

The Doctrine of Christ

Impassibility and Christology: Did Jesus Really Suffer?

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God cannot suffer. Or, to use more technical theological jargon, God is impassible. To the contemporary Christian, this seems an odd, if not distasteful claim. Does it not hurt God when His creatures reject Him? Is He not disappointed when we sin against Him? Do not even the scriptures speak of God being grieved in His heart ([Gen. 6:6](#), [Is. 63:10](#))? Furthermore, if God cannot suffer, how can He know me and know what I experience? Can a God incapable of suffering truly love me if He doesn't suffer when I suffer?

These objections are not silly or unfounded, but neither are they new objections to the classical doctrine of divine impassibility. The Church has dealt with these thorny questions for centuries. Even so, almost all Christian traditions have held that the doctrine of impassibility is vital. James Dolezal points out that, "Historically [impassibility] commanded wide ecumenical backing, being maintained by the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and more."¹ Indeed, the 2nd London Baptist

¹ James E. Dolezal, "[Strong Impassibility](#)," in *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 14.

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Confession, 39 Articles, and Westminster Confession, all affirm that God is “without body, parts, or *passions*” (2LBCF 2.1). We would be wise to heed the words of Chesterton to never take down a fence until we know the reason it was put up, and the wisdom of Solomon to, “not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set” ([Prov. 22:28](#)). As we shall see, Divinity cannot suffer, yet in the incarnation God the Son does enter into our human experience and suffer to manifest His love to us, thus bringing us to Himself.



IMPASSIBILITY

When we say that God is without passions, we are saying that He does not have changeable affections, that the Divine Being cannot suffer (which implies the want or the lack of anything good), and He does not experience emotions the way that human beings do. Certainly, God is love ([1Jn. 4:8](#)) and He loves His people ([Ps. 36:7](#)), yet He cannot be passively affected in His emotions by His creatures.

There are several biblical and theological arguments in favor of this doctrine. First, the doctrine of impassibility is a corollary to the doctrine of immutability. God does not change ([Mal. 3:6](#), [Num. 23:19](#)), therefore neither does He experience emotional flux, at one moment sad, at another moment happy. In considering the doctrine of God’s immutability, some may attempt to argue that, while God does not change in His essence, He does undergo some external and relational changes, i.e. His will and His affections undergo change. This is similar to the way in which we, as humans remain who we are, yet undergo various external changes as we age and grow. In this way, God can remain unchangeably who He is, yet His external affections and His will and His relationship to His creatures can change. But the apostle James would disabuse us of this notion. He says that with God, “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Ja. 1:17). There is no change in God of any sort, not even a shadow of change. (For a discussion on how we are to understand the scripture passages that refer to God being grieved and regretting His actions, I would refer you to the excellent article in this series by Sam Renihan on [Analogy and Simplicity](#).)

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The light of nature confirms the necessity of an unchanging God. Turretin says, “[God] can neither be changed for the better (because He is the best) nor for the worse (because

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he would cease to be the most perfect).”² Since God is immutable and unchanging such that there is not even a shadow of change in Him, then it must also be said that He has no passions and that He cannot suffer. He cannot go from a state of perfect blessedness and happiness to a state of grief or sorrow or a state of pleasure to a state of pain.

Second, to say that God can suffer is to reject the omnipotence of God. What creature has the power to harm God? In order to maintain the Creator/creature distinction, we must affirm God’s impassibility, because a failure to do so is to affirm that God can, in some sense, be subject to the actions of His creature. But God is infinite and transcendent. He depends on no one and nothing for His existence, being, and perfect blessedness. As the only truly self-sufficient One, He cannot be moved or acted upon by any of His creatures such that they could harm Him in any way. A creature cannot cause any emotion to arise in God because this would make some aspect of God dependent upon an outside cause. But no creature has the power to give to God anything that He does not already possess, nor to take anything from Him ([Rom. 11:34-36](#)). God cannot receive anything good from His creatures which He once lacked (i.e. joy), nor can His creatures take anything good from Him so as to deprive Him of His own perfections.

Third, the scriptures speak directly to God’s impassibility. The apostle Paul identifies God as the impassible One in [Acts 14:15](#). While preaching in the town of Lystra, the inhabitants of the town began to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods. But Paul says to them,

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. (ESV)

The Greek word that the ESV translates as “like nature” is *homoiotheis*, which means ‘like-passions.’ Paul is saying to them, ‘do not worship us as gods. We have passions just like you do, and as such, we cannot be divine.’ For Paul, the proof that he and Barnabas were not divine was the fact that they were not impassible, but rather subject to passions.

Finally, in [Romans 1:23](#), Paul calls God the incorruptible God. This does not merely refer to His moral perfections, it refers to His very being. Nothing in God can be corrupted from one thing into another. His joy cannot be corrupted into sadness, nor His happiness into grief, nor His eternal blessedness into suffering. Rather, His integrity is maintained in every way.

