

God is impassable

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[0 : 00] We're in a summer sermon series on the attributes, the character of God. We have looked at a number of different attributes, a number of different attributes and characteristics of God, and the hope is that as we grow to know God, as we behold who God is, his character, the very essence of who he is, that we will grow in our love for him, that we're going to grow in our ability to read his word and encounter him in his word in a more robust way.

And some of these attributes, they seem quite obvious for us. They're nothing new. If you've been at church even for a few weeks, some of these types of attributes make their appearances week after week, talking about God's self-existence or God's omnipotence.

These are very clear. There's very clear instances in scripture where God and his character are revealed, that God is the creator. I mean, I think George, he mentions that almost every week. If you're new and if you haven't heard George mention it, by the way, George is our lead pastor. You'll hear it. These are certain characteristics that we hear often. However, we're looking this morning at God's impassibility, something that isn't talked about all that much.

Not because George skirts around the issue or it's something that is extremely controversial. It's because it's just a lesser talked about doctrine.

[1 : 39] The idea behind the impassibility of God is that God is incapable of suffering. He is incapable of being overwhelmed. And he is incapable of being overcome by anything.

So the idea is in the kind of the older sense of the word passion, like Jesus' passion, Jesus' suffering, that God is incapable of suffering.

So that's where we get this term, the impassibility of God. And this actually goes hand in glove with what Shane preached on last week on God's unchangingness or his immutability, that God never changes.

And we must take these things together. In fact, like I mentioned a few weeks ago, the last time I opened up God's word at Messiah, is that these attributes of God, they are to be taken together. We do not have the liberty to pick and choose God's attributes. We can't treat God like a buffet where we go there.

[2 : 46] There's many different options. And we are bypassing the noodles and going straight for the stir fry. It is, we don't have the luxury of picking, okay, I really like God being omnipotent, but this idea of him being omnipresent everywhere, it seems a bit far-fetched.

I don't really like that. We don't have that luxury. So this attribute of God, it's deeply important. In fact, I want to put forward to you this morning that the impassibility of God is the key characteristic of God by which we can have assurance of our salvation.

We preach that when you put your hope and faith and trust in Jesus, his grip on us, on you, is greater than your grip on him.

That if you are his, you are adopted by grace. He isn't going to unadopt you. You're not heading back to some kind of spiritual orphanage. The impassibility of God is key in this, in understanding a true and hearty assurance of salvation.

So it's important that we do our best to get this right. It is not an easy doctrine to talk about because although, of course, we can say that God doesn't suffer, it opens up a lot of issues that we might find in the Bible.

[4 : 22] There are some stories, there are some passages in the Scripture that seem to contradict this idea that God does not suffer, or God does not change, or God isn't overwhelmed. So, we're first, this morning, we're going to look at this idea of divine impassibility.

What does it mean for God not to suffer? For God not to be overwhelmed? The second thing is we're going to try to tackle these apparent contradictions in the Scriptures when we read about it.

And I'll have a few examples. And then, at the end, why does this matter for us? Why is it so key? I talked about assurance of salvation, but why? Why does it give us true assurance of salvation? So first, let's take a look at what does this actually mean, God's impassibility. God is completely immune to suffering. With God being fully sovereign and fully omnipotent, meaning that he is fully powerful, there's no power greater than him, it means that there is no greater power that rivals him. There is no great power that will somehow influence God to do something contrary to his will, or to his character, or to his knowledge.

[5 : 41] It's not as if God is all-powerful, but in the sense of God is 1A, but there's something else that's like a 1B. We have to understand that God being all-powerful, completely omnipotent, means that if God has all power, there is an unbreachable chasm for the next powerful being.

And a big part of that is because God has created everything. He is the only uncreated being, and that everything in existence is his creation. And therefore, he is completely, completely powerful, more powerful than, infinitely powerful than his creation.

