

The Passion Of God

Ezekiel 36:26 – Habakkuk 3:2 – Isaiah 62:5

If you are anything like me, you are probably living in your heart. Most of the time, I live in my enthusiasm or 'passions', and I've never been ashamed of being a wholehearted person. There is a line in a well-known hymn that says, "**Love with every passion blending**". This states that love (and it is speaking of our human love) is foundational; all other passions must be submitted to and blended with the grand passion of **love**. But we aren't the only beings who love. God loves too! And God is zealous – **impassioned**.

The church hasn't always admitted this. In fact, for centuries the mediaeval church upheld the doctrine that God is utterly without passion. But what was lost when the church made this pronouncement? The living Person of God was lost; which is to say, God Himself was lost. You see, when our mediaeval Christian brothers maintained that God is without passion they inevitably had to say that God doesn't "feel" – that our God is unable to be compassionate. But of what help to suffering people is a God who knows nothing about their pain? Inevitably, in denying that God "is moved", our forefathers rendered God a non-person. Therefore what relationship can there be between people (who are persons) and a God who is a non-person? No relationship at all! The mediaeval church was wrong in maintaining that God is devoid of passion – that He is never moved!

Scripture speaks everywhere of the zeal or "passion" of God, just as scripture speaks everywhere of the Person of God.

There isn't enough time today to say all that can be said about the **passion** of God. However, in the time we have we shall deal briefly with four aspects: God's **love**, God's **jealousy**, God's **anger** and God's **joy**.

(1) Let us begin with **God's love**. Love is God's very essence, God's divine nature, and God's innermost character. God's jealousy, on the other hand, and God's anger and God's grief are all reactions in God; reactions in God to something concerning us (specifically, to our sin). But God's love isn't a reaction in God at all; God's love is what **He is** eternally. God's love is what He would be eternally even if the creation had never appeared. The apostle John writes, "**God is love**". To be sure, God hates, God rages, God grieves. But nowhere are we told that God is hatred, or God is rage, or God is grief. Hatred, rage, grief are 'reactions' within the heart of a God whose eternal nature is "agape" – a consistent and persistent and unconditional love.

When God's Word tells us that He is love, however, it is quick to tell us also what love is not. Love is not indulgence. God indulges no one, in anything. In the same way God tolerates nothing. And we must always be sure to understand that God never tolerates sin; God forgives sin. Neither is "agape" love sentimental froth. God is oceans deeper than this. God's way with Israel, and God's way at the cross, make it plain that God's love is God's 'self-giving' without qualification. To speak of self-giving without qualification is to say that God holds nothing of Himself back. In fact, nothing is held back for self-preservation. There's no greater love than to die for another!

In fact, God's entire "self" is poured out – without reserve – upon you and me. Let me repeat. When prophet and apostle speak of God's love they know that God has cast away all self-protection and all self-concern (with dignity, decorum, and respectability). When you and I love a little we give a little bit of ourselves to someone else and risk a little bit of rejection. As we love more we give more of ourselves and risk greater rejection. To love still more is to give still more and risk still more. But do you and I ever love anyone so much as to abandon all self-protection, throw away all the subtle defences we have spent years perfecting, and risk complete rejection? God's Word insists that God has done this not only in giving up his Son; God does this continually, since **love** is His divine essence.

There is even more to God's love than that of self-giving, when vulnerability left Him defenceless. There was also humiliation. Let us never forget that Rome crucified its victims naked. All Christian art depicts Jesus clad in His loincloth. The Roman soldiers may have snatched away His cloak, we are told, but at least they had the decency to leave him his undergarment. No! One of the cruellest aspects of this punishment was public humiliation, especially where Jews were concerned. Jesus was stripped of minimal modesty for the sake of maximum humiliation. The humiliation that the Father knew (in the humiliation of the Son), the Father had already known for centuries on account of the infidelity, the waywardness, of His people. Centuries before Good Friday the prophet Hosea learned about that humiliation which **God's love** brings God. Hosea learned this through the humiliation his love for his wife brought him.

Hosea's wife, Gomer, traipsed off to the marketplace and sold herself. Pregnancy, of course, is an

occupational hazard of prostitution, and Gomer bore three children who weren't Hosea's. When Gomer was sufficiently used up that her market-value was all but eroded and she thought she might as well return home (at least she would be fed there) Hosea went down to the marketplace, endured the taunts and crude jokes of the vulgar louts who lounged around there, and paid fifteen shekels to get his wife out of their clutches. Fifteen shekels was half the price of a slave. Why did Hosea endure such humiliation? Because he **loved** his wife, loved her regardless of the cost to himself, loved her regardless of the reputation which couldn't be saved. Thereafter Hosea preached about a **divine love**, which loves to the point of public humiliation.

