

Does God suffer?

Fellowship Meeting

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Bible Text: Isaiah 63:1-9
Preached on: Sunday, March 26, 2000

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Isaiah 63 and we'll read the first nine verses.

1 Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?
this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his
strength? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save. 2 Wherefore art
thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the
winefat? 3 I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was
none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my
fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain
all my raiment. 4 For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year
of my redeemed is come. 5 And I looked, and there was none to help; and
I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm
brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me. 6 And I will tread
down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I
will bring down their strength to the earth. 7 I will mention the
lovingkindnesses of the LORD, and the praises of the LORD, according to
all that the LORD hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the
house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies,
and according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses. 8 For he said,
Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their
Saviour. 9 In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his
presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he
bare them, and carried them all the days of old.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of his own word.

Our theme this evening is "Does God suffer?" Does God suffer? This may seem at first hearing a rather obscure affair but it isn't. We need to know what God is like. Stephen Charnock, the Puritan, said, "It is impossible to honor God as we ought unless we know him as He is."

So first of all then, the question stated, the question stated: what's this all about? In the early centuries, an error appeared in some quarters of a professing church called patripassianism. The idea is that when Christ suffered, the Father also suffered. Patri, father, passianism, passion. It is from the Latin patior, to suffer. So it's the idea of the Father suffering and so it involved the idea that God in all three persons could suffer.

Now this view was consistently rejected by the orthodox Christians and that remained the case and at the time of the Reformation, it was reaffirmed that God could not suffer. So in Isaiah 63:9 which we just read, John Calvin says, "Not that he can in any way endure anguish." Martin Luther also maintained that for our Savior to suffer, he must become man. The Heidelberg Catechism dating from the Reformation period said Christ suffered "not according to both natures, not according to the divinity, but according to the human nature only both in body and soul, for the divine nature is immutable, impassible," that means not subject to suffering, "and life itself, and so cannot die." Our own Westminster Confession says God is "the most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, that is, without sufferings." So William Symington, a 19th century Reformed Presbyterian in his work on the atonement, the intercession of Jesus Christ says, "It may be thought of this way as the person would divine, such an assertion involves the blasphemy that deity suffers. By no means." Symington says the idea of deity suffering is blasphemy. Charles Hodge says the idea of a suffering God was rejected by the Latin, Lutheran and Reformed churches alike.

So there has been a consistent testimony among orthodox Christians that God as God does not suffer, but there have been voices in the opposite direction. A. H. Strong, for example, believed that God as God can suffer. The liberal Karl Barth not surprisingly perhaps believed in a suffering God. A man called Moltmann, a German theologian has perhaps done more than any to propagate this view. More recently, John Stott in England has said in his book "The Cross of Christ," if God's full and final self-revelation was given in Jesus, moreover then his feelings and suffering are an authentic reflection of the feelings and sufferings of God himself. That's on page 331. Professor Donald Macleod, principal of the Free Church College says the Father suffers because he loves the Son and suffers a loss corresponding to the Son's own loss when the communion between them is disrupted. More recently on the 20th of March, '96 in the West Highland Free Press after the Dunblane killings, Macleod said the little ones at Dunblane were his children, every bullet made God shudder, he couldn't look.

Well now, what is the answer? What is the answer to be a loving God who pities men and women, do we have to believe in a God who suffers? In other words, to say that God does not suffer, does that mean we're closed up to think of God as a cold intelligence who acts like a machine? You see, that's the argument. If you don't believe God suffers, then God is mechanical, a mere force and operates like a machine and without feeling, sympathy or pity.

That brings us, secondly, to the blessedness of God. The blessedness of God. The Bible teaches that God is blessed forever. Romans 1:25, "Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for

ever." Romans 9:5, "Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever." There again in 1 Timothy 1:11, "According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust." Chapter 6 of 1 Timothy and verse 15, "Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." Then finally in 2 Corinthians 11:31, "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not." Now in these passages, it's not blessed in the sense of ascribing praise but it's describing the fact that God is blessed, that is, that he is exceedingly happy and he is so forevermore. God is unchangeable and therefore unchangeably blessed, content and happy. Nothing disturbs the tranquility, contentment and happiness of God. Only a perfectly holy God who is unchangeably blessed can make men eternally holy and blessed. Psalm 102:27, "But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end."

