

THURSDAY MORNING GROUP

NONE GREATER

3. The Immutability and Impassibility of the God of Love

This week we are going to look at the related truths of *the immutability* and *impassibility* of God. Again, these are ‘attributes’ that are essential to divinity, and so have no correspondence with our human existence. And for that reason they can be hard to understand. We are forced to use two ‘negatives’ to express these truths.

‘Immutable’ means ‘unchanging and unchangeable.’ At a creational and a human level there are two things that are part and parcel of life. 1. In life, everything moves “upwards”, from one degree of development to another. Life is marked by potentiality and the reaching of potential. 2. In life, everything moves “downwards”, towards death; life is marked by entropy, a movement to a great degree of disorder. As the hymn writer wrote, “Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day. Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away. Change and decay in all around I see...” (And then of course the verse concludes, “*O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*”) Speaking of the immutability, the *unchangingness and unchangeableness* of God is again hard to get our heads and hearts around. There is nothing like it in our natural, earthly experience.

‘Impassible’ means ‘unable to suffer.’ Human beings are essentially *responsive* creatures. We are both subject and object. As subjects we make decisions, take courses of actions, do deeds etc. But as objects we are affected and impacted by the decisions, actions and deeds of others, and this affect and impact then plays out in the decisions, actions and deeds we engage in. Sometimes this affect or impact is instinctive: we might lash out when someone threatens us in some way; sometimes it can be very considered and deliberate – “vengeance is a dish best served cold!” But whatever, the action we do is drawn out of us by the situation we have encountered. To be impassible, then, is to be *not* that – “God is impassible in the sense that he cannot experience emotional changes of state due to his relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order... God...does not undergo successive fluctuating emotional states; nor can the created order alter him in such a way as to cause him to suffer any modification or loss.”¹ The positive side of this is that God is always the subject in His deeds. God is always subject; all that He does, He does out of Himself, from the wellspring of His own being and according to His eternal will. God’s impassibility is deeply related to his immutability.

Immutability

Perhaps the closing thing to unchanging and impassive in our imagination is the physical, inorganic world. We see the ancient mountains, speak of solid rocks and think of the ‘eternal hills.’ (Even as we say this, we know, of course, that these also are subject to erosion, seismic forces etc which change them. It’s just that the changes happen at a much slower pace than our own change and decay that it seems that they remain forever.) And we think of impassibility in similar ways, though often negatively. An unfeeling person is ‘as cold as a rock.’ He was ‘stony hearted.’ The Scriptures – accommodating God’s otherwise incomprehensible truth to our human situation – commandeers images from the natural world to speak of God’s changelessness. There are many references in the Old Testament to God being Israel’s Rock.

Deuteronomy 32:4 ‘The Rock – his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He.’ So do you see here, how God’s unchangingness is the guarantee of his justice, faithfulness, and perfection? These things are absolutely trustworthy, because He is unchangeable.

¹ From Thomas Weinandy, “Does God Suffer”, *First Things* 117 (Nov. 2001), pp. 35-41

Psalm 18:1-2 ‘I love you, O LORD my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.’ Here, God’s ‘rockiness’ is the grounds for his dependability as saviour and rescuer. That God doesn’t change is the basis for our continued trust in Him.

Psalm 42:8-9 ‘By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”’ Here—strangely—it is the fact that God is the unchangeable rock that the psalmist can throw a kind of accusation that He, God, hasn’t proven Himself to be so. He seems to have forgotten His servant. The suffering of the psalmist seems incomprehensible against the truth of God being the God of his life, his rock.

Isaiah 44:6-8 ‘Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.”’ (Here he means there is no *other* rock, like our God the Rock.) The whole covenant is grounded on God’s changelessness. See **Hebrews 7:20-25** and **6:17**.

Impassibility

The covenant name that God gave His people – YHWH – is seemingly mysterious. ‘I am who I am.’ (Exod. 3:14.) But to help us penetrate the mystery of this name, God then twice ‘exegetes’ the name Himself, to help us see what it means.

Exodus 33:19 ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.’

Exodus 34:6-9 ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.’

We worship a God who is in complete control of who He is and what He does. God is never at odds with Himself; He is never doing something that another part of Him is questioning the wisdom of! There is a settled unity of the will, being and deeds of God. (It is important to see the vast difference between the God who has made Himself known in the Scriptures, and the conjured gods of Greek and Roman mythology who were capricious, vengeful, manipulative, whimsical, impetuous and chaotic!) In all He is and does we encounter God as measured and “self-controlled”, i.e. acting out of the reality of His own self, and never in some (panicked, angry or maudlin) response to the world He engages with. And what He is in Himself is grace, mercy, steadfast love, faithfulness.

Three essentials of impassibility:

1. God is not acted upon from without and so does not have emotional changes brought about in him by outside influences.
2. God is not capable of freely changing his inner ‘emotional state’ (I’m speaking like a fool!) in response to, and in interaction with, the changing human conditions and world order.
3. God does not have “feelings” that are analogous to human “feelings” and does not experience changes of emotional state by being acted upon from without.

Does this mean that God is lifeless, cold, stoic, static, apathetic, unloving? Does it mean God is devoid of ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’?

God's impassibility is not the absence of emotion and feeling but His fullness of them. God loves, forgives, is faithful in steadfast love and mercy out of who He is. All the perfections of God are not caused in Him by something in creation. Before creation ever were, and before creation ever were in a mess!, God is all this in fullness. However we find ourselves in God's world – in trouble or sin or gladness and goodness – He meets us as He has always been, full of compassion, love, joy. He is not *moved* to compassion – that would imply that our situation brings something to Him, He had not before. No, His immense and eternal and immeasurable reserve of compassion overflows. From our human and passible side, it seems to us that He has been moved by our situation.

The impassibility of God is actually the bedrock of God's love. Wherever you are, however you are, God is always and always will be and always was love. His love is always prevenient – it always precedes anything in our situation. It is from everlasting to everlasting. To say that God is impassible is to say that He is eternal love. In coming to Him in our distress and our sins, we do not have to move Him to pity, mercy, love.

There are places in the Scriptures where it does seem that God 'changes his mind' – perhaps you can think of some? But again this is God's word accommodating to our humanity. God was, is and ever will be the endless reservoir of love. What might 'change' is the way that love acts toward us for our good and salvation.

Ephesians 2:1-7

'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.'