

Genesis 6: 5-8; “The Immutability and Impassibility of God”, Sermon #24 in the series – “Beginnings”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on June 19th, 2016, in the Morning Worship Service.

This morning I want to bring to your attention two doctrines of God which are related; that of Divine Immutability and Divine Impassibility. The study of the doctrine of Divine Impassibility is a subset of the study of Divine Immutability; that is the truth, that, according to the Bible, our God does not change. In Malachi 3: 6 He states: “For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.” God does not change in His Essence or His Being. And He does not change in His decrees; all that He has purposed to do as the Triune God from before the foundation of the world. If this is true, and is true according to the Bible, then we also need to understand that God does not change in any of His purposed actions, or in what we would understand as His feelings or emotions. It is true that God is love, and that because of men’s sins, God is angry with sinners every day. The Bible also describes Him as full of compassion to men because of His essential goodness. And when we come to consider His care over His elect people, those whom He redeems and saves for Christ’s sake, we find that “as a father pities His children, even so God pities those who fear Him”, as it says in Psalm 103, verse 13. If these repentings, and emotions and affections in God are not like the repentings, and emotions and affections which are found in us as men, then what are they? I want you to think with me 1st – Of what it means when it says that God was sorry (or that it repented Him) that He had made man. And 2nd – I want you to think with me about what it means when it says that God was grieved in His heart. And 3rd – I want you to think with me about God’s electing love and compassion.

1st of all – What does it mean when it says that God was sorry (or that it repented Him) that He had made man? (Verse 6a and 7)

Verse 6a says: “And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth.” And verse 7 says: So the Lord said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’ We all know, or should know, that God is perfectly Holy. He is just and true; He is wise and good, and He is righteous in all of His ways. There is not even a blush of sin in His thoughts or actions. Everything about Him is perfectly impeccable; that is, He is without fault in every sense that we might think about Him. But the word repentance usually implies to us, that something wrong has been done, and the sinner must turn from his sins. But in this case we should understand that there is nothing that God should be sorry about, or grieve over. In the King James version of the Bible, verse 6 reads this way: “And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart.” And, you see this same kind of wording in other parts of the Old Testament. Exodus 32: 14 says, “So the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do to His people.” In the New King James translation, which we are using, the word is translated “relented” instead of repented. Here in Genesis 6, it is translated in both verses 6 and 7 by the word “sorry”.

Now it is certainly true, that in the sense of personal sin, that God cannot repent; He has nothing to repent of. And in the book of Numbers, chapter 23, verse 19 we find the straightforward truth of this matter when it says, “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He not said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” God is not like a man, a sinner who needs to repent, because of his great and many sins. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”; and that, in every situation? Moreover, God is Omniscient and Omnipotent. He knows everything in the here and now; He knows everything in the past and in the future. He knows also all possibilities and the

outcome of every action taken by Himself, as well as every action taken by every man. He knows every contingency (that is, one thing depending on another) of second causes (causes outside of God Himself); things that might impact the outcome in the accomplishing of His purposes, and each of us must come to understand, if we would be wise, that no purpose of His can be thwarted. Job 42: 2 says, "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You."

But what really compounds our consideration of these things is that God is Immutable. He is unchangeable in His Being. He has ordained whatsoever comes to pass, even from before the foundation of the world, and knows the end from the beginning. He has decreed whatsoever comes to pass and sticks to it. There is no variation or shifting of shadow with Him. Repentance is a changing of the mind. So how can it be said in reference to God that He changes His mind, or that He is sorry? How are we to understand the descriptive words which are used of God's repentance in this passage? We know from various scriptures that our God is a God of purpose and plans that were formed long ago in perfect faithfulness. (Isaiah 25: 1) These are His decrees. He does not vary from them. Job 23: 13 says, "But He is unique, and who can make him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does. For He performs what is appointed for me, and many such things are with Him." Job knew that all the awful things that were happening to him, as a man of integrity, were appointed by God. They had come to him from the sovereign hand of God. No one could make God change His mind, no man can sin against God or be righteous before God in such a way that would cause Him to move from His plans concerning him.

So as we apply this to Genesis 6 in our thinking, we must understand this description of God's "being sorry" as something that God had anticipated; it was something that He had planned for, long before it was said that He was sorry that He had made man on the earth. But it is something which, for our sakes as men, He communicates in the Word a certain reluctance to see the reality of it come about because of His great compassions; His essential goodness and His general love for people that He had created. The reality was, however, that the consequences of those people's choices in sin had become intensively and extensively great. The whole earth was not filled with God's glory but with man's sin. God determined for the glory of His justice to destroy the whole world of men, because the original beauty of soul with which He had made man, was marred to the point where every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil. God's honor had been set aside and forgotten. God hates the sins of pride and violence and the choice of sensual beauty over spiritual beauty, very much.

