



T A B L E T A L K

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Security in a World of change... Even after Sept. 11

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The crashing, rolling waves of the Pacific matched my thoughts and mood. One by one the waves rose out of the sea toward the gray darkening sky, bringing the wash and roar of the sea, then folded back down on the sand and foam. The ocean seemed to spin with the mix of tide and surf, all in a random motion, without any seeming meaning or purpose. That seemed to fit; it seemed to match the horror of March 31, 1985.

It was a wet and cool spring day in Portland, and I was in the barn. The phone rang, and news came of an automobile accident. Our family quickly drove to the hospital. The next four hours seemed like a blur, but they would not fade like a bad dream. The wife of one of our elders, also one of my close friends and colleagues, had had a bad accident. Despite the diligence of the hospital staff and the fervent prayers of many, she died.

As I dug my toe into the sand, my mind shifted back twenty years. As a young collegian I, too, had been in an auto accident. Many things were similar; the collision of two cars, the frantic work of firemen and paramedics, the quick, professional care of medical staff—and the death of my only brother.

As I walked that beach, it seemed that life was somewhat like those waves. Life itself rose up, reached for the sky, and then came crashing down on the surf and foam of time and mortality. In a world of change, where life is too brief, where is God? How is He the anchor of life during these times?

The writer of Hebrews stated: "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that . . . we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul firm and secure" (6:17-19, NIV).

Life and, more important, God himself were no different four thousand years ago. Here was Abraham, seemingly cast adrift in the land of Canaan. God had brought him out of Ur. He had seen the favor and forgiveness of the Lord in his marriage fears where he had tried to pass Sarah off as his sister, in his military conquests when God gave him victory over his enemies, and in his faith when he believed God would fulfill his promise and give him an heir through Sarah. And God had done it! The miracle of Isaac's birth documented the faithfulness of God.

But now Abraham faced perhaps the greatest challenge of his life. He sat beside his dead wife, mourning her death and recognizing that, despite God's promises to give him the land of Canaan, he owned no land in Hebron to even bury Sarah's body (Genesis 23). Yet amid Abraham's swirling life-sea, God remained the same. His promises were, and would be, fulfilled exactly in the terms of the oath and promise.

In our lives, it is easy to forget but worth remembering: few things are forever. Fads and fashions, notions and nations, passions and possessions, even life on this planet all come and go. But God remains constant. He is unchanging—His promises and purposes will not change.

Life is a lot like the shadows that pass with the rotation of the day. At first glance they seem stable and constant. But careful observation reveals that they move. James notes that contrast: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (1:17, NIV).

The fact of God's immutability, then, becomes the anchor or constant in a life of change. If God were to change, there would only be three alternatives: one, He could go from worse to better; two, He could change from better to worse; or three, He could change within Himself—that is, from immaturity to maturity. Yet none of these are true.

Moses wrote, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Numbers 23:19, NIV). Isaiah noted, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (46:10, NIV). The seemingly meaningless and tragic loss of a family member, or young mother, still fits into the purpose and plan of an unchanging God.

But what about the times when God appears to have changed His mind? The Lord was grieved and regretted the creation of man (Genesis 6:6). He relented, or changed His mind, concerning judgment on Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:14). God changed His mind about the impending judgment on Nineveh after its repentance—despite Jonah's prediction (Jonah 3:10).

Part of the answer to this seeming contradiction comes in realizing that God does not always give us the complete terms of His judgment or prediction, not even in Scripture. In each of these three examples, the contrasting heart of repentance and godliness brought the reprieve of God. In all of the cases, the change is less in God and more in man. For God to change His conditional treatment of a situation as the character or intercession of man changes is precisely what His immutability dictates.

As I looked beyond the crashing waves and surf and up to the moon above the sea, I noted that the reflection of the moonlight came down across the water and up to the wet sand at my feet. As I walked along, the moonlight stayed at my feet. Despite the crash and wash of the waves, that light still glistened and sparkled its brilliance from the heavens to my exact position. The wave action only enhanced the moonlight.

To a good extent, that is also the message of God's immutability. Despite our expectations and plans and the life spans given by God, which seem

like bouncing waves, He remains constant. He is the unchanging anchor who provides hope and encouragement, the light that burns through changing shadows. And He is the Lord and Savior who meets us in compassion and grace, who carries us through the waves of life as surely as He was in charge of the automobile accidents that have touched my life. For thousands of years, God's immutability has stabilized the saints of God in a world of constant change.

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