THE IMPASSIBILITY OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

- Before unpacking what it means that God is *impassible* (with an "I" in the middle), it is important to understand that we are not using the word *impassable* (with an "a" in the middle)
- The latter word perhaps refers to what happens to a road after a mudslide covers it...it becomes impassable
- Or perhaps it refers to the impasse reached because of the inability of two sides to conclude a negotiation
- The impassibility of God means that he does not experience emotional changes either from within or effected by his relationship to creation
- In other words, God is never moved by something that would provoke a change in Him.
- As it implies, *impassibility* is a negation, the opposite of *passibility*
- *Im*passibility is one of many negations in the study of theology proper...just as God is *in*finite not finite, *im*mortal not subject to mortality, *in*comprehensible beyond our ability to comprehend and *im*mutable not changeable, so also God is *im*passible in that he is not subject to passions
- Because impassibility is a negation, it is more easily understood in contrast to human passibility
- Humans are *passible* beings because they are capable of being acted on by outside influences
- People are capable of being the *patient* of an *agent*...the words *patient* and *passible* come from the same root (*pati-*) meaning "to suffer or undergo"...a patient is one who suffers (not always a negative term) or undergoes the action of an agent
- Thus, to be passible is to be able to be or capable of being the patient of an agent
- As humans, we (the patient) engage with a variety of situations and events (the agent) that produce changes in us
- These changes move us toward what we perceive as good and away from what we perceive as bad
- These motions toward good and away from bad are *passions*
- Thus, humans are *passionate* (think states of being as opposed to intensity) creatures, constantly being acted upon by outside influences, resulting in a variety of *passions* such as love and hate, joy and sadness, confidence and fear, mercy and vengeance, etc.
- To be "passible" is to be "capable of feeling, especially suffering" or to be "susceptible to emotion"
- Examples: choosing some but rejecting other foods on a buffet...loving and hating certain sports teams... loving a spouse or another person
- All of these situations involve humans being acted upon by external forces...this is what it means to be *passionate* and *passible*
- "The life of passible creatures, the experience of passions, is a constant shifting flow of movements and motions, ups and downs, changes brought about by all kinds of outward forces. A green light makes us happy one moment; then a red light changes our mood entirely. A point scored by our favorite sports team gives us great contentment and confidence; then a point scored by the opposing team provokes frustration and fear."
- Thus, our passions are motions of the body and mind, changes brought about as we become the patients of agents of all kinds
- However, God is not susceptible to the influence of outside forces...he is entirely impassible

- He neither undergoes affective change nor feels the actions of creatures on himself...he is entirely unmoved by his creatures
- God's love and mercy, etc. are not passions or motions, changes or states of being; rather, they are God Himself, perfect, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, pouring out His goodness on His creatures.

WHAT IS DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY?

Definition of a Passion

- In order to properly understand why God is impassible (i.e. he has no passions), it is important to understand what passion means and why states of being that humans experience such as love, joy, compassion, fear, and anger are called passions
- Merriam-Webster defines passion as "the state or capacity of being acted on by external agents or forces"
- Passion is a state of being created when someone is acted on by an external agent
- Our English term "passion" comes from the Latin word *passio* (from the Latin *pati-*) which means to suffer, to submit, to undergo, to experience
- It has the sense of being acted on and of receiving the action of an agent with oneself
- The Latin terms come from the Greek terms *pathos* and *pascho* which have essentially the same meaning
- Every passion produces a change in the subject as the consequence of some agent's action on it
- "Every passion is a caused state of being into which one is moved by the activity of some agent. For this reason, all passions are finite, dependent, time bound, and mutable states of being. Moreover, to experience passion one must possess a principle of receptivity (i.e., passive potency) by which new actuality is received. That is, one must be moveable or changeable...Passions can be either good or bad. Others can act on us in ways that produce joy or sadness, pleasure or pain. Even the term suffering, though commonly associated with the infliction of pain, does not necessarily indicate an experience of anguish or distress. Sometimes we deploy the language of affliction to speak of pleasant passions. Humans fall in love and are smitten by the objects of their romantic attraction. One's beloved may even be called one's crush. These violent terms speak of the intensity and power with which romantic love sometimes comes upon a person. The agent causing this passion is the one loved insomuch as his or her loveliness is the attractive force that moves the lover into a state of actually loving. My wife's loveliness, for instance, is the efficient cause that draws me to her. My love for her is passionate to just the extent that I am affected and moved by her loveliness."
- "Passions are only so called because of the manner of their coming on the subject through a process of undergoing and reception of new actuality. If one were to possess the virtues of love, joy, mercy, jealousy, and the like without having undergone an intrinsic affective change produced by the action of some causal agent, then those virtues would not be passions in that case. This does not mean those virtues would be deprived of intensity, vitality, or dynamism. To speak of passionless love, joy, mercy, or jealousy means only that these states did not come upon the subject through the reception of actuality from an efficient cause of being. One person could be passionless because of the lack of love, joy, mercy, or jealousy. Another could be passionless because, although he or she is intensely and dynamically loving, joyful, merciful, or jealous, these states are not the effect of some agent's action on him or her...Suffice it to say that denying passions of God by no means entails that he is without love, joy, mercy, jealousy, and so forth, but only that these virtues are not in him as the result of the determinative action of a causal agent."²

