

## **Sermon 17: 1 Samuel 15:29: The Impassibility of God**

### **OUTLINE**

Definition of impassibility  
Apparatus of impassibility  
Application of impassibility

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a Christian I have had to undergo some continental shifts in my thinking about God. From an absence of belief in God to faith upon conversion; from a anthropocentric God to a self-defining God in leaving the Charismatic Church; from a small and reactionary God to a Sovereign God in coming to understand the doctrines of the Reformation. The last major shift has come in recognizing the incomprehensible God, the Creator-creature distinction, and the abyss that really exists between God and ourselves. Last week we began looking at 1 Sam 15 and the events of Saul having the kingdom removed from him and it being given to David. But in the midst of that chapter we passed over some very important statements about God. On the one hand we were told that God regretted making Saul king, v11, 35; yet on the other hand we are told that God is not like a man that He should have regrets, v29. So which is it? This is the question we want to confront, and in confronting it dig into some of the deepest waters we can find about our God. We want to talk about what is traditionally called the impassibility of God.

There are a number of verses in the bible that confront us with this issue. Gen. 6:6, 'And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.' Numbers 23:19, 'God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?' Jonah 3:10, 'When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.' And of course, 1 Samuel 15:29, 'And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.'"

Christians today have lost their ability to understand these statements. We no longer believe as our fathers did on these matters and have been influenced by modern trends in philosophy. We are feeling the effects of Hegelianism in Christian thought. Hegel influenced various forms of theology of which process theology and open theism are children. In this view God is not being but becoming. He Himself is in process. He does not know the future, he is changing as things develop. Along with time He is on a journey and developing. This form of theology has become very popular since the Holocaust, because in this form of theology we have a God who suffers with us. They claim that instead of God being cold, aloof, unchanging and unaffected, He feels with us and suffers with us and this is proof of His love. On top of that because of the influence of Emmanuel Kant who drove a wedge between faith and reason, much of the metaphysical apparatus that older theologies would use to approach these questions was put disqualified for use by a form of empiricism. Thankfully there is a reviving of these older approaches and Christians are retaking their heritage recognising that the philosophical biases that intimidated Christians away from them are in fact biases. What I would like to do today is to touch upon how we ought to think about these verses. Introducing you to the traditional way in which Christians answered this question for centuries, bringing forward some key tools and then looking at application. So we look then at defining the impassibility of God, the tools necessary in interpreting the scriptures, and how it applies.

## Definition of impassibility

168: 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, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, every way infinite, most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, and withal most just and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.' This is a statement of truth that is shared by many churches. It is the statement of God being without body, parts and passions which is important to note. What did they mean when they said God is without passions? The confession gives us Acts 14:15 as a prooftext to help us understand their meaning, "'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, 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.' The prooftext points to a statement by the apostles which shows how God is not like men. When earlier Christians spoke about God as being without passions, they were using the older use of the word. The word passions from Latin literally means 'to undergo', and was used of Christ's passions in other words the sufferings He underwent.

Here is a traditional definition of God's impassibility: impassibility is that divine attribute whereby God is said not to experience inner emotional changes of state whether enacted freely from within, or affected by His relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order. In other words, God is not subject to changes by any force, he is not a patient in any way, He is not acted upon and made to suffer by anyone, He is not at the mercy of any moment and induced to feel things. It is not as if He was inactive and then moved to action. For example, it is not as if God was not loving and then loving. God is infinitely and unchangeably love.

There are several related doctrines which we have to think about as we ponder God's being. Firstly, we need to think of God's eternity. God is not a creature that is going through time like we are who experiences a sequence of events. God is supratemporal. He is not in motion in the sense that He is on a journey either in time or space. We have a false view of time and think that when Jesus comes again time will come to an end and then we will enter into the eternal state of God. This is not true. One day this age will come to an end, but our existence as created is of a different order of being than God's, and all our existence is time and space bound. We will never enter into God's eternity. Even in the new creation we will not finally be like God in His eternity, we will merely be in a time that has no sin. Here is where we really need to try and learn something. We always project from our experience onto God and think that His being is something like ours instead of totally different. Another teaching we have to reckon with is God's immutability, that He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is unchangeably perfect, He is not growing, improving, learning, becoming more or less just, loving or holy. Another doctrine is the doctrine of God's simplicity which understands God to be a unity and single being. He is not divided into parts and is divided against Himself like a schizophrenic, but historically it teaches that He is always all of what He is without becoming. Some speak of pure act. Many of these characteristics are derived from God's own self-revelation as He reveals Himself as the 'I Am,' as the 'Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due

to change.' Mal. 3:6, "'For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.'