That brings us, thirdly, to the question of feeling in God. Feeling in God. The Scriptures ascribe to God that which entails feeling. He is said to love, to hate, to execute wrath. These cannot be conceived of without feeling or emotion. One writer, W.G.T. Shedd says, "A theory that begins with affirming absolute indifference in God and denying that he either loves the good or hates the evil must end ultimately in rejecting all moral attributes and reducing him to blind force." He also says, "When God hates what is hateful and he's angry at that which merits wrath, the true nature and fitness of things is observed and he feels in himself that inward satisfaction which is the substance of happiness."

Well now, how are we to understand this? I realize it isn't an easy subject. How can God love and pity his afflicted children, how can he be angry with the wicked and yet be blessed and content and tranquil and free from all suffering and misery? The answer lies in the difference between God and men. The difference between God and men.

First of all, God is perfectly holy. He is therefore free from all those rash bursts of feeling which are found in fallen man such as when a man is in a rage, that is, when his feelings are not kept under control by truth and fact; when his feelings are out-of-control and are unholy feelings. God has none of that. There is no rashness with God.

Then, secondly, God never responds to receive knowledge as to a surprise. God is never surprised. God has foreordained all that comes to pass. Ephesians 1:11, he "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will," to the praise of his glory. He has foreordained all things and he's foreordained that he will be glorified at the ultimate end of all things. That means God knows the end from the beginning. There is no increase in knowledge with God. His knowledge of all things is always absolute. The eyes of the Lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good. This is simply to say that God never learns anything because he never has any need to learn. He always knows. He knows everything about everything all the time and always has and always will so there is no increase of knowledge, no taking in of knowledge with God because he has all knowledge always.

Then we can say God then never responds to anything as if previously unknown. When God is represented as reacting to human sin. It is not as if he has only learned about it by

the event. God has decreed all that comes to pass and knows from all eternity so even concerning the actions of the wicked in the death of the Lord Jesus, the wickedness of Judas in betraying him was known from eternity by God. It was revealed and prophesied of. Likewise, Christ himself taught the disciples in advance that he would be taken by the priests and the rulers and the elders. And in Acts 2, Peter on the day of Pentecost speaking of Christ says, "Him being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." So God never learns things by the event taking place, he knows all because he has determined all from eternity.

Then we must say God views events in the full light of the ultimate outcome. We don't see the ultimate outcome of things but God knows the end from the beginning. Ever before his mind is the total plan and end of all things so there is no frustration, no uncertainty and no ignorance.

So another writer, Dabney says that God "has something analogous to what are called in man active principles is manifest, for he wills and acts therefore he must feel. But these active principles must not be conceived of as emotions in the sense of ebbing and flowing acts of feeling. In other words, they lack that agitation and rush that change from cold to hot and hot to cold which constitutes the characteristics of passion in us. They are in God and ineffable, that means inexpressible, fixed, peaceful, unchangeable calm although the springs of volition." Now you might not follow all of that but what he's saying is that in God feeling is not a matter of ebb and flow, it's not changeable; that God's feelings towards all that he has foreordained shall take place and knows it will take place, is settled from eternity. There is no ebb and flow in feeling with God. God's disposition towards the events of time are all fixed from eternity as surely as his decree that these events shall take place so there is no fluctuation of emotion in God.

Then, fourthly, God's spoken of in human terms. God's spoken of in human terms. This is sometimes called anthropomorphism. It doesn't matter, don't worry about remembering the word but just anthropos is man, and morphi is form. So it's the idea of God being spoken of in the form of a man. So God is sometimes spoken of as if he were a man. Certain passages of Scripture speak of God in human terms. When we read of the mouth of the Lord, the word that comes from the mouth of God, well, God is a spirit, he doesn't have a mouth. Or when we read the eyes of the Lord are in every place, God does not have physical eyes. These are to be explained but not explained away. Sometimes people say, "Oh well, speaking of God as man," as if that tells you what they mean, as if they have no meaning. They do have meaning but they are to be explained in the light of the rest of the word of God. God does not have a literal mouth because we know from Scripture that God is a spirit, the Lord Jesus said that in John 4. So we are warranted by taking a passage of Scripture which clearly is literal, God is a spirit, and therefore concluding that when it speaks of God's mouth, it's speaking of God as if he were a man. We take what is clearly literal and we understand what may not be literal in the life of what is clear.

