

The Impassible God

Revelation 21:1-4

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Our topic this morning, the impassibility of God, is the doctrine that God does not suffer. Passible, in this context, is related to our word for passion, or suffering – like we might speak of the passion of Christ, by which, we mean his suffering. To say God is impassible, is to affirm that he does not, indeed, he cannot, in his essence as God, suffer. He is not passible, but he is impassible.

Now, this attribute of God has been held by virtually the whole church, in the whole world, for the whole of its existence. It may seem counterintuitive to us – as I've said, a lot about God is counterintuitive to us – and this is certainly an aspect where modern people bristle -- but it was anything but counterintuitive or problematic to the historic church. It was joyfully proclaimed and understood as indispensable to Christian theism.

But the 20th c – and into the 21st – has been a time of convulsion – in the world, and in the world of theology. And we have seen a steady questioning, and abandonment of, the classical doctrine of God's impassibility. And if you want the reason for this, I can give it to you in one word: Auschwitz. Or, more broadly, the Holocaust. In the face of such horrific evil, the idea that God doesn't suffer with us, with the millions of innocent victims, has been deemed unacceptable. Thus the idea of an impassible God has come under withering criticism from all sides. The idea of an impassible God is too Greek, we've been repeatedly told, it owes too much to the Stoics, to Hellenistic thought, and not to the (esp. Hebrew) Bible. For the God of the Bible, unlike the God of the philosophers, is passionate, angry. He weeps, he pleads, he loves, he hates, he is provoked, he is tender, he is deeply, emotionally, implicated in the lives of his creatures. And, thus, surely, he must suffer. It would be appalling (and heartless) to think otherwise.

Elie Wiesel, the famous Jewish author & holocaust survivor, in his memoir, *Night* (1960), wrote of watching a young child hung (with two others) in front of thousands of spectators in Nazi death camp. Then being forced to walk past the hanging victims, he writes:

But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing... And so, he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range.

He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard a man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where is he? This is where—hanging here, from this gallows."

If there is to be a God at all after Auschwitz, he must suffer in our suffering. And if this is so, then we must, the narrative goes, abandon the classical doctrine of impassibility. We do not want a God who does not suffer.

This view was perhaps most famously and effectively put forth by the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, who, in 1973, authored an influential book, entitled: *The Crucified God*. Moltmann believed we need God himself AS God, AS divine, in his DIVINITY, suffering and hanging on the gallows with broken and anguished humanity.

"Any other answer would be blasphemy, he says, to speak here of a God who could not suffer would be to make God a demon... *God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God --- that is the basis for a real hope.*"

So, as you can see, there is a lot at stake here, and it is an emotionally fraught issue, especially after the horror that world witnessed in the 20th c.

If you want an effective rebuttal Moltmann and this whole trend, then I recommend Thomas Weinandy's (Catholic scholar) book: *Does God Suffer?* He defends the classical position, and thus his answer to the question: "Does God Suffer?" is "No, he does not."

With that, we will make three points. The Impassible God. Passionate Language. And the Impassible Suffers.

I. The Impassible God

First, then, the impassible God. Here I want to state, with a bit more precision what we are affirming. Impassibility means God is unable, he is not capable, it is impossible for him, to suffer. A God who suffered IN HIS BEING AS GOD would not be the Christian God.

Now, we are not affirming that God is stoic, or indifferent to human misery, or that's he's detached, and uncaring, uninvolved. No one doubts that God cares, that he understands. Nor do we mean that God is static or inert. Impassible does not mean apathetic. We have already referred to WCF chapter 2 which says --- that God is without body, parts, or PASSIONS. "Passions" here means emotional fluctuations, any sort of change or suffering.

The point, for our purposes is that God is not acted on, or caused to suffer, by external forces, or by something arising from his own internal being. God can suffer neither from within, nor from without. He cannot be harmed, compromised, manipulated, victimized, diminished, thwarted, or altered in any way. If he could, the forces which did so, would be greater than God. Thus, God cannot suffer.

I know some of you are thinking --- but what about...this or that... or what about Jesus... lets go slow. And start with the one essence of God, the undivided divinity shared by all three persons. Impassibility is easily deduced from, or bound up with, entailed by, a number of other attributes we've already looked at. Remember: at a bare minimum, we must say any attribute of God implies ALL the other attributes.

Let's just think through a few attributes. Most obviously, impassibility follows immutability which we looked at a few weeks back. All the Scripture texts we used there, apply here. Psalm 102, Hebrews 6, James 1:17, 1 Samuel 15. Any text which asserts God does not change, implies that he does not suffer. If God suffers in his Godhead, then his divinity fluctuates and changes.

Second, we saw that God is A-SE, he possesses Aseity, that is he is independent of the creature, and fully self-sufficient. Such a being cannot be emotionally afflicted by his creatures.

Or think of God's knowledge. If he knows all, infallibly and eternally (much less decrees whatsoever comes to pass), then he certainly can't be surprised, or caught off guard, or grieved or find himself needing to respond to something unforeseen.

Or think of God's simplicity. God does not have parts. Not just body parts, but immaterial, invisible parts. There is no composition of any kind in God. Thus, all that is in God--IS God. This means that either ALL of God suffers (in which case he is not God), or none of God suffers, in which case, he is impassible.

But think further, of God's happiness, his infinite blessedness. God blesses us, and we bless God, all because God IS blessed. That is, fully happy, and delighted in being Himself. This is pervasively affirmed in Scripture. Hear the Word of God: Psalm 106: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!