### **Apparatus of impassibility**

There are two key phrases that we need to learn that help us read the bible correctly. Firstly the Creator-creature difference and secondly, analogical predication. God is not on the same chain of being as us. He is not simply man written with capital letters like the Mormons think, or like Greek mythology. God is another order of being. We are created He is uncreated. We are dependent, He is independent. We are not self-sufficient, He is. We are bound by time and space; God created these and is in and above them. We are embodied spirits, He is Spirit of a different order unlike all others. We are finite, He is infinite. We are space bound He is omnipresent. We learn He knows all things immediately. We die He is neither given life nor can die. We are changeable in sin He is immutable. We grow in limited power He is always unlimited in power. This is the underlying assumption of the bible. This is the God who is eternal, who creates from nothing, who is independent, who is I Am.

That said, the bible also speaks about this God who is unlike us or anything else. How does one speak of something that we cannot compare to anything, and is unlike anything else we have experienced? At first you may think it impossible but this is the wonder of scripture. God Himself provides us with information about Himself. In it He tells us all these things we have stressed yet it also uses language in ways that accommodate themselves to our level and speak metaphorically. The chapter we are looking at, 1 Sam 15 has both of these types of statements. On the one hand we are told that God does not regret. That He is not a man who gets disappointed and surprised and needs time to recover from depression. And yet this chapter uses the language of human experience to communicate God's displeasure with the situation, it uses the language of regret. We must understand that this is not a contradiction. It is the assumption of the bible that God is a being unlike any other, yet also uses language of our experience to try and express things about His will and doing that are not meant to be seen as contradictory to the other parts. We call this type of language that uses the language of human emotion or physique analogical. It makes assertions not by exact description or parity but by an analogy. So that we have an idea of truth but it is not by virtue of exact correspondence.

In one sense all affirmations about God are analogical. For example, God our Father. He is not married, He cannot be widowed or divorced or has need of a mate to make offspring. We could go on and on listing the multitude of ways God is not like a father. But for the purposes of expressing His love, authority, provision and power it becomes a very useful word to us. It communicates intimacy, tenderness, strength, compassion and many other things without making God a man. Historically scholars have made a distinction between things that can be ascribed to God properly and improperly. To say God is love, is meant properly is we mean that He has and always will be love without any increase or decrease. But to using the language of God loving humanity borrowing the language of time bound experience that fluctuates is improper. In other words you don't press it for all its worth. We understand this when we talk about metaphorical language. So when God presents Himself as a betrayed husband who is undergoing the torment of Israel's betrayal, we must recognise the horror of our sins, God's disapproval of it, but we must not infer that we are able to wound the infinite God. Or if God says He repents, this does not mean that He has sinned and made a mistake He must repair, it is an indication of His disapproval, His holiness and the horror of our sins. We can allow for this latitude in expression because the bible has already laid the ground work for a God who is nothing like us.

## **Application of impassibility**

The critique of this teaching when it is put forward is that it makes God sound cold, abstract, uncaring and distant, but this could not be further from the truth. For example, let us consider God's love. Those views which view God's love as changeable think that a God who can fall in and out of love is more compassionate. But this is to make God less loving not more. God is love, it is essential and definitional to who He is, it is not merely an action or an attitude that He assumes but what He unchangeably is. This means that perfect, unchangeable God sized love is always towards me, and unceasingly so. Whether I am going through trials, when I am doubting my salvation, it is God's love towards me that will never change that gives me a confidence.

You see it is only a God of unchangeable justice who will always demand repentance of sin, always judge sin, and always guarantee forgiveness for sin. Some might want to ask the question whether there is in fact a change in God as we move from under judgement to grace. The answer is no. It is we who change not God. God's unchangeable justice demands that sin be repented of, this is a standard which will never be withdrawn. God's holiness being unchanging demands that all sin must be punished. And so, when God sends His Son who pays in full for all our sin, to stand in our stead. And we receive the gift of righteousness and justification when we trust in Christ, we can know that as certainly as God's justice demanded punishment for sin, now we know He will insist on our salvation for justice is perfectly satisfied. It is God's unchangeableness that as a Father towards us now in the gospel that will ensure that God will discipline us for sin and not destroy us. We can know that He is not like our human fathers who are overcome by their emotions, who are at the mercy of their emotions.

A question usually comes up with regards to Christ suffering on the cross. If Jesus is God and God is impassable did God suffer on the cross? The answer is yes according to His human nature and no according to His divine nature. When Christ was dying on the cross the divine nature that cannot die or suffer did not die or suffer, Christ suffered in His humanity. And here is where we really see the marvel of God's love and his willingness to save. We needed justice satisfied on our account, but God Himself cannot suffer and die. However, God Himself incarnated Himself as a man taking to Himself a full human nature in which He could suffer and die. The impassibility of God amplifies the wonder of God becoming man and Himself coming to save us by dying in our place.