Now we have to avoid being random by simply deciding to interpret texts as if they're speaking of God in human terms in a purely arbitrary way, but when there is a literal view, where a literal view of a text would clearly contradict the teaching of other passages that clearly are literal, then we are justified in concluding that this text is meant to be understood as speaking of God in human terms for our benefit.

Let me give you an example. 1 Samuel 15:29, "And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent." Now that is literal. It's saying God isn't like men, he doesn't repent, he doesn't change his mind because what repentance means basically, a turning around. So there we have a literal passage that's telling us God does not repent.

Then we turn to Genesis 6:6, "And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. Then in Exodus 32:14, "And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." Now in 1 Samuel 15:29 it says the strength of Israel, the Lord is not a man that he should lie or repent. There it's telling us the Lord doesn't repent. Here in these passages it says the Lord repented. How are we to understand this? Well, we take the passage that is clearly literal, 1 Samuel 15:29, which is telling us the difference between God and man, men repent, men change their minds, but God doesn't, and then when we see in Genesis 6:6 the Lord repenting, we say, "Ah, the other passage tells us the difference between God and man is that God doesn't repent so when this verse says that he repented, it must be speaking of God in human terms because repenting is something that men do, not God." Therefore we know that Genesis 6:6 and Exodus 32:14 are anthropomorphic, it's speaking of God in the form of a man.

Then again to give another example, Genesis 11:5, the Tower of Babel, "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded." The Lord came down to see. Now, we know from Psalm 139 and from many places that God doesn't have to do anything. He doesn't have to come down, he knows everything. The guy that we quoted earlier, "Is in every place beholding the evil and the good." He doesn't have to do anything to learn what's going on and so because Scripture elsewhere teaches us that God always knows everything, then we know that this passage is speaking of God in human terms for our benefit because we can't understand God, we can't hold in our mind the omniscience of God, that he always from eternity knew everything. We just can't manage it. We're not able and so God in condescension speaks of himself in human terms.

Well then, so when the Scriptures speak of God as becoming wrath or as repenting or as expressing fury against his adversaries in connection with some particular event that occurs in time, we must understand them as speaking of God in human terms. What is meant is that the outward manifestation of his actions was as though those feelings then arose. It's the fact that God is displaying his anger towards what has taken place, but that anger was always there, that hostility to that sin of which God knew from eternity, that anger was always there and yet when it says he was moved to anger, it means that he displays, he manifests his anger at that particular time.

That brings us, fifthly, Christ, a divine person suffered in his human nature. Christ as a divine person, suffered in his human nature.

First of all, Christ really suffered. That is self-evident from the Scriptures. Christ did suffer.

Secondly, Christ was always a divine person. The Shorter Catechism says, "The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ who being the eternal Son of God became man and so was and continues to be God as man in two distinct natures and one person forever." He never ceased to be God. Let's be quite clear. Immanuel, God with us. It doesn't say someone who used to be God is now with us but he's not God now. Immanuel, God with us. God was manifested in the flesh. He didn't stop being God.

So the sufferings of Christ were the suffering of a divine person but then we must also say that Christ suffered in his human nature. He suffered in his human nature. As the Westminster Confession puts it, "Christ in the work of mediation acted according to both natures but each nature doing that which is proper to itself, yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature." The Westminster Confession, 7. So it's saying that Christ as the mediator acts according to both natures but that which is proper to each nature in itself, and yet because he is one person in two natures, sometimes in Scripture a title that refers to his divine nature is used of him when something is being said that relates to his human nature, and the same in reverse.

For example in Mark 13, I know some of you have been through this at different times, Mark 13:32, "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." Now there the Lord Jesus professes limitation of knowledge and particularly ignorance of the day and the hour of his return. Now that cannot be true of Christ as God but in his human consciousness though he was always sinless and infallible in his thoughts, his human nature was finite. So there is something that was true of Christ in his human nature and yet he refers to himself as the Son, that is the Son of the Father, not the title that refers to his being God. So he uses a title that expresses his deity while saying something that is only true of himself in his human nature.