In Romans 9 Paul speaks of Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. And the gospel, he says in 1 Timothy 1, is the gospel of the blessed God. He takes an oath in 2 Corinthians and says: The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. Or, in a text to which we have repaired numerous times, 1 Timothy 6: he is the blessed and only sovereign.

Finally, our NT lesson from Romans 1: They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!

Precisely because God is NOT a creature, but is the Creator, he is BLESSED, transcendentally infinitely, happy forever. We do not think enough about God's pleasure in being God, his divine, full, replete happiness. His eternal and indestructible blessedness as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Because we are constantly correlating him to us, ratcheting down his Godness to something we can manage.

If God is blessed, and he is infinitely so, then he can suffer no grief, no modification, no loss. His sovereign serenity and peace remain undisturbed. Even by war. Passibility, then, is simply incompatible with ANY of the perfections of our God. Not a single attribute or perfection of God remains if, in the divine essence he suffers.

Now, I am not unaware of the emotional force of someone like Moltmann who passionately argues (pun intended) for a God who suffers with us. It can be moving, even comforting, at least at first glance.

But here we must push back. Here there are two things we will consider. First, it should be clear that God is impassible not because he's cold, or lacks compassion, but precisely because he is the fulness of perfect being. He could not be any more compassionate or merciful or loving or concerned than he already is – and if suffering could induce some improvement, or move him to be better, or more near, it would only indicate that he is not God.

Second, given the human predicament, we don't really need a God who is bound up in suffering as we are. Imagine, if you will, that you need a major surgery to save your life. And the doctor comes in and says, "oh, I've got the same thing, and I am in agony today, I'm right there suffering with you. In fact, like you, I slept terrible last night." Well, you might want him to get fixed before he tries to fix you. The great Physician is not the sick and suffering physician. He's healthy and whole and full of ever-fresh power and wisdom to restore us.

Same thing if your house is on fire. And your neighbor starts telling you about how sympathetic they are, because their house is also on fire. Or they light themselves on fire to show their solidarity with you. You need someone from the fire department who is stable, calm, equipped, and not undergoing your plight, to save you from your plight. Certainly, we don't need or want someone who is undergoing the same emotional fluctuations as we are. In short, only the impassible God can save a suffering people.

II. Passionate Language

Our second point is passionate language. And here I will be brief, because we've covered this before. There is an array of passages (dozens) which speak of God as pleading, as angry, as furious, and emotionally distressed with Israel. What about these texts? Well, we've seen that God is a simple spirit. Even though, a quick naïve reading of the Bible, would show that he has hands, nostrils, fingers, arms, feet, eyes, legs, etc. We all easily realize that these are anthropomorphisms. That is, they describe God (improperly) as, or in the form of, a man. Even though God is not a man. In short, we don't take these texts literally, they are metaphorical ways of pointing to something in God.

Well, the same is true with all the texts about God's apparently changing emotions, his grief, his disappointment, etc. This is called anthropopathic language. That is, language which speaks of God as having the passions or emotions of human beings. But God has unalterable dispositions and affections. Virtues, if you will, which are not subject to variation or being altered. So this language of grief or regret or fury must also be figurative.

Now, this is a complex, but for now we can say it speaks of how we experience God's actions (outward will). Whatever we want to do with this language, it cannot refer to tumult or turbulence in the being of God. Here's John Owen the 17th c. English theologian: If God be properly and literally angry, and furious and wrathful, then he is moved, troubled, perplexed and is neither blessed nor perfect.

"In strict propriety of speech," Jonathan Edwards says, "there is no such thing as any pain, grief, or trouble in God."

So of this passionate language, we must affirm with Augustine: You love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you "repent" without the pain of regret. You are wrathful and remain tranquil."

III. The Impassible Suffers.

Finally, the impassible suffers. The impassible God, the God whose essence is beyond suffering, becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, and AS MAN, not in his divine nature, but in his humanity, he suffers. The person of the Son of God suffers in his human nature, NOT in his divine essence. If God could suffer AS GOD, the way modern theologians insist he must, the incarnation would be unnecessary. God could just inflict the suffering and punishment due to sin on his own divine being.

But the incarnation is necessary . And it shows us that God is not impassible in the sense lacking sympathy. As we heard from Hebrews 4 today:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

God sympathizes with our weaknesses so much, that he became man (while remaining fully divine, the eternal Son of God), he became man to enter into our weaknesses, and ultimately, to bear them away. The One who suffers IS divine, but he does not suffer AS divine (2x's). He suffers as man, in our flesh. Any other form of suffering would not be genuinely human suffering, it would not be *our* suffering.

And here we affirm that it is precisely the absence of suffering in God, which enables and protects his love and steadfastness, his perfect goodness, from any assault or fluctuation. And this means, when out of the fulness of his unchanging love and sympathy, his abundant mercy, his unmeasured compassion, he acts to save us in Jesus Christ – that action is PURE gift, pure grace. Only this One can save us and can suffer for us. For we are saved, not in spite of God's impassibility, but because of it.

Only of this God shall it be said, as John prophesies in Revelation 21: *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*

At that time, the whole church will participate, in a creaturely way, in the impassible glory of God, for in that day suffering will be destroyed, banished, and, like it has always been for God, it will be impossible for us to ever suffer again. Glory to the Impassible God. Amen.

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