I glory in God's love for me. I know that God loves me not in the sense that he feels somewhat warm towards me and thinks about me now and then. God loves me inasmuch as He has poured out Himself upon me without qualification; He has risked Himself in a vulnerability so drastic as to leave Him defenceless; He has undergone a public humiliation without concern to save face or preserve dignity – and all of this in order that my defiant, ungrateful, rebellious heart might be overwhelmed. So that I may renounce my stupid, stand-off posturing and throw myself into His arms. This is what it means to say God loves us, and to say God loves us on the grounds that **God is love – eternally**. And this great love never ever fails!

(2) What about the passion of jealousy? **Jealousy** in men and women is frequently a sign of insecurity. A husband sees his wife talking to a man she's never met before. Immediately he thinks ill of it and imagines his wife in all manner of luridness. A woman groundlessly suspects her husband at the office and mobilises surveillance in order to expose the "bounder" who in fact has never turned his head from the computer screen. The more insecure we are, the more ridiculous our jealousy becomes. But God isn't insecure at all. Then whatever we mean by God's jealousy we can't be speaking of ridiculous suspicion born of pathetic insecurity. To speak of God's jealousy is not to speak of a character defect in God. God's **jealousy** is simply God's insistence that he alone be acknowledged and honoured and trusted as God. God's jealousy is reflected in the first of the Ten Commandments: "**You shall have no other gods before me**".

To say that God is jealous is to say that God wants 'passionately' that we honour Him, and wants this 'passionately' so that we may always live within the sphere of His blessing. Through the prophet Ezekiel God cries, "**I will... have mercy upon the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name**". Because God is "for us", in the words of the psalmist, God's jealousy for His own name can only mean that God wants passionately to prosper us. To say that God is **jealous** is to say that He insists on being acknowledged uniquely, exclusively, as God. And since God is "for us", God insists on this acknowledgement for our own good. Let's rephrase it ... To say that God is **jealous** is to say that fathomless **love** always warns foolish people against giving their heart away to what isn't fathomless love.

(3) Yet because we are foolish people we do exactly what we are warned not to do. All of us do, without exception. God reacts to our foolishness. His reaction is His **anger** or wrath. When God's loving warning goes unheeded, His anger heats up. While His anger is real (not merely seeming anger), His anger nevertheless is an expression of His love. It has to be, since God is love. God is love, with every other passion blended into this love. God's anger is never a childish loss of temper; His anger is never mean spirited vindictiveness; His anger is never frustrated love now turned nasty. God's anger is simply His love burning hot. God's anger is His love shaking us up until we admit that something about us is dreadfully out of order.

I just mentioned that fathomless love aches to see foolish people scorn such love, because the God who is love knows that when humankind scores Him it brings decay upon itself. And Jesus? For the same reason, on countless occasions, Jesus became so angry – He was livid. You see, if He weren't livid, He wouldn't be loving. Elie Wiesel, the most articulate Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, repeats in all his books that the contradiction of love is not hatred; the contradiction of love is indifference. If our Lord were indifferent He couldn't love. The fact that He is angry proves that He cares. And to say that He cares is to say that He loves!

(4) All of which now brings us to the last aspect of God's "passion", God's **joy**. Joy floods God Himself when God's love for us achieves its purpose and we lose ourselves in love for God. Nasty people attack Jesus on the grounds that He welcomes irreligious people and even eats with them. He in turn tells His accusers why He welcomes irreligious people and eats with them. The parable of the lost sheep concludes with the declaration that there is **joy** in heaven over one sinner (even just one!) who repents. Next parable, the lost coin; it concludes with the declaration that there is **joy** before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Of course **joy** floods God at this; for in the repentance of one sinner His fathomless love has achieved its purpose and has quickened an answering love for him.

Ultimately **repentance** is self-abandonment. Repentance is abandoning ourselves to a love so vast that we

are left unable to do anything else. Repentance is giving ourselves up to a love so far-reaching that we forget our hurts, our wounded pride, our petty grudges, our self-serving ambition, and our childish vendettas. We forget it all inasmuch as we are taken up into the very **love** that has taken us over. The prophet Isaiah knows of God's joy at the repentant homecoming of His people. ***“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”*** (Isaiah 62:5)

When next you wonder who God is, what God is, repeat this one simple line:

“Love with every passion blending”.