

Lesson 18

Joel 2:13b-14, Continued

Joel 2:13b-14 – And he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

We are now in our third and final class about the short but difficult phrase at the end of verse 13 – “and he relents over disaster.”

Does God ever change his mind? That is the question we have been looking at very carefully, and last week we saw that there are two main views: the Closed View and the Open View.

Under the Closed View, whatever takes place in history, from events of great significance to the buzzing of a fly, must take place exactly as God eternally foreknew it would take place before the universe was ever created.

But, under the Open View, God pre-knows some, but not all, future events. Under the Open View, there are some future events that are not knowable in advance, and so God does not know them. That is what it means to

be unknowable – no one knows them. If there are such events, then perhaps they are a consequence of the free will that God has given each of us.

When God does foreknow a future event, then that is either because God will step in and make that event come to pass or because that event is an inevitable result of prior events.

We talked about all of that last week, and when we ended we were looking at many verses in the Bible that seem very hard to explain under the Closed View – such as God regretting that he had made man or that he had made Saul king, such as God changing his mind about Nineveh, such as God extending Hezekiah's life 15 years after he had earlier told Hezekiah that he would not recover, and such as God saying that the possibility of child sacrifice had not even entered his mind.

How does the Closed View crowd explain these examples?

They say that these verses are just figurative and should not be taken as literal descriptions of God – and yet what is the basis for that conclusion?

Where in the Bible do we ever see any indication that we cannot learn about the nature of God from reading about how God operates in this world? If we can learn about God from his creation (Romans 1:20), then of course we can learn even more about God from his word.

But with regard to the Closed View, there is a very important issue we must consider at this point. What about those verses that say God does not or perhaps cannot change his mind?

1 Samuel 15:29 – And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.

Malachi 3:6 – For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

Hebrews 13:8 – Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Aren't those verses a problem for the Open View? Aren't those verses a problem for the idea that God sometimes changes his mind?

To answer those questions, let's look at the context of those verses.

As for that verse from 1 Samuel 15, the immediate context shows God regretting that he had ever made Saul king at all. In fact, in 1 Samuel 15:11, God said "**I regret** that I have made Saul king."

What happened next after God said that? What happened next is that Samuel prayed all night in response to what God had just said about King Saul, seemingly in an attempt to change God's mind.

But when the morning came, I think Samuel understood that God would not change his mind about Saul – not that God **could** not change his mind, but that God **would** not change his mind.

Yes, a man might have had changed his mind about Saul some evening, but then might have forgotten about it the next morning – or perhaps might have changed his mind back the next morning. But that is what a man might have done – that is not what God would do. God

would not change his mind one day and then change it back the next day like a man might have done.

I think when we read 1 Samuel 15:29 in the context of 1 Samuel 15:11, we can see that that is what verse 29 is telling us. I think the message of that verse is that, unlike with men, God cannot be cajoled into changing his mind on a whim. When God changes his mind, God does so only for reasons that are consistent with God's unchanging character.

And I think other verses support that view. For example:

Ezekiel 24:14 – I am the LORD. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. **I will not go back; I will not spare; I will not relent;** according to your ways and your deeds you will be judged, declares the Lord GOD.”

In that verse, God says that he will not change his mind. But doesn't the need for God to make that statement suggest that God **could** change his mind? God does not say, “I **cannot** relent.” Instead, God says, “I **will not** relent.”

I think the point of these verses is not that God is unable to change his mind, but rather is that God is totally unlike men. Unlike men, God does not change his mind when it is profitable or change his mind for the sake of convenience – both of which were common for the false prophets and are still common today. That is how men operate, but that is not how God operates.

Finally, Hebrews 13 does tell us that Jesus is always the same – but how are we to understand that verse

when we see all of the things that Jesus did throughout his life here on earth and when we read about Jesus' changing roles as he ascends back to Heaven to reign over his kingdom and one day deliver that kingdom to God?

Yes, Hebrews 13:8 tells us that Jesus is always the same, but Hebrews 5:8 tells us that Jesus "**learned** obedience through what he suffered." We need to understand both verses in a way that is free of contradiction.

What never changes about Jesus and what can never change about Jesus is Jesus' holy and divine character. We can trust Jesus because we know that his word to us and his love for us are unchanging. We can rely on Jesus because we know that his character and his nature will never change. I think that is the point of Hebrews 13:8.

