Failed Grammar and Divine Inability

“There are some things God cannot do,” my seven year old Sophie recently informed me. And, of course, Sophie is right. There are a lot of things that God cannot do. God cannot cease to exist (Jeremiah 10.10; 1 Timothy 1.17), God cannot change (Malachi 3.6; James 1.17), God cannot approve of what is evil (Habakkuk 1.13), and God cannot lie (Numbers 23.19; Hebrews 6.18). The point is not simply that God does not do any of these things. The point is that God cannot do any of these things. They are impossible for him.

Does God’s “inability” to do these things reflect a weakness on God’s part? Surely not! At this point our grammar betrays us. That God cannot change or lie does not signal a lack of power on his part. It rather signals the perfection of the divine nature—that which distinguishes the eternally perfect God from mortal, changeable human beings: “Let God be true, and every man a liar!” (Romans 3.4; cf. Numbers 23.19).

In the midst of constantly changing circumstances, enemies who would destroy us, and a deep awareness of our own continuing sinfulness, the perfection of God’s nature is pure gospel. God’s unchanging, unlying nature underlines every covenant promise and seals every covenant blessing. He has sworn to be our God (Leviticus 26.12). He has promised never to leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13.5). He has pledged to complete his work of redemption (Ephesians 1.13-14). Because God has given us these promises, his good purposes for us cannot fail, even should the whole world oppose us. This we know because “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6.18).

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