The reality is, that men are free to sin. They are free to make their sinful choices. But God is also free, and He is sovereign over free agents as the righteous Judge over all the earth, to reward or to punish all men's choices. And so, it should be understood that God must be faithful to Himself; to punish all sin, or He would not be God. God had faithfully warned these people of Noah's day, for 120 years, about the coming judgment. He had given them plenty of time, but He would be most decisive when the time came in which He would judge. God is not obligated to all men, or to any particular person, to give them grace that would save and change them. Men who become indignant about this; that is, the judgments which God must make, are only further proving that they are deserving of His punishment. God has no need to take any notice of it or any obligation to show any mercy to it at all. He does have an obligation to deal with it.

But He speaks of these things in the Scripture in anthropopathic terms. He speaks of them, not in the way that He as God really sees it, as the Immutable and Unchangeable God. He speaks of it, so that we as men, can come to terms with how God thinks about our sin when we pile it up before Him, in the way that we live. "I am sorry," He says, "that I have made man." Is He truly sorry and repentant in the sense that a man should be when he sins? No, He is not. He is not a man that He should repent. He is sorry and repentant in the sense that He would communicate to everyone who would follow, that would hear this Word, His hatred of those

men's sins, the harm and damage that they had done to so many others; the cumulative effect that it had in terms of His justice, as He beheld it, in His holy mind, to cause Him to exercise His wrath. In reasoning in a way in which we would understand, it would have been better if He had never made man at all if it had come to this.

He gives us His reasons as to why He would purposed to wipe man from the face of the earth. He would word it this way so that we would understand what we need to do in relation to our own thoughts and actions. We must all repent, or we will all likewise perish in God's judgment. God's ways are above our ways and His thoughts above our thoughts. He was sorry, when they were the ones who should have been sorry. His being sorry shows forth the sincere and noble expectation in God's mind that man would be holy, even as He, God, is holy. The holy justice of God must triumph over their unholy rejection of God; over men who would trample His glory under their feet. He would, in perfect justice, destroy them. His infinite wisdom in justice would be seen in drowning all their glory, which was really their shame, and in casting them down to hell forever. There they would forever understand that they had despised His glory, the One who truly cared for their souls. They would understand just what their sins deserved.

2nd – Men had sinned so greatly that God is described as being “grieved in His heart.” (Verse 6b)

When we hear the word “grieved”, if we are not informed by other verses in the Bible, it might cause us to picture God as sitting upon His throne of Glory, sad and mourning over the mistake that He had made in creating man. It says that He was grieved in His heart. I believe that when we think of God, that we must indeed think of Him as having a heart, but truly it is not like the heart of a man. God indeed has thoughts with feelings attached to them. If God created man in His own image and likeness, and man has deep feelings and emotions, then it is reasonable, by inference, to conclude that God also has feeling and emotion; but because He is unchangeable and impassible, these perfections in Him are not like ours. God is One in His Essence and as such has no succession of thought, and no affections which somehow change or become dependent in any sense upon what any man is doing at any given time. We must not, and we dare not, think of God as a man with feelings that “ebb and flow.” Or, that when God's word exhibits Him having an emotion such as anger that there is anything in God that is out of control, or something outside of Himself moving Him or provoking Him to act. God is never moved by forces outside of Himself, in relation to His bringing about a change in the things that He has already purposed.

And so, it is imperative that we must try to understand the grief in His heart, or at His heart, in light of His unchangeableness. He is the God of infinite power and understanding, and we must not consider Him as unable to do anything that He has purposed to do. God is One, and His will is One, and His purpose is One. But when it says that He is grieved and sorry, and that He changed His mind about creating man, this is to accommodate our understanding, so that we can begin to know how He as God thinks and feels, so that we will understand Him better. Even so, we do not understand Him, for He is Incomprehensible in His Essential Being. An example in point can be found in 1st Samuel 15. God intended to punish Amalek because they had ambushed Israel when they came out of Egypt. He told Samuel to tell King Saul that he and his forces were to go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy them, all that they had, and not to spare them. In verse 9, however, it says “that Saul and the people spared Agag, king of the Amalekites, and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them.” “But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.”