² François Turretini, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology. 1: First through Tenth Topics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publ, 1992), 205.

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HE SUFFERED IN THE FLESH

God cannot receive anything good from His creatures which He once lacked, nor can His creatures take anything good from Him so as to deprive Him of His own perfections.



Having established divine impassibility, we now run into a theological quandary. Since God cannot suffer, and since Jesus is God, how can we say that Jesus suffered? Indeed, how do we understand the words of scripture which tell us that He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief ([Is. 53:3](#)), that He suffered in His temptation and even died ([1Pet. 4:1](#), [Heb. 2:14](#), [18](#))? The Bible is clear that the Son must suffer in order to atone for the sins of His people ([Heb. 2:17-18](#); [5:7-9](#); [Rom. 6:10](#)). But how can He atone for our sins if He cannot suffer? How can He die for us if He cannot die?

It may be said that God the Son can suffer because He assumed unto Himself a human nature so that He is both God and man. The Symbol of Chalcedon declares that the Son is,

To be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is, the second person of the Trinity, in the fullness of time ([Gal. 4:4](#)), assumed unto Himself a human nature with a body of flesh and reasonable soul so that in this incarnation there was a union of a divine nature and a human nature within the one Person (a hypostatic union). These two natures are not mixed together into a human/divine hybrid, thus becoming neither human nor divine. Nor are the two natures separated into two subjects as though the single person of the Son split Himself into two separate persons (i.e. a human person and a divine person). As the Athanasian Creed says, “although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.” The human nature does not receive a little bit of divinity and a little bit of immortality, nor does the divine nature receive anything from the human nature, the natures are united, but not mixed.

Sometimes, the Son acts according to His human nature, and sometimes He acts according to His divine nature, but it is always God the Son acting. In addition, that which can be said of His human nature can and must be said of the person of the Son, and that which is said of His divine nature can and must be said of His person. However, that which can be said of His human nature (ignorance, mortality, weakness) cannot be said

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of His divine nature. Conversely, that which can be said of His divine nature (immortality, omniscience, omnipresence) cannot be said of His human nature. This is what has come to be known among theologians as the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of properties). The properties of the natures can be predicated of the Person but not of each other.

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Thus, the Son could grow in wisdom and in stature ([Lk. 2:40](#)) even though an increase in wisdom implies previous ignorance. God is all knowing and cannot grow in wisdom because there is nothing He does not already know. To grow in stature is to change, and as we have already seen, it is impossible for God to change. Yet, the Son of God, grew and learned according to His human nature which is neither immutable nor omniscient. He did not, and could not, learn or grow according to His divine nature. This is also why Jesus could say that the Son does not know the day of the coming of the Son of Man, but only the Father ([Mark 13:32](#)). The Son is ignorant of the future according to His human nature while at the same time being omniscient according to the divine nature which He and the Father have in common.

Were the sufferings of the Christ endured by a mere human person they would not have the redemptive value necessary to bring us to God.

It is proper to human nature to be mortal, to suffer, and to die. Therefore, the Son of God, God Himself, can suffer, according to His human nature. Yet, the divine nature cannot die or suffer, and it does not. We see this in [Acts 20:28](#) where Paul says that *God* purchased the church with His own blood. How is this possible? God does not have blood, He is pure spirit ([Jn. 4:24](#)). While the divine nature does not have blood, God does have blood according to the human nature of the Son. So, when the Son suffers to make atonement, He does not take that suffering up into the divine nature as if the two natures were mixed, but He really does suffer truly according to His human nature, which is capable of such suffering. As John of Damascus says,

For when the one Christ, who is composed of divinity and humanity, and exists as both human and divine, suffered, the passible element suffered, as was natural to it, but the impassible element did not suffer along with it.³

³ St John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith: A New Translation of An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. Norman Russell (St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2022), 225.

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FOR US AND FOR OUR SALVATION

It is necessary that the Son be impassible according to His divine nature. If He is not impassible, He is not immutable, He is not Omnipotent, He is not Self-Sufficient (*a se*), He is not transcendent, He is not God. Yet it is also necessary that the Son be capable of suffering so that He might, by His humiliation, sufferings, and death, purchase our salvation. Cyril of Alexandria says it this way,

Since on this account He wished to suffer, even though he was beyond the power of suffering in His nature as God, then he wrapped Himself in flesh that was capable of suffering, and revealed it as His very own, so that even the suffering might be said to be His because it was His own body which suffered and no one else's.⁴

The atonement that He made in the body of His flesh is efficacious to redeem a lost race because it is the passible body of God Himself. Were the sufferings of the Christ endured by a mere human person they would not have the redemptive value necessary to bring us to God. But the blood which was shed was the blood of a divine person, making it infinite in value and worthy to purchase lost souls. Thus, we see the immense love and wisdom of God, “who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.”



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⁴ Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2005), 118.