So that God, what follows is that God can't be overwhelmed. He can't be overcome by anything. He's unaffected by anything whatsoever. There is no outside influence that can somehow cause God to second-guess, or to regret, or to somehow expose his lack of love, or his lack of mercy, or his lack of justice.

That God is completely perfect. He is completely other than. And as such, he doesn't have any unrealized potential.

So for us, maybe you've known some people, maybe you are one of these people, where there was a lot of promise for you when you were younger, and you grew up, and you didn't quite meet expectations.

[7 : 15] Whether they're your expectations, or parents, or whatever. But there's unmet expectations. There's unrealized potential. In God, there's none of that.

In God, there is the very definition of what love is, of what mercy, and justice, and compassion is, so much so in him that it is his very essence.

So we read in 1 John, where it says that God is love. We can extend that to God is mercy. God is compassion. God is pure justice.

God, in a very pure way, hates evil. That is his essence. It's his very essence of who he is. So he can't get overwhelmed.

There is nothing that can somehow upend him. There is no power that, in some way, God hasn't considered. For us, we are not like this at all, are we?

[8 : 18] We are influenced a ton. Some of us have better self-control than others. Fantastic. Other people are more kind of rock solid in their emotions than others.

But all of us, whether it be a negative or a positive aspect, we, outside influences, can influence us, can change us, can cause us to reconsider certain things, can cause us to be overwhelmed.

A flirty interaction with your spouse or somebody that you might be interested in, that is an outside influence that can level you for the day.

Like, just totally, totally take over. At the same time, if that spouse is frustrated at you or a pass at, you know, somebody you're interested in isn't reciprocated, that can also just, it can feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders.

And that changes who you are for that day. We are passable people. We are. We are given to our emotions and our passions. And this is the way that we are. And by the way, I'm not trying to advocate for, like, this is a terrible thing.

[9 : 32] We need to go the way of the Stoics or the Buddhists or the Serenity Now folk. This is just who we are as people. Our desires are constantly in flux.

They can be disordered quite a bit. But consider again God, how he can't be affected by anything. Nothing, again, is his love for us, for instance, isn't contingent on how we reciprocate back.

It is not as though God loves us so that we might love him back and fill a void in his life, in his eternal being, because there is none. God is completely impassable.

And it's really important that we understand that it is essentially due to him being completely other than us. He is the creator. We are the creation.

This summer, like I mentioned, we're going through these attributes of God. And there's a number of attributes. I guess we could look at it like this. The attributes of God can roughly be understood in two different camps. Okay?

[10:40] There's those attributes that we share with God. Not completely equal, obviously, but we share. There's a connection there.

God is a loving God. We can be loving people. God is, he has power. He can influence. Well, we can as well. Again, to a degree. Never to the extent of God.

So we understand this as an analogy. We're analogous to God, not equal to God in that way. But then there are these attributes where we have no connection.

There's complete difference with God, right? God is immortal. He has no beginning and no end. We have a beginning. Our hope in Christ is that we will not have an end and be with him for eternity. But we've had a beginning. We can't claim of ourselves, like God can, that he has always existed. Unlike God, we can't claim that we're omnipresent, that we're everywhere at once.

[11:45] These are unique to God. And impassibility is one of those things. And it's important that we understand this creature-creator distinctive.

Offentimes, in our culture, actually in our cultures, maybe that's a better way of talking about it, we try to switch the roles.

We try to put ourselves as God and then kind of use God as a tool, as a means for our own benefit, as if God could be manipulated.

But with this idea of impassibility, God is completely other than us. He's completely unique in this. So much so that God is, as creator, that we actually have our being in him.

It says in Acts 17, the Apostle Paul is saying to the Athenians, in him we live and move and have our being. Psalm 18, that Shane read, verses 1 to 3 and then verse 31.

[12:53] I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

I call upon the Lord who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. For who is God but the Lord? This idea that David is communicating, he's praising God about, is that God can't be changed and he can't be upended and he can't be conquered.

