

“Impassible but Not Detached”
Judges 2:10-18
(Preached at Trinity, November 30, 2014)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. According to God's promise to Abraham He raised up a great nation and blessed them. When they were taken captive in Egypt God demonstrated His covenant faithfulness to His people Israel by delivering them. He continually reminded them of this covenant blessing so that they would not forget.
Exodus 20:2-3 NAU - "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before Me."
2. But God always demanded covenant faithfulness from them.
Deuteronomy 28:1 NAU - "Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth."
Deuteronomy 28:15 NAU - "But it shall come about, if you do not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you"
3. God gave them the land of Canaan just as He promised but also commanded that they continue as His holy people. They were not to make covenant with the nations of Canaan. They were to utterly remove them.
Exodus 23:31-33 NAU - "I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you. ³² "You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. ³³ "They shall not live in your land, because they will make you sin against Me; for *if* you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."
4. Sadly, they did not maintain their covenant faithfulness. God sent His preachers to warn them. Most often God raised up His prophets. At times He sent angels, God's heavenly messengers.
This is what we find in **Verses 1-3**
The people wept in sorrow but it wasn't an enduring repentance. The next generation soon forgot God.
Judges 2:11-12 NAU - "Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, ¹² and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from *among* the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger."

5. In His mercy God raised up judges to guide them, but they didn't listen to the judges.
Judges 2:16-17 NAU - "Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ Yet they did not listen to their judges"
6. The text tells us that all of this provoked God to anger.
Judges 2:12 NAU - "thus they provoked the LORD to anger."
Judges 2:14 NAU - "The anger of the LORD burned against Israel"
Judges 2:20 NAU - "So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel"
7. God's anger is His wrath, fiery and fearful.
Psalms 21:8-9 NAU - "Your hand will find out all your enemies; Your right hand will find out those who hate you. ⁹ You will make them as a fiery oven in the time of your anger; The LORD will swallow them up in His wrath, And fire will devour them."
Hebrews 10:31 NAU - " It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."
8. This raises an important question. Is God subject to the rising and falling of His passions based upon the behavior of His creatures? Did God experience a change in mood or a change in His emotional state based upon the sinful behavior of the Israelites?
9. This is the heart of the doctrine known as the impassibility of God. Our Confession states (**Chapter 2:1**) – "The Lord our God is but one only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of Himself, infinite in being and perfection; whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself; a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions. . ."
10. There is a debate circulating within our association regarding this doctrine of impassibility. Many of you have expressed an interest in exactly what we mean by this. This evening I want to set this doctrine before you to help you understand the basics of the doctrine.
 - A. We are treading over a chasm of infinite depth for we are seeking to enter into the very mind of God. This is a subject that God Himself tells us is beyond our ability to fully understand.
Romans 11:33-34 NAS - "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?"
Isaiah 55:8-9 NAS - "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts."
 - B. Yet, we are to study God and continually seek to know Him more. This is what we mean by theology.
11. Tonight I want to try to define the doctrine of impassability for you and then reassure you that although God cannot be affected by anything outside Himself, He is not void of intense affection for His people.

I. Impassability defined

- A. Our Confession states that God is “without passions.”
1. This word is easily misunderstood as we apply it to our modern understanding. Passion today refers to strong feelings or excitement. Many regard the word passion synonymous with affections. They reason that since love and anger and compassion are all passions and God is said to have all of these how can we deny that passion to God?
 2. This misses the classical understanding of the word passion.
 - a. The word comes from the Latin *patior* which means “to suffer.” We understand this sense as we speak of the Passion of Christ.
 - b. It indicates harm or injury that one incurs by the action of another
 - c. Suffering implies undergoing some form of change – to enter the state of suffering. A man goes from joy to sorrow, from health to illness.
 - d. It is the consequence of an action whereby we are acted upon resulting in some form of loss—loss of comfort, loss of joy, etc. Or it may involve some form of gain or increase either negative or positive – the increase of pain, grief, joy, delight.
 - e. Love and anger are referred to as passions because they involve some emotional change.
 3. The Confession is simply stating that God cannot experience a change in His essential being from anything outside Himself
 - a. This is consistent with His attributes of aseity and immutability
 - b. Aseity – God has being derived from Himself. He is self-originating, self-sufficient, fully independent.
 - c. Immutability – God is unchanging. When we learn something our intellect has changed. When we become angry our disposition has changed. God is incapable of change.
- B. Divine impassability has been the historic position of classic theism
1. Simply put, impassibility means that God is not subject to the ebb and flow of *involuntary* passions.
 2. It is not possible for God to experience any change in His intrinsic state of being, either negative or positive, by anything outside Himself.
- C. There are contemporary views of the theism that are significantly different
1. Most errors in theism today stem from a desire to make God more like man. In our hyper-sentimentalized culture God is seen as having emotions identical with ours.
 2. One modern error is Open Theism. Open Theism places God squarely within the boundaries of time with His knowledge of the future based on infinite possibilities and His providence flexible based upon the unfolding of these possibilities. In other words, God is moving through time just as we are. They see God as deeply moved by the experiences of His creation which produces a variety of feelings within Him.
 3. Some contemporary theists hold that God has decreed emotional change in relation to His creatures. This is a part of the debate within our assoc.
 - a. First of all, not even God can deny His own attributes that define His divine essence. That would be to deny Himself. God cannot decree that He is capable of change.