There is another passage from the Bible that we should consider in this study, and that is Jeremiah 18:1-12. Those verses provide a remarkable commentary on the issues we have been considering.

In those verses, we read where Israel had heard that God was planning on punishing them for their wickedness, and so they had then wrongly assumed that there was no hope. If God had said that he would punish them, then they reasoned that there was nothing they could do about it – so why not just then continue in their wickedness?

To correct that false fatalistic thinking, God told Jeremiah to go to a potter's house to watch a potter at work.

Jeremiah 18:3-10 – So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. **If** at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and **if** that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will **relent** of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And **if** at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and **if** it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will **relent** of the good that I had intended to do to it.

Paul later picks up this same analogy.

Romans 9:21-23 – Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory

Many who adopt the Closed View of the future read those verses to say that God exercises unilateral control over us, but that is precisely the opposite of what is being said in Jeremiah 18 and Romans 9. As the potter is willing to revise his plans after his first plan is

spoiled, so God is willing to revise his plan when the circumstances call for it.

Yes, there are certainties in the future. It was certain that Christ would come and die; it was certain that his church would be established; it is certain that this world will someday end with a day of judgment.

But that there are certainties in the future does not mean that every future event falls into that same category. God is the potter; we are the clay. And God is willing to continue working with us until we become what he wants us to become.

And, how do we explain prayer under the Closed View of the future?

If every outcome is already recorded somewhere, then what good does it do to pray for some specific outcome?

If the outcome is known to God before we pray for it to occur otherwise, then how could God ever be said to answer our prayer one way or the other? How could our prayer ever change anything?

Under the Closed View, wouldn't our prayers be like someone watching a Shakespearean tragedy written 400 years ago and praying to God that it will have a happy ending? "God, please let Hamlet live!" Does that make any sense?

Is that how prayer is described in the Bible? I don't think so. The Bible tells us that God sometimes reverses his planned course of action based on prayer. We certainly saw that with the 15 years added to King Hezekiah's life.

And what about Elijah?

James 5:17-18 – Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Were that drought and that rain going to happen whether or not Elijah prayed for them to happen? If so, then in what way is Elijah a great example of the power of prayer?

So where are we? What can we conclude about these issues?

Where we are is still in Joel 2:13-14!

“And he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?”

And the question that started this off remains – does God ever change his mind?

The answer is simple under the Closed View. If God does not and cannot change in any respect, then, of course, God does not ever change his mind.

But I think that view is wrong. I think the Bible tells us that God does sometimes change his mind. I think that is what we have seen in the verses we have just studied. And I think that is what we see here in Joel 2:13 – “And he relents over disaster.”

And if God changes his mind, doesn't that tell us that there are some things about the future that are unknowable before they happen – such as the thoughts of free will human beings? Isn't the only reason to change your mind because you have learned something new – something you did not know earlier?

Either way we go with this question, I think we need to avoid simplistic answers. There is nothing simple here. As we said at the beginning, we cannot answer these questions from the shallow end of the pool. Let me give two complicated examples to demonstrate that fact.

If you spend much time thinking about these issues, it is examples such as these two that will keep you up at night!

The first complicated example involves God's rejection of King Saul, which we looked at last week.

We know that God chose King Saul as the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:1). And we know that King Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Samuel 9:21). And we also know God's promise to King Saul through the prophet Samuel.

1 Samuel 13:13-14 – And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. **For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever.** But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over

his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”

Samuel said, “For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever.” But how then do we explain God’s earlier promise to Judah through his father Jacob?

Genesis 49:10 – The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

How could the scepter never depart from the tribe of **Judah** if the royal line would be from the tribe of **Benjamin** forever? That’s a good question! Let’s come back to it later.

The second complicated example is no easier, and it involves God’s extension of King Hezekiah’s life, which we also looked at last week.

In 2 Kings 20:1, God said to Hezekiah, “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.” But Hezekiah prayed to God, and, as a result, he did recover, and God added 15 years to his life. Keep that number 15 in mind.

After those 15 years were up, Hezekiah died in 2 Kings 20:21. And who reigned next?

2 Kings 21:1 – Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem.

Manasseh was one of the most evil kings who ever lived, even to the point of burning his son as an offering to his false gods in 2 Kings 21:6.

But notice how old he was when he started to reign – he was 12 years old. What that means is that Manasseh would never have been born had Hezekiah not had those 15 years added to his life.