There is nothing at all that can prevent God from being God. Consider the Greek and Roman gods who are given to flights of rage, who are manipulated, who are given to lust and war.

There is an inconsistency in them. In the Hindu pantheon, there is constant struggle. There's no almighty God.

God, our God that we see in scriptures, is completely other than any other God. Any other God in any other faith tradition, he is completely, completely other than.

[14:15] And again, we don't talk about the impassibility of God all that much. And a part of it is because here at Church of the Messiah, we go through books of the Bible, and it's a fantastic way to kind of systematically understand who God is as God has revealed himself to us.

However, it's moments, sermons like these that help us actually read the Bible better. So, for instance, I mentioned that there seems to be contradictions in the scriptures about this doctrine of God's impassibility.

There's a number of instances, actually. I'll give a few examples. God negotiates with Abraham before destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. He negotiates as if there is some kind of influence that Abraham might have on God.

God seems to rage only to calm down, be calmed down by Moses with the idolatry of the nation of Israel. Somehow, Moses convinces God to change his mind, his wrath towards Israel.

Also, God anoints King Saul to be king, and King Saul blunders, and God says that he regrets the decision that he made to anoint King Saul.

[15:43] It's a kind of repentance, is it not? I mean, not because God somehow sinned, but because God made a decision that he needs to correct. How does that jive with impassibility?

This is, it's a good question. And if you're asking that question, if you are, maybe you're frustrated at me because you're anticipating some of this stuff, and you're like, man, you're not reading the Bible properly, or maybe it's making you squirm, or making you feel uncomfortable, it's a good thing because you're wanting to be faithful to the Scriptures, and that's what we want to do.

But a few things that we need to consider as we hold on to this doctrine of impassibility and then encounter a seemingly impassible God in the Scriptures.

A couple things. In the 39 Articles of Faith, it's what kind of defines our doctrine as Anglicans. Article 20 says that we ought not to expound one part of Scripture over against another part.

That might contradict it. So here's an example. It says in the Scriptures that God is spirit. He doesn't have a body. And yet, he rescues Israel from Egypt with what?

[17:03] A strong arm and an outstretched hand. I don't know if it's an outstretched arm and a strong hand. I get those things mixed up. But the point is, he saves Israel, and the language used is with his arm.

Now, do we say, well, hold on a second. Clearly, God has a body because that's what it says. Do we contradict one part of Scripture or interpret one part of Scripture at the expense of the other? Well, no. We say, hold on a second. This is language used to communicate that God has done a mighty work on behalf of his people. That God is spirit.

He is without body. So we don't read every passage literally at face value, but we honor it in the way it was written.

So it's really important that we never contradict Scripture with Scripture. And that's not an easy thing, by the way. It's not an easy thing. But this is why we go through a summer series that gives us tools to read the Scriptures a bit better.

[18:06] The second thing is that God uses adequate language to our beings. So the Bible isn't some collection of sayings or a big tome of law.

It is a story. It's a collection of different types of writing, of course, but ultimately it is this grand story. And God describes himself as what? He describes himself as a father and as a king and as a lord and as a lover and as a shepherd and as a husband.

How does he describe us? He describes us as his bride, as sheep. We are not sheep, but the Bible is constantly using.

God has so ordered the Bible to be written in such a way by which we can understand it and relate to it. We understand life as a story, as a journey, as something that is this grand epic.

And this is how God has revealed himself to us. God reveals, the infinite God reveals himself in language that finite, limited humans can comprehend and have a capacity to understand.

[19:29] So, going back to King Saul, the issue with King Saul and God repenting, is God really repenting? Is God really, did God really fail to take in all this information that Saul would mess up and that God would look bad and that he regrets what he has done as if God made a mistake?

Is that what is happening? Is God, who negotiates with Abraham about the future of Sodom and Gomorrah, is he really negotiating as if he's at the market and there's kind of like this discussion over goods?

