

Digging Deep: Exploring the Joy of Systematic Theology

Class 9: The Doctrine of God, part 5

The Attributes of God

"... this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

John 17. 3

*There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, **invisible**, without body, parts, or **passions**, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, 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.*

Westminster Confession of Faith, 2.1

I. God is Invisible (or God cannot be seen)

Immortal, invisible, God only wise. In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.

Immortal, Invisible

A. Where is this doctrine found?

This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" —and I am the worst of them. But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate His extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in Him for eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

1 Timothy 1. 15-17

he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

1 Timothy 6. 15-16

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Colossians 1.15

By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

Hebrews 11.27

God is spirit...

John 4.24

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

1 John 4.20

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

John 1.18

John declares to all who are capable of understanding, that there is no nature to which God is visible: not as if He were a being who was visible by nature, and merely escaped or baffled the view of a frailer creature, but because by the nature of His being it is impossible for Him to be seen."

Origen, De Principiis

B. How does this doctrine apply?

- 1. Because God does not have a body & is invisible, it means that He not only can, but is, "completely and without remainder", present everywhere all the time.**

*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.*

Psalms 139. 7-10

- 2. Therefore every moment of every day is lived in His full & complete presence. Though we may feel He is absent, and often pray that He will be with us, He is always with His people.**

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Psalms 23.4

*He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

Psalms 121. 3-4

II. God is Impassable (or God cannot suffer)

*How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss – the Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory.*

Stuart Townend, *How Deep the Father's Love*

A. What this doctrine does NOT mean

- 1. It does not mean that God is a cold, unfeeling deity.**

*Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*

Isaiah 49. 15

... for the LORD delights in you. For as ... the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Isaiah 62.4-5

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

Zephaniah 3. 17

2. Though God is impassible, this does not mean that He is apathetic. God is impassable, not impassive (that is, he may not have “passions” but He certainly has compassion!).

How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!

Psalm 78.40

For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper.

¹³ *He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.*

¹⁴ *From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.*

Psalm 72. 12-14

Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15.10

The Scriptures do not mock us when they say, “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.” (Psalm 103.13). He meant what He said when He proclaimed Himself as “the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth.” (Exodus 34.6)

Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology

B. What this doctrine DOES mean

1. God has emotions!

Does God Have Emotions? Yes! Unpacking that truth, however, can be tricky. The discussion touches on an important point of theology: God’s impassibility. If you are familiar with that doctrine, you know the theology can get technical and hard to follow pretty quickly. And, complicating matters, theologians don’t all agree. For those of you new to the subject, impassibility is the doctrine that God is not able to suffer or be changed by involuntary passions.

*The basic concern here is an important one: the Bible is clear that God is not dependent on his creation in any way (i.e., he is truly transcendent), and therefore he cannot be at its mercy, involuntarily affected by it, reeling in reaction to what he has made, and thus on some level controlled by it. In other words, what he has created cannot afflict him with suffering or **make** him feel anything.*

Right off the bat you might think that it actually sounds like God doesn’t have emotions. If God is unaffected by his creation, then—well—he can’t feel anything about it good or bad. But that isn’t what the doctrine of impassibility is getting at. The issue isn’t really whether or not God has emotions but what they are like. Does God experience emotions the way we do? Some theologians argue that he does and that this is basic to his ability to empathize with us. Other theologians argue that he does not experience emotions as we do at all. If he did, his emotions would make him as willy-nilly as we are, and we could no longer consider him reliably stable (i.e., immutable).

Winston Smith, Alasdair Groves, Untangling Emotions

2. Since “passions” (understood literally & historically) are “an uncontrolled response to an external event”, God’s emotions are an expression of His internal (& eternal) being. That is, what God “feels” flows from His character; it is not forced on Him by something outside of Himself.

“This conception of God [as impassible] represents no single biblical term, but was introduced into Christian theology in the second century. What was it supposed to mean? The historical answer is: not impassivity, unconcern, and impersonal detachment in the face of the creation. Not inability or unwillingness to empathize with human pain and grief, either. It means simply that God’s experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us. His are foreknown, willed, and chosen by himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside, apart from his own decision, in the way that ours regularly are ... Let us be clear: A totally impassive God would be a horror, and not the God of Calvary at all. He might belong in Islam; but he has no place in Christianity. If, therefore, we can learn to think of the chosenness of God’s grief and pain as the essence of his impassibility, so-called, we will do well.”

J.I. Packer, “What Do You Mean When You Say God?”

C. How does this doctrine apply?

1. God is not subject to mood swings. He does not have good days & bad days. He is not susceptible to involuntary emotional manipulation. Therefore, His character and His Word can always be trusted.
2. God not only cares for you in your suffering, but He understands & cares that you know He understands.
3. God cannot change because He cannot possibly be any more loving, or just, or good than He already is & always has been.