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¹ James Dolezal, "Strong Impassibility" pdf

² Ibid

Definition of Impassibility

- When used of God, impassibility means that God does not experience emotional change in any way...he does not and cannot suffer...he is without passions
- It is the notion that God cannot be acted upon or moved by any other source or external force
- It is that divine attribute in which God does not experience inner emotional changes of state, whether enacted freely from within or effected by his relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order
- God is not subject to shifting moods, flashes of temper, fluctuating dispositions, or seasons of despondency
- There is a close connection between divine immutability and divine impassibility as impassibility is a corollary to immutability, flowing inevitably from the fact that God is unchangeable
- An unchanging God cannot, by definition, have passions, which in the technical language of theology are emotional states that can be affected or changed by external forces
- Because He cannot be affected or changed by external forces, God cannot experience passions
- God is never the patient of an agent...he is never moved by something that would provoke a change in him
- Nothing in God's creation exerts a force on God that changes him and causes him to move toward a perceived good or away from a perceived bad
- For example, God's love and mercy are not passions as they are in humans, but rather are his perfections, completely uninfluenced by his creatures
- This means that God is not moved to love or moved to mercy but, rather, that he loves and shows mercy from the infinite fullness of his own goodness
- God is not moved to love and, because his love is not a passion, he can no more cease to be love than he can cease to be

1 John 4:8 ~ The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

"If God's love were a passion like ours, it would change constantly based on our goodness and badness. Our changes would cause changes in God. In fact, all creation would be a constant cause of change in an omniscient and omnipresent God. But God relates to creation and loves His people with an everlasting love precisely because God loves us from His own infinite fullness and not based on perceived goodness in us."

Psalm 136:1 ~ Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

1 John 4:19 ~ We love, because He first loved us.

- Similarly, God is not moved to mercy by something He perceives in us, such as our depravity and great need of grace
- This is not like our mercy...our mercy depends on feeling our heartstrings pulled toward someone or something...when that happens, we are moved to mercy (i.e. we give to the poor, help those in need, etc.)
- But God's mercy is not like that...it is not a passion

Ephesians 2:4-9 ~ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

³ https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2022/05/impassibility/

- Neither our "good" works or our "bad" works (i.e. our wretched depravity described in Eph 2:1-3) moved God to be merciful toward us
- "God helps the helpless from the infinite fullness of His own goodness, not from sincere movement or emotional manipulation. Therefore, the helpless can always call on God, knowing that He is not merciful but mercy itself. God is not moved to mercy; He is mercy."
- This is what we see portrayed frequently throughout the OT

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 ~ The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Lamentations 3:22-23 ~ The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. 23 They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.

Hosea 14:4 ~ I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely, For My anger has turned away from them.

- The reason God cannot be moved by any external force is because he possesses all that is necessary for true happiness
- No one can add to or subtract anything from God because no one can increase or decrease his happiness in himself

1 Timothy 1:11 ~ according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.

1 Timothy 6:15-16 ~ which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

- Since he is completely, satisfied in himself, God's happiness does not change based on whether people love him or not
- "God does have pleasure in his people and their good works, but he is pleased with what he works in them by the grace of Christ (Heb. 13:20–21). In other words, God's pleasure in us does not come from anything we add to him, but what he adds to us. Therefore, God dwells in perfect happiness. He is 'the fountain of living waters' (Jer. 2:13). Dwelling in his love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice beyond measure, God is a feast of life and a river of joy (Ps. 36:5–9)."
- "Our glad conclusion is that God is entirely happy. The Lord is a bottomless ocean of joy, a never-setting sun of blessedness. God is infinitely merciful, and Christ is full of sympathy for us in his human nature, but the triune God has not a speck of sadness in himself. He is God."

