



## The pathos of God – *a covenantal perspective*

For man to be in covenant relationship with God means that man "walks with God"; he is involved with God as his friend, and this in opposition to mankind as a whole, who since the Fall, has determined to live autonomously, that is, by his own laws, independent of God.

In this article, we shall explore what it means for God to be in covenant relation to man. How does God function within the covenant bond and how does the behaviour of his covenant partner affect him? What does the Scripture mean when it ascribes human emotions to God, such as grief, wrath and love? When we experience these emotions as human beings, it is because we are *involved* and what happens to us affects us, sometimes profoundly. If we were not involved and affected, we would be *apathetic*, i.e. without emotions, disinterested, somehow removed from or above what is happening around us. But what of God? Is he apathetic? Or does he display *pathos*, involvement at the level of his heart? These are fascinating questions and before we attempt to answer them, we need to consider some of the suggestions that have been made in the past.

### Greek mythology and philosophy

In Greek mythology, the gods displayed all the human emotions, both good and bad. For example, according to Homer (8th century B.C.) Zeus, the god of weather and thunder, ruled according to power rather than righteousness and justice. He had innumerable loves and children, who again, advanced his influence, and his wrath was frequently the result of petulance or caprice rather than the outworking of a moral principle. Herodotus (484-424 B.C.) was convinced that the gods worked harm in people's lives and did not hesitate to speak of their envy and pride. Indeed, the gods could not abide anyone being as happy as they were, often visiting their anger upon wealthy people because their envy was aroused. We can summarize by affirming that the Greek gods were creations in the image of man, and they displayed "larger than life" human characteristics, both moral and immoral.

The Greek, philosophers, most notably Plato (422-347 B.C) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C), reacted against these human characterizations of the gods. In their attempt to explain and give order to the real world around them, they looked for an anchor that would give stability and meaning to all the flux or change that they observed. For Plato, this anchor was the ideal world (a world of ideas) behind the world that we see, touch, taste and feel. This ideal world was the world of true, eternal, and self-consistent being. Since the ideal world was unchangeable, there was no place in it for human emotions, since emotions, as we know, come and go. They *change*, and are inherently unstable and they sometimes express themselves in unreasonable ways, which for Plato, was certainly something to be avoided.

Aristotle further developed Plato's ideas. He extrapolated back from the real world and posited a god who was the First Cause of all things. For Aristotle, "god" was the Mover and Ground of all that is and since he is the *mover* of all things, he himself must be unmoved, unchangeable, completely independent and, very important for our discussion, devoid of all emotion.

The Greek philosophers' view of the divine, was certainly an advance over that of Greek mythology with its *all too human* gods. The Bible teaches that God is the creator of all things and that he sustains the universe by his power. In this sense, he is certainly the Ground of all that is. Moreover, God is not dependent on anything or anyone. Unlike the Greek gods, he is self-sufficient and

independent of his creation. But what Aristotle failed to acknowledge was the *personal* character of God. For him, "god" was an idea, a concept only, and he is therefore incapable of sustaining relationships with others. In this way, the covenant formula "*I will be your God, and you will be my people*" is, strictly speaking, a misuse of language.

## **Philo and the Apologists**

The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.- A.D. 50), was heavily influenced by the Greek philosophical view of God. His goal in philosophy was to reconcile Greek thought with the Old Testament Scripture. According to Philo, the reason why the Scripture speaks of God in anthropomorphic terms (i.e. language that ascribes human form to God, e.g., the "eye of God", the "hand of God", etc.) and anthropopathic terms (language that ascribes human emotion to God, e.g. God grieves, loves, displays wrath, etc.) is that here God is *accommodating* himself to us in our human weakness. In other words, he is using language that we as human beings can understand. But what we should do is move beyond this language and consider God as he is in himself, or in his essence. However, God in his essence is incomprehensible to us and therefore we should speak of him in negative, rather than positive terms.

God is unchangeable, incorporeal (no bodily form), incomparable, impassible (devoid of emotion), etc. And when the Bible says that God is angry, for instance, we should not understand that God actually feels anything, since God is, by definition, incapable of any changes and incapable of being affected by anything.

Of the early church fathers, Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215) have in this area exerted considerable influence on later theology. According to Origen, the *dignum deo* (that which is appropriate to God) could be summed up in three points: 1) God has no corporeal body or form, 2) God is apathetic and knows no emotions such as anger or grief, 3) God is unchangeable, not only in his inward being, but also in relation to others. He cannot move or change his mind in any sense.

Therefore, when the Scripture says that God changes his mind, or that he is angry with his people, these are "word pictures" or "allegories" which must be interpreted in a spiritual way. Likewise, Clement taught that God was impassible and therefore, if we want to be most like God, we should rise above our emotions and affections, such as courage, anger, love, cheerfulness. We have to rid ourselves of these because they are disturbances of the mind. The saint is a person who functions by reason, and is not affected by emotion.

