

What is Divine Impassibility? ⁴¹²⁵

The idea of divine impassibility is that God does not feel pain nor does He have emotions. Divine impassibility is a difficult concept because it often means different things to different people. For this reason, some think that the term is best left unused or replaced with something else. *Impassibility* comes from the root word for *passion*, which may mean “strong emotion” or “suffering.” Most people who speak of divine impassibility have something of both aspects in mind.

The concept of divine impassibility springs out of the unchangeable nature of God—His [immutability](#). The thought is that God does not feel pain and sorrow, He does not change His mind, and He does not have emotions. If God could change, it is said, that would implicate His perfection. If He changed, even to express emotion, then either He would be improving (which would indicate that He is less than perfect now) or worsening (which would leave Him less than perfect after the change). According to those who hold to divine impassibility, the passages of Scripture that indicate God feels passion or pain are simply anthropomorphisms. However, taken to the logical conclusion, God’s absolute immutability would seem to preclude any action at all on His part. He would be a static being—a statue.

On the other end of the spectrum are [Open Theists](#), who take the biblical words about God’s emotions quite literally. They see God as reacting to the choices of human beings with genuine emotion, disappointment, or even surprise. Open Theists would say that God does not know what human beings will do, so when He finds out, He has a genuine reaction. What proponents of divine impassibility see as [anthropomorphism](#), Open Theists see as straightforward statement of fact. God was sorry that He made mankind, so He decided to wipe them from the face of the earth ([Genesis 6:7](#)). According to Open Theists, when God found out how sinful mankind had become, He regretted His earlier action and made a course correction. We reject Open Theism in that it diminishes God’s perfection.

Scripture seems to chart a middle ground between Open Theism and divine impassibility. God has emotions but is not bound by them in the way that human beings are. God’s emotions are more than just anthropomorphic. God may grieve, but He is never “crippled with grief.” God may be angry, but He does not “lose His temper.” God may be disappointed by our choices, but these choices do not catch Him by surprise. God’s basic character does not change, but He can interact with changeable human beings and respond to our choices in time and space, even though He exists outside those dimensions. Although His nature and character remain the same, the way He responds to us may differ according to the situation. He always responds in ways that are consistent with His other attributes.

Ultimately, in Christ, God did experience pain and suffering. And perhaps in Christ we can understand immutability in a way that will allow us to see a perfect, unchangeable God who still experiences pain and emotions. [Hebrews 13:8](#) says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” yet we know that Jesus changed—He grew, He acted, He had emotions, He died, He rose, and He felt anger, compassion, and hunger—yet His changes never indicated that He was anything less than perfect to begin with.