Other Scriptural Support

- There are a couple key texts in Job which substantiate the impassibility of God, demonstrating that our righteousness or wickedness do not change God
- Our sin does not hurt God, nor does our righteousness give anything to him

Job 22:1-3 ~ Then Eliphaz the Temanite responded, 2 "Can a vigorous man be of use to God, Or a wise man be useful to himself? 3 Is there any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, Or profit if you make your ways perfect?

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paul Smalley, https://credomag.com/article/can-an-impassible-god-love/

⁶ Ibid.

Job 35:5-8 ~ Look at the heavens and see; And behold the clouds—they are higher than you. 6 If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against Him? And if your transgressions are many, what do you do to Him? 7 If you are righteous, what do you give to Him, Or what does He receive from your hand? 8 Your wickedness is for a man like yourself, And your righteousness is for a son of man.

A key passage in Acts also argues for divine impassibility

Acts 14:11-15 ~ When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." 12 And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out 15 and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM.

- v. 15 literally says "we are also men of the same passion as you"
- KJV = "We are also men of like passions with you"
- Young's Literal Translation = "we are men like–affected with you"
- Paul argues that he and Barnabas are not like the Greek gods at all...they are in fact, just like other men, passionate creatures...thus, they should receive no worship at all
- Instead, they point the people away from themselves to the independent, self-sufficient, "living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them"...i.e. the one, true living God who is not like Paul and Barnabas...who is impassible
- Many of the other perfections of God that we have already discussed also contribute to our understanding that God is impassible

Immutability

- God is the one true constant in the entire universe, unchanging in all his ways
- He does not alter His Word, revise His will, revoke His promises, or change His mind

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

Numbers 23:19 ~ God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

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

James 1:17 ~ Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

- Divine impassibility is a necessary complement to the doctrine of divine immutability, expressing the fact that God is unchangeable in his essence or being, and in his outward acts in the world
- If God is not immutable and impassible, then "[s]uddenly you have a miserable God, the unhappiest being in the universe as he shares in the suffering of all his creatures. And once you have a God mired in the misery of his creation you are marching closer to process theology. In process theology God so identifies with his creation that he is all becoming, no being. And because he experiences all the brokenness we experience, God can't help but be in process with the rest of us."

⁷ Kevin DeYoung, Tis Mystery All, the Immortal Dies: Why the Gospel of Christ's Suffering is More Glorious Because God Does Not Suffer pdf

Aseity

Exodus 3:14 ~ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

• "Emotional change, which impassibility absolutely denies with respect to God, would necessarily involve a mutation from either a worse state of being to a better one or a better state of being to a worse one. On the one hand, how can one who is infinite in perfection be in need of any change for the better? Moreover, where would this good come from with respect to Him who possesses all that HE—IS from and by Himself? If He did not possess it from Himself, He could not impart to Himself what He does not already have. And yet, if He already possesses this good from Himself, then there would be no emotional change after all. On the other hand, how could one who is infinite in power, wisdom, and goodness suffer any change for the worse? God is incorruptible and, therefore, cannot become worse; He is immutable and, therefore, cannot improve or mutate in any way. From this we see that God must necessarily be impassible."

Simplicity

• The simplicity of God means that he is not made up of parts, nor does he have multiple states of being

Exodus 3:14 ~ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Acts 17:25 ~ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things

Romans 11:35 ~ Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?

God derives nothing of himself from another being

Does God Have Emotions or Affections?

