

GOD'S COMPASSION

God changes His mind and relents. This is the wonderful message of the Gospel. When people deserve to expect His judgment and fierce anger He relaxes severity. He becomes less stern. He abandons His harsh intentions, and yields to compassion. After threats and refusal to lift His people up, He suddenly asks, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart has altered within Me. My compassion has all at once been aroused" (Hos 11:8).

The origin of the Hebrew word for "compassion" suggests the idea of "breathing deeply." It suggests a display of deep feelings such as sorrow, or being deeply moved to warm and tender feelings in one's interior being.

One strand of meaning in the basic Hebrew root is "comfort." Although the people of Judah would languish in captivity in Babylon, Isaiah's message was "'Comfort, comfort My people!' says your God. 'Speak kindly to Jerusalem and announce to it that its compulsory military service is over, that its iniquity has been paid for, and that it has received a double equivalent from the hand of the LORD for all its sins!'" (Isa 40:1-2) where David said, about his heavenly Shepherd, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me" (Ps 23:4). This basic Hebrew word found its way into Hebrew names, such as Nehemiah, Nahum, and Menehem.

The strand of meaning that interests us particularly in Hosea 11:8 is "repent" or "relent." The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, usually translated this Hebrew word NHM by words that meant either "repent" or "regret." In the New Testament the word for "repent" means a change of heart in sinful human beings, when they turn from their sin in remorse. It is surprising, therefore, to learn that the majority of uses of the Hebrew root NHM in the Old Testament refer to God's repentance, not that of human beings. We usually think of Him as unchanging or immutable. When Samuel told Saul that the LORD has rejected him, he said, "Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind. For He is not a human being, that He should change His mind."

However, although God is free from sin, and we often think of Him as unchanging or immutable, it is fully appropriate to think about God as if He experienced the kinds of feelings that human beings have. The Greek Epicureans thought of their gods as happily removed from the woes of human beings in the inter-mundane spaces. Knowing about human wickedness would have made them sad, and being sad would have meant a change to a less happy state. Logically, such gods, who could not have feelings, change, or suffer pain, could neither be angry nor forgive. Forgiveness includes accepting the cost and the pain oneself.

The Scriptures inform us that God changes His mind, repents, or relents. Sometimes we are tempted to ask, "If God knew from the outset that human beings would become so wicked, why did He create them? If God knew that Saul was going to become disobedient, why did He choose him as king?" However, when the LORD saw the wickedness of human beings before the universal flood, He "regretted that He had made mankind on the earth, and He felt grieved in His heart" (Gen 6:6). When Saul spared Agag and the best of the animals of the Amalekites, God told Samuel, "I have come to regret that I made Saul king. For he has turned away from following Me and has not carried out My instructions" (1 Sm 15:11). Sometimes this regret in God brought on judgment and punishment. It was a regret that heralded the Law.

However, on other occasions, God's regret heralded undeserved, merciful release. When the Israelites worshipped the golden calf at Mount Sinai, and Moses interceded for them, begging Him to remember His promises to the patriarchs, "the LORD relented from the harm that He said He would do to His people" (Ex 32:14). During the period of the Judges the Israelites repeatedly fell away from God. When they called to Him in their distress, He raised up judges for them. We read this summary of the whole sad process of sin, repentance, and rescue. "Then the LORD relented from the harm that He said He would do to His people" (Jdg 2:18).

After David took a census of the Israelites, God gave David three options as retribution: famine, enemy occupation, or a plague. However, after a plague had taken seventy thousand lives in the rest of the country, and the Angel that God sent to Jerusalem was about to destroy it, "the LORD looked, and relented from the calamity. He told the Angel, who was working destruction: 'It is enough! Now drop your hand!'" (1 Chrn 21:15).

Often God's change of mind was related directly to human beings' repentance as a condition for it. "At one moment, I may threaten about a nation or a kingdom that I shall root it up, tear it down, and destroy it. However, if that nation, which I had threatened, turns back from its evil, then I shall relent about the calamity that I had intended to bring on it. At another time, I may promise about a nation or a kingdom that I shall build and plant it. However, if it does what I regard as evil, so that it does not obey Me, then I shall change My mind about the good things that I had promised to do to it." (Jr 18:7-10). Human repenting was a condition for divine relenting.

Jeremiah's work was made particularly difficult by the knowledge that there was little hope that the people of Judah would repent. Nevertheless, the promise of a change in God's attitude remained open. "Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, so that I may change My mind about the calamity that I intend, because of the evil that they have been doing" (Jr 26:3). When Jeremiah was in danger of being put to death, some of the elders of the land pointed out that Micah from Moresheth had given a similar prophecy, and asked, "Did Hezekiah, the king of Judah, and all Judah, put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and plead for the favour of the LORD? The LORD changed His plan about the calamity that He had threatened against them" (Jr 26:19). When Amos foresaw that a plague of locusts was about to destroy the late crop and a subsequent judgment by fire, and pleaded for the LORD to forgive, "The LORD changed His mind about this. The LORD said, 'This will not happen'" (Amos 7:3, 6).

Jonah wanted to see the destruction of Nineveh, the powerful enemy of Israel. The king of Nineveh told the people to stop their wicked conduct and proclaimed a fast. “When God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their wicked conduct, God relented from the calamity that He had threatened to send on them, and He did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

The faithfulness of God that the Gospel proclaims rests on the certainty that He will not go back on His promises. The messianic promise in Psalm 110, which the writer to the Hebrews takes up in detail, rests on His assurance, “The LORD has sworn and will not relent, ‘You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps 110:4). The messianic promises were unconditional.

We have the hope of eternal life although we know that we have not deserved His grace and mercy. We live in ongoing repentance from sin and faith in the redemption by Jesus Christ. God is just, in a double sense. He is just in the sense that He does not flout His justice, but takes full account of His threats to punish sin. He is just (or righteous) in the Gospel sense that He justifies, or declares righteous, those who believe in Jesus Christ, because His redemption has paid the cost to God’s strict justice. Jesus Christ has taken full account of God’s judgment in Himself. In the cross of Jesus Christ God’s Law, wrath, and just judgment meet His Gospel, grace, and gracious verdict, “Righteous, for Christ’s sake.” Christ’s cross is the means and the guarantee that God has relented. He has relented from the calamity that we had deserved and forgiven us for the sake of Jesus Christ, His Son. In Him God is unchangeable in grace. His Word of the Gospel is faithful.