- b. Would not this emotional change still effect a change upon the unchanging being of God? If God has emotions towards His creatures that He did not previously have has He not undergone a change? God would have emotional mutability.

II. How are we to explain the many passages that ascribe to God emotions?

A. Examples:

1. Passages that say God is grieved
Psalms 78:40 NAU - "How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness And grieved Him in the desert!"
Ephesians 4:30 NAU - "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."
2. Passages that describe God as being pleased
1 Kings 3:10 NAU - "It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing."
3. God is described as feeling joy
Zephaniah 3:17 NAU - "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy."
4. We see in this passage in Judges that describes God's burning anger
Judges 2:14 NAU - "The anger of the LORD burned against Israel"
5. We also see God moved with pity
Judges 2:18 NAU - " for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them."

B. Classical theism refers to these as anthropopathisms

1. We've often seen the expression of the term anthropomorphism – the figurative expression of ascribing human physical metaphors – the *hands* of God or the *eyes* of God, or the *mouth* of God, etc.
2. Anthropopathisms are figurative expressions apply human emotions to God. The Bible describes God's repentings, His anger, pity, joy, pleasure, love, jealousy, and hatred.
3. We must not presume that God is given to involuntary swings of mood based upon the actions of human beings.
 Classical theists hold that we do NOT have such power over God as to cause Him to experience involuntary emotions. To hold to this is to say that God is not in full control over His own mind.

C. The problem with the contemporary views of theism is applying to God the emotional swings we experience.

1. We "fall" in love and "fall" out of love
2. We have fits of temper
2. God is not like men

D. Even when God heard the groans of Israel in Egypt He had already determined His covenant relationship and their deliverance.

Even as Christ became flesh and suffered at the hands of men, it was by the predetermined plan and purpose of God. Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

III. If God is impassible can we say then that God truly loves His people?

- A. The opposite question is actually more important to us
1. If God is not in full control over His mind how do we have any assurance that His love for us will not change?
 2. If our actions can have such an impact upon God as to change the state of His emotions is it not possible that we might do something to affect His love for us? Do we have assurance in God's love if external events can affect it and diminish it?
 3. Thankfully, the Bible reveals God as being unchanging
Lamentations 3:22-23 NAU - "The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail.²³ They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness."
Malachi 3:6 NAU - "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."
James 1:17 NAU - "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."
- B. So does God have true affections for us?
1. There is a difference between passions and affections
 - a. We understand passions as something that stir our emotions – something outside ourselves. We have deep feelings for our spouses and children. We find anger rising up in us. These are passions. They are largely beyond our control.
 - b. God's affections find their source within Him and are unaffected by anything outside of Himself.
 God's affections are always active and intrinsically a part of His being. God doesn't *fall* in love. God is love. He has eternally been love. There is nothing outside of God that creates love within Him.
 - c. God is eternally holy and eternally angry at all that is not holy.
 God does not require something beyond himself in order for Him to acquire that which is a part of His Divine essence.
 2. We have to understand God's anthropopathisms that use metaphors of human emotion to describe God.
Judges 2:14 NAU - "The anger of the LORD burned against Israel"
 - a. We become angry as a reaction to an event beyond our control
 - b. Nothing happens that is beyond God's control. God's wrath and anger is not a temper tantrum. God never changes. He is always the same.
 - c. This doesn't mean that God is unfeeling. It means that no human being has the power to inflict some involuntary reaction from God. God does everything by active and deliberate action. Nothing takes Him by surprise and nothing brings an involuntary reaction from God.
 - d. God's anger is the perfect reflection of His holy hatred of sin. It isn't a reaction but a display of His glory.
 - e. God's love is a voluntary expression of His grace and mercy upon His elect people whereby He determines to shower them with His infinite goodness. It is completely apart from our actions.

Conclusion:

1. The impassibility of God does not mean that God is detached and passive in our lives. He is very much involved in our lives. God is a personal and relational God. Impassibility does mean that God does not change His mood at every turn of our will or change of our behavior.
2. God's anger is fiery and fearsome. But His anger a part of His divine essence as an expression of His hatred of sin. There is nothing outside of Himself that creates this anger within Him. Nothing takes God by surprise.
3. God's love for us is incomprehensible. It is beyond our knowledge. And yet, we experience it daily. He has sent His Holy Spirit within us who continually testifies to our adoption and the love of our Father.
4. He delights in us and takes pleasure in us. He takes pity upon us covers us with His compassion. But these affections are fully volitional. They come from within the Divine being. They do not ebb and flow by circumstances outside of Him. They are unwavering, eternal, and changless.
Malachi 3:6 NAU - "For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."
5. What a glorious, mighty love this is! It is far beyond any degree of human love.