- In one sense, God does have an emotional life...the Word tells us that he is grieved, he is angry, he rejoices, he is full of mercy, he is overflowing in love
- So, if anger and joy and pity are emotions, then God has emotions...we should not be afraid to speak of God in the way Scripture does and the Bible is full of emotional language
- On the other hand, we can't simply say that God has emotions like we do...because emotions don't sweep over him involuntarily like they do for us
- Not only is God's character immutable so too is God's inner life...he is never passively acted upon
- God is never overcome with rage...he never falls in love...he does not get frustrated
- Emotions do not just happen to him such that he is forced to act in a certain way in order to make himself happier or change his mood from bad to good...he is completely free
- He makes decisions based on his own unchanging will and purpose, not on changing emotional states
- "If we are equating emotions with the old sense of passions, then God doesn't have emotions. But if we are talking about affections, he does...Most of what we call emotion in God is his evaluation of what is happening with his creation. So God has real emotions but they are always active. They are not forced upon him. They are not dictated by others. God's inner emotional life suffers no change...As we talk about God's emotional life we must keep this in mind: his changing external emotions are but a reflection of his inner,

⁸ Charles Rennie, https://credomag.com/article/is-impassibility-really-biblical/

unchanging nature and character. These emotional 'changes' in God relate to the temporal changes in his creatures."

• "While Scripture in some places does seem to attribute emotions to God, we must look past the human language to the perfections they signify. For example, love is in God as an eternal perfection, not as a passion brought about by an encounter with the creature. Theologians have often said that when God is described in the language of human emotion, these are expressions of effect, not affect. In other words, we are reading about the effects God causes us to experience of himself, not effects that we have caused God to experience in himself. If we read of them in the same way that we experience human passions and affections, we diminish God, making him only a greater version of ourselves." 10

Contemporary Reactions Against Divine Impassibility

- Sadly, this doctrine has fallen on hard times being unpopular among evangelical theologians, particularly in the last hundred years
- Many shun the idea of divine impassibility because they think it makes God seem cold and aloof
- The reason for this is that the idea of God not being affected or moved by his creatures sounds absurd to most people
- If someone cannot feel pain, then we think there is something wrong with them
- In order to properly relate to others, it is assumed that we are able to "empathize" with others, meaning that as and when other people feel pain, we ought to feel pain with them
- If someone is unaffected by others, then it makes them unrelatable
- Thus, for God to be truly loving, he must suffer...most people assume a suffering God is a more caring God
- If God doesn't feel pain when he sees the pain that exists in the world, then he can't truly love the world
- If God doesn't feel pleasure when his creatures do what's right, then he can't truly be relatable
- Critics of impassibility hold that the doctrine essentially makes God into an unfeeling monster
- As a result, numerous recent theologians have distanced themselves from the doctrine of divine impassibility in favor of theistic mutualism or theistic personalism, which supposedly preserve God's relatability to his creatures
- However, it is a false notion to assume that God is cold, aloof, stoic, lifeless, indifferent, apathetic, unrelatable, and incapable of love and compassion
- "To say that God is not vulnerable, that He Himself cannot be hurt, and that He isn't given to moodiness is not to say He is utterly unfeeling or devoid of affections...His compassion, His lovingkindness, and His tender mercies endure forever (Psalm 136). His divine affections are more real, more sure, and more trustworthy than any human emotions could ever be. In fact, the constancy and infinity of God's tender affections epitomize why divine impassibility is such a wonderful truth...The main problem in our thinking about these things is that we tend to reduce God's attributes to human terms, and we shouldn't. We're not to imagine that God is like us (Psalm 50:21). His affections, unlike human emotions, are not involuntary reflexes, spasms of temper, paroxysms of good and bad humor, or conflicted states of mind. He is as deliberate and as faithful in His lovingkindness as He is perfect and incorruptible in His holiness." 11

⁹ DeYoung, Tis Mystery All, the Immortal Dies: Why the Gospel of Christ's Suffering is More Glorious Because God Does Not Suffer pdf

¹⁰ James Renihan, https://credomag.com/article/what-is-impassibility/

¹¹ John MacArthur, https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B160727/can-an-unchanging-god-be-compassionate

IMPLICATIONS OF DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY

- Contrary to popular belief, the doctrine of divine impassibility is actually wonderful news for sufferers and sinners
- Just because God doesn't experience emotional change doesn't mean that he lacks a real relationship with his creatures
- Rather than meaning that he's unable to love us or to empathize with our pain (as it is often assumed), it means that he chooses to do so without change, which is a steady comfort to true believers

It Guarantees that God's Love Toward Us is Unchangeable

- Since God is impassible, it means that he could not be more loving than he is eternally
- Since God is infinite, he is never waiting to be activated to reach his full potential
- There is no "passive potency" in God...he is his attributes in infinite measure
- He is "purely actual" in that he cannot be more perfect than he is; otherwise, he would be less perfect, finite, and in need of improvement
- Thus, when it comes to his love, impassibility makes all the difference
- Since he is impassible, he does not merely possess love, he is love...and he is love in infinite measure
- He cannot become more loving than he already is eternally; therefore, we can be sure that his love for us is not motivated by anything in us
- His love for and mercy toward us are infinite and unshakeable

Psalm 103:11, 13 ~ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him...13 Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.