And say, well, hold on a second. We understand that God is unchanging. He is all-knowing. He's impassable. So, how then do we read the scripture in light of that? Well, I think we need to ask ourselves these questions. In light of God being impassable, what is God trying to communicate in the story of King Saul having his crown removed?

What is he teaching us about the human condition? About his great desire to be the king of his people and yet their apostasy, wanting to be like the other nations and get a king of their own, even though the creator of heaven and earth is their king.

What does it tell us about God's glory and God's desire to bless and not curse? About to honor free will? What does it tell us about who God is and what God has done?

[21:06] What does it tell us about God's glory? And when we ask those questions, right, and we don't, we ask those questions individually, but we also ask them at church as a community of God's people, but we ask those questions and all of a sudden, all of a sudden, we get this beautiful picture that starts to get painted of this God that we serve.

And it's magnificent. It's greater than we'd ever have thought. His love is much deeper than we had ever imagined. His mercy and his justice, his patience is so much greater than we'd ever understand.

So when we come to instances where it seems like God is one of us, like he is, he is fickle, we have to ask the questions.

Well, hold on a second. What's really being communicated here? We must resist the urge to fashion God, two extremes, to fashion God in our own image or somehow treat God as if he is completely an apathetic deity, right?

Because if I'm saying like God is unaffected by anything, it kind of goes to, doesn't it kind of lead us to logically think that God doesn't really love?

[22 : 36] Because the idea of love is there's some kind of reciprocation that he's not, he doesn't show emotions even though we see it in scripture. No, no, no. We must hold this tension of not creating God in our image and not treating him as some kind of apathetic deity, some kind of God that makes the watch, winds it up, and just leaves it.

So, the reality is, is God does have emotions. He most certainly does. In Exodus chapter 3, verse 7, when he sees Israel crying out, they're in Egyptian slavery, God most certainly does feel, but his emotions never change his essence, who he is.

He doesn't love, he doesn't feel out of a lack, but actually out of fullness. That God doesn't love to be loved or show compassion so that he is seen as a nice guy or shown mercy, he doesn't show mercy so that people, oh, look at this God, we're in his pocket.

No, no, no, no. God has emotions, but he is completely unaffected by his emotions. He's unlike us in this regard. So, this is why the study of the attributes of God is so important because we come to the scriptures and we hold these things in tension and we realize, hold on a second, this God is for me.

He loves me. And also, he's unchanging so that I can trust in his consistency in his character forever. This is where the rubber hits the road because if God has made promises, he doesn't go back on them.

[24 : 24] Not because he's a good promise keeper, is because he cannot go back on them. Because his promises of salvation and love, they are outpouring of his very character, of who he is.

And he can't go against that. So, when we have the, these wonderful promises were made for little Coralie, that if she grows up and, you know, she has a bad stretch, God forbid, God doesn't look at her and say, like, enough is enough, I'm done, and pull, and pull the rug from out from underneath her.

Those promises remain true. They've remained true all the way. And we can, we can take that to the bank. It means that when God says that all the injustice will be taken care of one day, all the injustice will be taken care of one day.

And we take that to the bank. You can't be influenced otherwise. When God shows mercy to people, that mercy doesn't get undid, so to speak.

If he adopts you as his son or daughter, that is never going to be rescinded. If you are truly his, you are his forever. And all of a sudden, we understand that the doctrine of the impassibility of God is key to our assurance of salvation.

[25 : 54] Because we have a God that does not change, that cannot be influenced, that cannot be connived, cannot be twisted, cannot be, he's perfect, unchanging.

And we can take that to the bank. We can. We can hold God to his promises. We can. His promises come out in his way and in his timing, but we can hold to his promises. Another wonderful thing about this is that it helps us to understand the incarnation really well.

