

## Question: What is the doctrine of the impassibility vs. passibility of God?

**Answer:** To be “passible” is to be “capable of feeling, especially suffering” or to be “susceptible to emotion.” When theologians speak of God’s “passibility” versus His “impassibility,” they are referring to His freedom to respond emotionally versus a perceived lack of empathy for His creatures.

The doctrine of the passibility of God has to do with the theology of the “suffering” of God. Does God suffer? Can He truly feel emotional pain? Some theologians see the impassibility of God as one of His attributes, right up there with His immutability, omniscience, or eternity. They see God as “apathetic” in the sense that He exists above human emotion and remains untouched by it. Others see God’s passibility as one of His essential attributes—they insist that God does indeed suffer with us.

Both sides of the issue face the danger of pushing things too far. When the doctrine of divine impassibility is pushed to an extreme, the result is deism, which views God as cold, distant, and impassive—a God who deigns not to interact with humanity. Conversely, when the doctrine of divine passibility is taken to an extreme, the result is open theism, which views God as not knowing the future and being as surprised as we are by each turn of events.

Arguing for the doctrine of God’s impassibility is the fact of God’s immutability (His unchanging nature). The reasoning is that, if God “suffers” in response to a source of pain, then has He not changed? Those who argue for impassibility do not deny that God has emotions; rather, they affirm that God’s emotions are voluntary and purposeful, not knee-jerk reactions to events on earth. Also, according to promoters of God’s impassibility, God’s absolute power and sovereignty argue against His suffering: someone who suffers must be subject to the circumstance that causes the suffering; therefore, God cannot suffer, since He is not subject to anything.

However, arguing for the doctrine of God’s passibility are many Scripture passages that seem to indicate that God does respond emotionally to events on earth. It’s impossible to read much of Scripture without realizing that God feels compassion for His people ([Isaiah 14:1](#)); that He feels wrath against sin ([Psalm 38:3](#)); and that He is pained by the rejection of His love and grace ([Luke 19:41–42](#)). Jesus, who is “the exact representation” of God’s being ([Hebrews 1:3](#)), wept at Lazarus’s tomb ([John 11:35](#)).

Jesus, who showed us the Father ([John 14:8–10](#)), often showed that He was passible. We see passibility in the description of Him as our Great High Priest who is able to “empathize with our weaknesses” ([Hebrews 4:15](#)). The prophets predicted Jesus to be “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” ([Isaiah 53:3](#)).

Likewise, God’s children must enter into the suffering of each other. Paul wrote from prison for the church to “remember my chains” ([Colossians 4:18](#)). The author of Hebrews tells the church to “continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” ([Hebrews 13:3](#)). It is this suffering *with* those who suffer that truly defines passibility. “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” ([Romans 12:15](#)). As God’s people share each other’s sorrow, they reflect the passibility of God.

Those who argue for the passibility of God point out that it is God’s eternal, divine sympathy that leads Him to be involved in His creation and to voluntarily allow His heart to be touched by the suffering of His people. *Got Questions Ministries, Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014–2021).

people. God is transcendent, yes, but He is not aloof. Biblical statements such as “God is love” ([1 John 4:8](#)) reveal a passionate God who listens to our cries for help ([Psalm 69:33](#)), shows compassion ([Mark 6:34](#)), and knows our suffering firsthand ([Hebrews 2:18](#)).

The doctrine of the passibility of God does *not* teach that God is fickle, has mood swings, or cannot control His responses. God is never the victim of circumstance. The doctrine of passibility does teach that God is emotionally invested in His creation; He is involved because He cares.