Now we might say that is lesson about watching we ask for, but let's not be too quick to say that. Why? Because not only would we have missed out on Manasseh, we would also have missed out on Manasseh's grandson – Josiah!

In the annals of godly teenagers, King Josiah deserves a place along side Daniel, another godly teenager who was born not long after Josiah. When Josiah was 16, 2 Chronicles 34:3 tells us that “he began to seek after the God of David his father.”

Josiah's repairs to the temple led to the re-discovery of the law by Hilkiah the priest. That find led to a time of great religious reform in Judah.

But where is the complication, you ask? It is right here:

1 Kings 13:1-2 – And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the LORD to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the LORD and said, “O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, **Josiah by name**, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.’”

That prophecy from 1 Kings 13 that refers to King Josiah **by name** was made 300 years before Josiah was born! And

Josiah would never have been born had God not extended his grandfather's life by 15 years!

As I said, there is nothing simple about these issues!

How does the Open View explain such complicated examples as those two?

These may just be examples of the sort we have already seen – examples where God steps in and makes something happen as he needs for it to happen to accomplish his purposes.

God must have known that at some point he would switch the kingship from Benjamin to Judah, and so he did so when King Saul disobeyed his command. Had Saul not disobeyed God, then that change to Judah would have happened at some later time. But we know it was going to happen eventually because of the great promise in Genesis 49:10. And perhaps we even know it would have happened in the days of David given his connection with Ruth.

So, yes, God does sometime change his mind – but sometimes God knows all along that he will change his mind at some point.

Likewise, if Hezekiah had died when he was originally told he would die, God could have raised up a Josiah from someone else in the royal line. The prophecy was just that there would be a good king named Josiah – God could have found someone else to fill that role.

So what then is the answer? The Closed View or the Open View? Which is a better fit with what we read about God in the Bible?

I think the Open View is better than the Closed View at explaining what we read in the Bible. In fact, in my opinion, the Closed View sometimes contradicts what we read in the Bible. And the fact that the Closed View was John Calvin's view doesn't help it.

So am I saying that the Open View is the correct view? No, I am not. What I am saying is that the Open View is the better view – it is better than the Closed View.

But we also saw some potential issues with the Open View when we looked at God regretting that he had ever made Saul king and when we looked at the prophecy about Josiah.

As we said at the beginning of our study, we may be living in Flatland when it comes to these issues. We live in time the way a fish lives in water, and a timeless existence is not something we can really understand.

I am sure that the Closed View cannot explain all of the evidence in the Bible, and I suspect the same may be true of the Open View.

So this is where I have ended up: I reject the Closed View, and I lean toward the Open View. But I am keeping an open mind, and I plan to continue studying these difficult questions. Every time I do, I learn more about God from his word – and that is a very good thing!

In our detailed study of verses 13–14, we have looked at many examples from the Bible that teach us something about how God sees the future. Let's look at one more example.

Genesis 22:9-12 – When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, **for now I know** that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Did you catch it? “For **now** I know.”

When did God know that Abraham would not withhold his only son from God? “For **now** I know!” And if God had known that earlier, then why put Abraham through that terrible test?

Was it just so Abraham himself would know? That is not what the Bible says. The Bible says, “**for now I know** that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, **from me.**”

I think what we find in the Bible is a God who is as creative and resourceful as he is wise and powerful and loving. God’s plans are accomplished because God accomplishes them. God is active in this world, and God expects us to be active as well. God is not just sitting back and watching things happen, and neither should we.

We know that the character of God and the nature of God are unchanging. But that does not mean that God is a like a photograph that forever remains fixed in time.

That is not the description of God that we find in his word.

I think what we see in the Bible is that God is not a being who experiences the whole of reality in the isolation of a single timeless perception. I do not think that we see a God who is a detached observer. I do not think that we find a God who is unmoved and unmovable by the course of human history.

Instead, I think what we find in the Bible is a God who sometimes responds to events as they occur. A God who sometimes rejoices, who sometimes sorrows, who is sometimes surprised, and who sometimes wishes things had turned out very differently from how they did turn out.

Can we ever understand all there is to know about such a God?

- God, who spoke the entire universe into existence, from the smallest particle to the furthest star?
- God, who made us in his image, with free will?
- God, who created time and who put eternity into our heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11)?
- God, “who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things” (Romans 8:32)?