One of the, out of all the stuff with the pandemic and the restrictions, and I'm not, I'm not making comments on government stuff, really, but one of the things that has been absolutely horrible is elderly folk spending their last days alone, dying alone, suffering alone.

Our, my grandmother, when all this stuff happened, she was in her retirement home for three months and we could see her through a window. It was heartbreaking for us. Maybe you guys know people or you've experienced some of that with your loved ones.

We got her out of the home, thank God, but other people have been in the home for a year, more, and they're suffering alone. They're completely alone.

[27 : 15] In the incarnation, God, out of his self-sufficient love for us, what does he do? He condescends and in the person of Jesus Christ, he unites himself.

The fullness of the divinity unites with the fullness of humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. And what does Jesus do? He suffers. His humanity suffers and yet his divinity conquers everything. Conquers the grave. Conquers sin. Not one time, but forever. So in the person of Jesus, we have somebody that can relate to us. That can know what it means to suffer.

Know what it means to be alone because what did he do? He died alone on a cross. And yet, he is fully divine, fully God in that in Jesus, the divine attribute of impassibility along with all the other divine attributes don't somehow get put on pause.

God remains fully God in the person of Jesus so that he conquers everything. He doesn't stay in the grave. He rises again. What a wonderful truth.

[28 : 32] we have a God who knows, is acquainted with our suffering. It says in Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 4, that we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses.

Yet, sorry, he was able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. That means Jesus experiences all of the emotions we have, but properly ordered, without sinning, without flying off the handle.

He experiences everything that we have, but yet is without sin. And what's the result? Verse 16 of Hebrews chapter 4, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

Psalms 18 continues on and it talks about God rescuing David, but it's more than just this picture of David being rescued from Saul when Saul was trying to attack him.

It is this fantastic picture of God rescuing his people from the greatest of evils, from the greatest of sin, of the greatest of what hell has to offer.

[29 : 50] God rescues his people. And he doesn't do it with the last bit of mustering of his strength. It's done. It's done. Jesus himself, what does he do?

He doesn't get coerced into laying down his life for us because somehow we will be in his debt, like I've mentioned, this idea of quid pro quo. But in John 10, what does he say?

For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. Verse 18, no one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord. I have authority to lay it down. I have authority to take it up again.

This charge I have received from my Father. That God, out of his goodness, out of his self-sufficiency, has suffered through Jesus on our behalf.

Friends, listen, if you are suffering, there is someone close. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to what? To comfort us in these times.

[30 : 53] And oftentimes, the Holy Spirit comforts us through one another, through the reading of his word, through times of prayer, through the gathering around his table, through the proclamation of his word.

The Holy Spirit's at work. We will never have that full satisfaction until we are glorified in heaven with God. But we get tastes of what it means to be comforted.

We get tastes of what it means to be in the impassable God's presence here on earth and to trust that his promises are true forever.

And I'll tell you, if you are on a spiritual journey, if you're in another faith, if you are exploring, wherever you may be, I'm telling you that today, God extends this desire to save, this love that he has done on the cross of Calvary, he extends that to you today.

And if he extends it to you and you are his, you will never not be his. Wonderful truth, assurance of salvation. Heavenly Father, we come before you as your people and we thank you that you are not like us in many respects, that you cannot be manipulated, that you don't change your mind, that you aren't, in your divinity, you do not suffer.

[32 : 15] And yet, in the person and work of your son, Jesus Christ, he suffered on our behalf. He took every last bit of the taste of death away from us so that we don't have to taste it because he tasted it.

And Lord, we can be sure as sure can be that we are yours because of what you have done for us and you do not rescind your adoption. You don't send us back to an orphanage.

You don't send us out to be alone and to suffer by ourselves. No. So Lord, help us to know you more, help us to know your qualities, your attributes, your essence more.

Today, as we read through the scriptures this week and as we continue on in our service or in our summer series for the rest of the summer, we pray all these things in Christ's name.

Amen.