

- ✓ God and His ways do not change — ***You are the same*** = lit., “You are He” (covenant God, YHWH). What doesn’t change? Specifically, His ***years do not come to an end***. He is eternally unchanging.

“You ever remain as you are.” (Luther) “God has neither evolved, grown, nor improved. All that He is today, He has ever been, and ever will be.” [Pink]

- The God who made a covenant with Abraham and rescued Lot and brought Israel out of Egypt and spoke through Jeremiah and closed Daniel’s lion’s mouths and stuck Jonah in a fish and blinded Saul and made him Paul and enabled Peter to walk on water (and saved him when he sank) and died on the cross and was resurrected is the same God today!
- Since this Psalm was written some 3000 years ago, it should be noted that...
 - ... God has not grown one day older,
 - ... God has neither gained nor lost one morsel of wisdom,
 - ... God has not forgotten a single item,
 - ... God has not learned even one new fact,

- ... God has not sinned even one time (nor had a desire to sin that He stifled),
- ... God has not made one wrong decision,
- ... God has added no new qualities to His character,
- ... God has not deepened nor lessened his love for man, and
- ... God has not developed his character in any way.
- ... He can't. He's God. And He doesn't change.
- ... All this means He is faithful to Himself and to His promises; He's dependable in our trials.

"To say that God is immutable is to say that He never differs from Himself. The concept of a growing or developing God is not found in the Scriptures. It seems to me impossible to think of God as varying from Himself in any way....For a moral being to change it would be necessary that the change be in one of three directions. He must go from better to worse or from worse to better; or granted that the moral quality remain stable, he must change within himself, as from immature to mature or from one order of being to another. It should be clear that God can move in none of these directions. His perfections forever rule out any such possibility....One who can suffer any slightest degree of change is neither self-existent, self-sufficient, nor eternal, and so is not God." [Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*.]

➤ God is always —

... Love	... Gracious	... Omnipresent
... Holy	... Faithful to His promises	... Omniscient
... Present	... Compassionate and	... Patient
... Calling the lost	merciful	... Perfect
... Glorious	... Immanent	... Self-existent & self-
... Righteous &	... Immense	sufficient
wrathful	... Infinite	... Sovereignty
... Eternal	... Jealousy	... Supreme
... Majestic	... Joyful	... Truth
... Good	... Omnipotent	... Wise

- ✓ With everything else about God that does not change, also notice that *God's Son does not change*.

These verses are quoted in **Heb. 1:10-12**. The writer of Hebrews says that to demonstrate the supremacy of Christ (**Heb. 1:4**) who is the radiance of His glory (**Heb. 1:3**; cf. 13:8).

- God's compassion, mercy, and grace toward sinners doesn't change — Gen. 18:32
- Salvation by grace does not change — Gen. 15:6
- God's compassion toward His people doesn't change — He knows we need Him (**103:13-14**)
- The character of the entire Godhead — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is eternally unending. What Christ is, He always has been and always will be... "His touch still has its ancient power."

- God's **PROMISES** do not change (v. 28)

- ✓ Because God's **years will not come to an end** (v. 27), the Psalmist is confident that God will keep His servants, and also His servant's **children and descendants** will be established before the Lord. I.e., the race of God's people will continue. God will not be left without followers.
- ✓ His people are endlessly established before the Lord. (By the end of the Psalm, the Psalmist is less concerned about his own prosperity and survival than he is of the survival of God's people.)
- ✓ Do you notice that the psalmist's final encouragement in this psalm is to encourage God's people by looking forward, to the future — to (as yet) unfulfilled promises? He does that because God is unchanging. And when He has made a promise, He cannot renege on it. He will be faithful. He will bring it to pass (1 Thess. 5:24). This is an OT way of saying, "set your mind on things above" (Col. 3:1).
- ✓ In the midst of our changing circumstances, let's remember the unchangeability of God's promises:
 - His truthfulness (Num. 23:19) has not changed.
 - He's not slow in keeping promises, but being patient toward you (2 Pt. 3:9)
 - He will not leave or forsake you — He is omnipresent and cannot change from that
 - In everything that He is, He is unchanging and unending — He "abides forever" (v. 12). We are transitory (the psalmist's lament in vv. 23-24), but He endures. And because God endures, we who are in Him can be confident that we also will endure, regardless of our worldly circumstances. In illness, death, criticism, persecution, COVID-19, or any other kind of suffering, if we are His people, we will endure as long as He endures. There is our safety and hope.

CONCLUSION: What will we do with the truth of God unchanging? This truth is given to us by God to us to reveal His dependability. We will trust what God has said. What if God could change for the better? or the worse? or in maturity? *Only* because God is immutable can we have hope (confidence!) in Him.

- ✓ Because God is unchanging, **be vigilant to fix your affections on our unchanging God alone.**
- ✓ Because God is unchanging, **rest in the truth that He is just as relevant to us today as He was to Israel.**
- ✓ Because God is unchanging, **be patient in all the providences of your life when you are tempted to distrust Him.**
- ✓ Because God is unchanging (and not needing transformation), **always be striving to be changed into His likeness.**
- ✓ "If our God is the same as the God of [biblical] believers, how can we justify ourselves in resting content with an experience of communion with Him, and a level of Christian conduct, that falls so far below theirs?" [Packer, *Knowing God*.]
- ✓ God unchanging was faithful and adequate for Israel when their world was changing.
- ✓ God unchanging is and will be faithful for us when our world is changing.

BENEDICTION: Psalm 103:19-22