- God's love and mercy are constant toward us
- Thus, far from portraying God as unsympathetic and untouched by our suffering, the Scriptures stress God's deep and devoted compassion virtually every time it mentions the immutability of God
- God's unchanging nature doesn't make Him incapable of responding to us with compassion; on the contrary, his impassibility reassures us that His compassion never changes
- If God's love toward us fluctuated, then it would be a finite, caused, and mutable love; instead, God loves his creatures with an unbounded act of free, superabundant, limitless, and uncaused love
- This means that God's disposition towards us is always maximally loving, maximally just, maximally merciful, etc...he is maximally perfect in all his affections
- God is love...divine love, infinite, eternal and unchangeable love...his love does not increase or decrease; it is what he is
- God's love is freely given...unmotivated by any need or deficiency in him...he does not love in order to relieve the suffering he feels on account of our suffering...he chooses to love because he is love
- This is really good news for us because it means that we never have to worry that we might catch God on a bad day, when he's lacking in love or goodness towards us
- It's a very good thing that his affections don't change in the way that ours often do
- "In that light, impassibility ensures that God is love in infinite measure. While the love of a passible God is subject to change and improvement, the love of an impassible God changes not in its infinite perfection. Impassibility guarantees that God's love could not be more infinite in its loveliness. God does not depend on others to activate and fulfill his love; no, he is love in infinite measure, eternally, immutably, and

independently from the created order. All that to say, it may seem counterintuitive, but only impassibility can give us a personal God who is eternal, unalterable love. Far from apathetic or inert, impassibility promises the believer that God could not be any more loving than he is eternally. That is something a passible God cannot promise."¹²

It Promises Us Real Hope in Times of Suffering

- Although a passible God at first seems more comforting in times of trouble, this is not the case
- If God is subject to emotional change, how do we know whether he will stay true to his promises?
- If God is vulnerable to emotional fluctuation, what confidence do we have that his own character will remain constant?
- A passible God is a depressing idea because it does not turn us to God as our rock and fortress but instead makes us pity God as one who is just as impotent in suffering as we are
- The good news which brings us hope, however, is that God is impassible
- When life's most difficult trials hit hard, we can be confident that our loving God does not waver because he is a God who is immutably impassible

It Demonstrates the Need for the Incarnation

Hebrews 2:9-10, 14, 18 ~ But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. 10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings...14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

- Christ had to become a man in order to suffer on our behalf
- However, if the doctrine of divine impassibility is not true, then the incarnation was not necessary
- If God can suffer, then the incarnation is robbed of its glorious condescension...there is no mystery and no majesty in the incarnation apart from impassibility
- "Our salvation required a Mediator unlike anything the universe had ever known: a God-man who would be both human and divine, mortal and immortal, passible and impassible. If God can suffer, if God can die, if God as God can experience loss...[then why] did God become man?"¹³
- "Our comfort in the midst of suffering is...that, moved by love, God the Son, in perfect cooperation and agreement with the God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, laid aside his immunity to pain so that he might suffer for us, as one of us. The incarnation of the Son of God and his subsequent passion is more glorious, more mysterious, and more loving because God in the person of Christ was experiencing, by his own free choice, what God in himself had never experienced, and would never again experience, namely, human suffering." 14
- Furthermore, as a result of the incarnation, we have one (Jesus) who can truly sympathize with us
- We don't look to a pain-stricken, grieving God for comfort, but rather to Christ who is our sympathetic high priest
- The impassible became passible in Christ

¹² Matthew Barrett, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/immutability-impassibility-god/

¹³ DeYoung, Tis Mystery All, the Immortal Dies: Why the Gospel of Christ's Suffering is More Glorious Because God Does Not Suffer pdf

¹⁴ Ibid.