Then in verse 10 and following it says, “Now the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, “I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has

not performed My commandments. And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the Lord all night.” Now notice here that when God says that “He greatly regretted” in verse 11, that the same Hebrew word *nacham* is used which we find in our passage in Genesis 6: 6, “He was sorry”, or it “repented Him”. It is God that set up Saul as King. This was His decreative will concerning Saul, that he become the first king of Israel. But with God there are purposes behind His first appointed purposes, which are not immediately revealed in time and space. And these purposes, coming to pass, do not at all prove that God actually changed His original decree concerning a man, or concerning changes which He would bring in His providential ordering of certain things to take place. It merely appears to us, that God has changed His mind. Samuel grieved over Saul in the way that a man grieves. He wanted Saul to succeed in being a good and righteous king. But, there were things in Saul’s heart that would prove that he was not a righteous man at all. There were real issues related to sin and issues related to compromise, men-pleasing, and pride which would undo him and bring him into God’s disfavor. God saw this all before He ever chose Saul to be Israel’s first king, and would work out His decreative purpose with Saul in terms of whether Saul would obey or reject His Word to him. His secret decree concerning the outcome was with Him, and His dealings with Saul were all righteous. God had many things to prove and show to Samuel, to show Israel, to show David, and to show Saul himself in everything He ordered in regard to Saul.

God’s interaction with Saul was ultimately in terms of His rejection of Saul, not only as being King, but also from the standpoint of his inheriting eternal life. And I believe that there is a real grief which is greater than we can understand in God, over those who He brings His judgments against. But He is never swayed by human emotions over these things. And His transcendently righteous and perfect feelings never cloud His perfect judgment. If you look over at Chapter 16 of 1st Samuel, verse 1, you find the Lord saying to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons.” Samuel is still grieving because he wanted to see Saul, whom he respected and loved as a man, established in righteousness before God. Everything that had transpired convinced Samuel that God’s judgment was right, but still the human feelings and wishes and thoughts persisted in his grief. God was not influenced by such feelings, and He saw with perfect clarity that life must go on, and that it is wrong for us to question the why, of why Saul could not be saved; why he could not be retrieved. For us it should be clear, that Saul would not repent. He had rejected God’s Word.

In God’s being grieved and sorry there is never any sorrow that is weakness or inability. Only perfect wisdom and discernment of what would be right and what would glorify Him most. God could save all men, He could turn them all back from destruction, but it does not glorify His righteousness to do so. We do not understand that, and so we have a tendency to think that if God has to power to do so, then it is wrong for Him not to do so. And so we may tend to think meanly of God’s sovereignty, or say that God cannot accomplish what He purposes. We falsely believe that He cannot overcome man’s free will. But let us always remember – “The Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear.” “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.” (Isaiah 59: 1 and 2) No there are greater purposes behind God’s original appointments, and these purposes show forth His glory, His righteousness and His compassion. And so we should glory that it is so; for if it were not so, then no man could be saved.

And then, 3rd and finally – I want you to think with me about God’s electing love and compassion. (Verses 8, 9)

It is the glory of God’s justice that is brought out so well in this passage, for it shows us the end result of all man’s boasted pride and strength, in their sinful independence from God, only

leads to destruction and oblivion and hell. But having said that, we can also see how faithful God is to show Himself compassionate, and to demonstrate His Electing love in that little sentence found in verse 8: “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” Men had sinned so greatly that God had said I will destroy man whom I have made, and yet He does not destroy every single man. He saves one man and His household, so that His eternal purposes would not be thwarted, and so that His compassion and care, His goodness and mercy, could all be seen in what He would do for them. His glory is, and will be, seen in what he does for His Elect, even though they be a chosen few. Thousands of strong and beautiful men and women may impress each other for hundreds of years. But through one man who finds grace, He will show the whole world the truth about themselves. Though they would not receive Noah’s word to them, God would give him to live among them, as a preacher of righteousness; to faithfully witness the gospel to them. If they would repent they would not be destroyed. They would not end up in hell.

But, as we read on, we find that there was not one convert beyond his own household which would be given to Noah for all of his efforts. And yet we must believe that he fulfilled God’s purpose in his generations. This is why we should never be overly concerned with numbers in our churches. We should be most concerned to be faithful. Yes, we can pray and plead with God for those who do not believe. And well we should. Truly, we long to see greater numbers gathered in. But will you not remember, and believe with joy, that God’s purposes in every generation will be fulfilled? The elect will be gathered in. Even though this is so, there will be no excuse if we are lazy in terms of trying to win the lost. We must be diligent to sow the Word of truth. But, let us remember that God will use the means of our preaching and sharing the truth. He will bless the efforts that we put forth in accordance with His own eternal purposes. And He will effectually call His people in; and according to His word, none of those who are Christ’s sheep shall ever perish. Let us therefore consider together the goodness and severity of God. On those who fell severity; but toward you, goodness in giving you the gospel, and the free gift of salvation, if you believe that gospel. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” “How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” His gifts and His calling are irrevocable, they are something He will never repent of.