When we think about just how great is our God, I think we must all end with the same statement that David had when he considered these same difficult issues.

Psalm 139:1-6 – O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. **Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.**

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it!” That is where David writing by inspiration ended up, and I think that is also a good ending point for us.

When we started this discussion we were in verse 14 of Joel 2, so let’s go back there and finish looking at that verse.

Joel 2:14 – Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

“Who knows whether he will not turn and relent?”

God would turn and relent if the people repented and returned to him, but God would not turn and relent if the people persisted in their sin and rebellion.

So who knows whether God would, in fact, turn and relent? Did God even know at this time? Did God know what the people would decide to do? Did God know their thoughts **before** they had those thoughts, or did God know their thoughts **when** they had those thoughts?

Perhaps we now have a different perspective on those questions after we have looked at all of those examples from the Bible.

In any event, it seems that this terrible coming day of the Lord was not yet a certainty but was still only a possibility. It could be stopped.

And the people were the ones who could stop it by turning back to God. It was **their** will that would determine whether God relented. Would they repent or would they not repent? **The choice was theirs.** They had free will to make that choice.

It all reminds me of a favorite C.S. Lewis quote:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it.

And what would the people find if God did turn and relent? Verse 14 tells us. They would find a blessing. They would find a grain offering. They would find a drink offering.

Rather than the promised curses of Deuteronomy 28 that come from disobedience, they would find the promised blessings that come from obedience.

And rather than being unable to make offerings to God in the temple, they would once again be able to make those drink and grain offerings because God would provide those blessings for them.

And, again, that is exactly what God had told them long before.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 – I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore **choose life**, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

Choose life! That choice was their choice. And it remains our choice today.

God has given us free will – how will we use it? Will we choose life? We know that it is God's will that we be saved. Is it our will? Is it my will? Is it your will?

Yes, our free will is a tremendous gift from God. But, as with all such gifts, our free is also a tremendous responsibility. The choice is ours! And God wants us all to make the right choice.

And here in Joel 2, the people listening to Joel has been given a choice. The choice was their choice. God had not made that choice for them, and God would not make that choice for them. But God would turn and relent over the promised disaster if they made the right choice.

Joel 2:15

Joel 2:15 – Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly;

The word “Zion” appears seven times in the book of Joel.

We saw the first occurrence back in Joel 2:1 (“Blow a trumpet in Zion”), and the second occurrence is here in verse 15 (“Blow the trumpet in Zion.”)

We will see “children of Zion” in verse 23, and we will see Zion at the end of Joel 2 just **before** the point where Peter stopped quoting Joel 2 in Acts 2 (“For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.”).

What can we say about the word “Zion”? One thing we can say is that its meaning evolved somewhat over time.

- Zion was originally a stronghold of the Jebusites located in or near Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:7–9).
- The Temple Mount was sometimes called Mount Zion (Isaiah 8:18).
- And Zion was sometimes used to refer to Jerusalem more generally (Psalm 51:18, Isaiah 2:3).
- And Zion was also used to designate the people of God as a whole (Isaiah 51:16) (“and saying to Zion, ‘You are my people.’”).

In fact, we sometimes find Jerusalem, Zion, and Mount Zion used almost interchangeably in the Bible.

That final usage of “Zion” as the people of God carried over into the New Testament, where “Zion” is used to describe the church.

Hebrews 12:22-23 – But you have come to **Mount Zion** and to **the city of the living God**, the **heavenly Jerusalem**, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to **the assembly of the firstborn** who are enrolled in heaven...

And so, as we said earlier about verse 1, verse 15 is likewise talking about physical Jerusalem, but, by using this word “Zion” I think verse 15 is also calling upon us to think about spiritual Zion, the church. Again, as with verse 1, I think verse 15 is anticipating what we will see at the end of Joel 2 about the establishment of the church.

Not only do we see “Zion” in both verses 1 and 15, but we also hear a trumpet in both verses 1 and 15. What does the trumpet signify?

Back in verse 1, the trumpet was blown in Zion to sound an alarm. The people had awakened to find themselves surrounded by an enemy army, and so the watchmen on the wall had sounded the alarm.

This trumpet in verse 15 is different. It is not being sounded as an alarm, but rather it is being sounded as a call for the people to gather together in a solemn assembly.

And, like the trumpet, that solemn assembly is also something we have seen earlier in Joel.

Joel 1:14 – Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.