You have the reverse in John 3:13, "And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven." Now the Lord Jesus standing on earth is saying that he is in heaven. The answer is that as God in his divinity, he was omnipresent, present everywhere, and present in heaven, and yet he calls himself the Son of man so he uses a title which indicates his manhood while stating something that is true of him in his divine nature, that he is in heaven. So then, the Lord Jesus Christ as a divine person, as God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever, while he was in this world he was a divine person but he suffered in his human nature.

Hebrews 2:14, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had

the power of death, that is, the devil." He became a man in order to die. God as God does not die and neither does he suffer, but God the Son without ceasing to be a divine person, took to himself a true body and a reasonable soul and he suffered in that body and soul in his human nature on behalf of sinners.

1 Peter 4:1, "Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin." Christ suffered in the flesh. It was not in his divine nature but in his human nature that he suffered. A divine person suffered in his human nature.

Of what atoning avail for fallen men with the suffering of a divine natured being? Of what use would it be, a divine nature suffering, atoning for sinful men? For as a divine person, his suffering in his human nature are of infinite value because he is a divine person, but they atone for the sins of men because he suffered in his human nature. As one writer put it, we ascribe the passion to the human nature but the efficacy or effectiveness of the passion to the divine because the Son of God suffered in the assumed and personally united human nature.

In Matthew 26:37 we read he "began to be sorrowful and very heavy." John Calvin says on that verse, "Certainly those who imagine that the Son of God was exempt from human passions do not truly and seriously acknowledge him to be a man." What a glorious Savior we have. I know that it's hard to take in this because there is nothing like him. That's why it's had to follow, there's nothing like him. There is no illustration. There is nothing that compares to this, that's why it's incapable of illustration without making it false.

It is unique but what a glorious Savior, the Lord of Glory crucified. They crucified the Lord of Glory, we're told. We must think rightly of Christ. We might think, "Well, this is all very rarefied stuff," and of course, it is. We've been looking at 1 John on Thursday nights, you remember those heretics that John seems to be combating, the Docetists who taught that Christ only seemed to be a man but he wasn't really. Or Cerinthus and the Gnostics who said Jesus, the man, and the Christ spirit were different, that the Christ came upon Jesus, the man, at his baptism and left him again before his crucifixion. What nonsense, but you see, we have to be clear: one person, two distinct natures. No blurring of the two. No mixing of the two natures, a joining of the two natures in one person, a divine person. The Christ suffered, a divine person suffered but he suffered in his human nature.

So in Hebrews 2:16-18, "For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted." As God he had nothing to learn. He didn't need to experience anything to understand us completely, but in his human nature, he learned, he experienced, he was made a perfect high priest. Not in the sense that he had sin and had to get rid of it, he was sinless, but he became fully qualified

through suffering that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest, for in that he himself had suffered being tempted, he was able to succor them that are tempted. So this learning obedience as it says later on in Hebrews, by the things that he suffered, this process of experience, it's not incompatible with the fact that his human nature was free from all sin but it was a qualifying experience in his human nature. Not as God, God always knows everything about us so that as God and man, as the God-man Redeemer and Mediator, he could be a sympathetic high priest.

Why it matters. Why it matters. What is the attractiveness of the idea of a suffering God? Why are people attracted to it? Well, they're attracted to it because it seems to make God more sympathetic. That's why. But God knows everything and in order to deny that God suffers as God, we do not need to believe that God is feeling-less, cold, or clinical, and remote. The Bible tells us God is merciful and gracious and longsuffering and full of pity. We do not need to believe in a suffering deity to believe that this is true of him.

The suffering God idea will lead to viewing God as helpless and out-of-control. In the end, a distressed God will become a confused God and this is not when men need to hear. They need to hear about the living God. He's not a suffering God but a sovereign God, ever blessed and God in three persons, and they need to hear of the second person of this Triune Godhead who became a man to suffer and die, who showed compassion, the divine compassion in his human tears, and who lay down his life for the sheep. If we believe in God as he really is, sovereign and blessed, and of Christ as he is, the God-man Redeemer, we shall be blessed indeed. Without human invention, without trying to improve on the biblical teaching about God as if the biblical God was not sympathetic enough, without trying to make God in man's image, but let us rest on the truth of the word of God and the certainty of the promises of him who is neither confused nor agitated but blessed forever.