

WEEK ONE: DEVOTIONAL READING

THE DOCTRINE OF IMPASSIBILITY:

The question of whether God can actually suffer has traditionally been dealt with in what has been called the doctrine of impassibility: “The doctrine that God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation.”¹

Such emotions that would involve change were seen to be incompatible with the perfect, unchanging character and tranquility of deity. As time went on, this view was accepted quite uncritically by the early Greek church fathers and, in consequence, as Stott rightfully notes that their teaching about God sometimes sounds more Greek than Hebrew.² They relegated all Old Testament descriptions of the love, jealousy, anger, sorrow, and pity of God to the realm of anthropomorphisms that could not be taken literally because they believed the divine nature is unmoved by all emotions.³ The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) declared the idea that the divine nature could suffer as “vain babblings,” and condemned those who believed it.

While the church fathers recognized that Christ, the incarnate Son of God, had suffered, they contended that God Himself did not; He was impassible.... There is often a fear that ascribing suffering to God would ascribe to Him an attribute that would be inconsistent with His omnipotence and immutability. To some, a suffering God implies a weak and frustrated deity.

This need not be the case. Ohlrich correctly points out that “many objections to passibility would be dispelled if we would keep in mind that God chooses to suffer; the God of suffering does not passively endure pain, but actively chooses to embrace it.”⁴ As Dennis Ngien writes, “Our Christian foreparents were right to speak of God as impassible if that means God is not emotionally unstable and cannot be manipulated by humans.”

If impassibility is properly understood to mean that God cannot be forced against His will from either inside or outside influences – and that He is never the helpless victim of circumstances, actions or emotions – then this is obviously in line with the revelation of God given in Scripture. God cannot be unconsciously or unwillingly moved. God suffers because He chooses to love.⁵

It is completely in line with Scripture to say, as C.S. Lewis does, that just as God “perfectly uses his intellectual and volitional powers, he perfectly uses his emotional powers.... God is not overcome by emotions, has no emotions out of control, out of balance, or inappropriate.... Affirmatively, the God of the Bible has appropriate, healthy, self-controlled emotional experience.”⁶

Glenn Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004), pp. 88-89.

¹ G. R. Lewis, “The Impassibility of God,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell. Baker Book House, 1984: 553.

² Stott: 330. See also Ignatius, “To the Ephesians” in *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. Cyril C. Richardson. Collier Books, 1970. “To Polycarp,” *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. Cyril C. Richardson. Collier Books, 1970. David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*. Westminster Press, 1976: 40,41; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. SCM Press, 1974: 227-231, 267-270.

³ Stott: 330; Lewis: 553.

⁴ Ohlrich: 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Lewis: 553.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1:

Acts 8:3. "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

What is our confidence that no one can destroy the church?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2:

Acts 8:1; Acts 8:1-3; Acts 8:8; Acts 9:2; Acts 9:10; Acts 9:25.

What types of persecution do we face where we live, work and play?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3:

As Christians how can we find comfort in suffering?