## **Reformed theology: Calvin and the Confessions**

In a fascinating passage in the *Institutes*, Calvin discusses the "repentance" of God. He writes:

*Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he testifies that he is angry toward sinners. Therefore when we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience; because God, whenever he is exercising judgement, exhibits the appearance of one kindled and angered. So we ought not to understand anything else under the word "repentance" than a change of action, because men are wont by changing their action to testify that they are displeased with themselves. Therefore, since every change among men is a correction of what displeases them, but that correction arises out of repentance, then by the fact that God changes with respect to his actions. Meanwhile, neither God's plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered; but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved, and decreed, he pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear to men's eyes.*

(*Institutes*, 1.XIII.1)

Notice how Calvin's explanation is again along the lines of divine accommodation. When God says that he is angry, he speaks from our human experience. He is not angry *in himself*, because he is "*beyond all disturbance of the mind*". So this is how he seems to us only. On the other hand, Calvin

does affirm that God changes his action, in accordance with his eternal divine decree. So while Calvin is content to employ the explanation of divine accommodation, he is not prepared to go as far as the Greek philosophers, who strenuously resisted any form of change in God.

When we come to the Reformed Confessions, we meet with a similar explanation. The *Westminster Confession* states: *There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgements; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.* (Chapter 2, section 1, cf. *Belgic Confession*, 1)

The Confession affirms that God is "*without body, parts or passions*". The proof text for this statement is Acts 14:14, 15, in which Paul and Barnabas were thought by the Lystrans to be Greek gods. They tear their robes (an act of passion!) and state emphatically: "*we also are men of like nature* (lit. "having like feelings or passions") *with you*". The missionaries were at pains to point out that the living God, the Creator, was not "like men" in the same way that the Greek gods were "like men". And the Westminster Reformers also wanted to express this forthrightly in their statement on the doctrine of God. But at the same time, they affirmed that God is "*most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering*", yet "*hating all sin*". This was something that the Greek philosophers, and Origen and Clement, would have had a great deal of trouble saying, because for them, God was simply devoid of *all* emotion and feeling.

So what are we to make of all this? When the Bible ascribes emotion and feeling to God, can we take these verses as they are, or should we always read: It is only *as if* God were feeling these things? We have argued that, contrary to the Greek philosophical conception of God, the covenant concept means that God is intimately involved with his people. To be in covenant with God is to commune with him in fellowship. But this is no one-sided relationship. Sovereignly and graciously, God chooses to walk with us in covenant and this means that he takes an interest in us and is affected by the way we respond to him. When the Bible says that God is loving towards us, or that he is angry or grieved by our unfaithfulness, this is covenantal language, i.e. language that is entirely consistent with, and an expression of, the nature of the covenant bond. The Old Testament writers, particularly the prophets, could not help but speak of God in this living and personal way. At the same time, however, these emotions in God are *divine* emotions, not human ones. Just as Isaiah affirms that the thoughts and ways of God are not our thoughts and ways, but are much higher than ours (Isaiah. 55:8, 9), so too, the pathos of God is much higher and more wonderful than ours. In Hosea 11, for instance, as God wrestles with the unfaithfulness of the 10 northern tribes of Israel, he says that he will not come in wrath, "*For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst*" (vs. 9). Thus, contrary to all human expectation, the love and the mercy of God take us by surprise. The divine pathos is not "larger than life" human emotion as in Greek mythology. To use theological terms, God's pathos is transcendent, as well as immanent, and therefore it repeatedly amazes us, precisely because it is divine and not human.

## **Lovingkindness**

The Hebrew term *hesed* (lovingkindness) is one of those difficult words to translate because it has a range of connotations. In 1 Samuel 20, David says to Jonathan that he should act with lovingkindness towards him because of the covenant bond established between them (vs. 8) and Jonathan, for his part, calls for David to reciprocate, showing lovingkindness not only to him personally, but also to his "*house forever*" (vss. 14, 15). Clearly, lovingkindness within the covenant bond means more than a surface affection or infatuation that can come and go. The Hebrew term implies longstanding commitment and faithfulness – the kind of dependability and loyalty that is required in the marriage covenant.

If this is the case, what does it mean that God shows lovingkindness to *us* in the covenant relationship? How is the dependability, faithfulness, loyalty and commitment of God expressed in

Scripture? Of all the prophets, it is Hosea who shows the lengths to which God's lovingkindness will take him as he confronts a covenant breaking, disloyal people. The prophet himself was instructed to marry a woman given to harlotry *"for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord"* (Hosea 1:2). Hosea was made to experience the pain of an unfaithful wife so that he could depict in his preaching the way in which God felt towards the 10 northern tribes of Israel, who had departed from him and committed spiritual "adultery" with false gods called the Beals and the Ashtaroah. The second chapter of his prophecy introduces us to a courtroom scene in which God speaks of bringing charges against the 10 northern tribes: *"Contend with your mother, contend, for she is not my wife and I am not her husband. And let her put away her harlotry from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts."* (Hosea 1:2)

This is a marriage court in which Yahweh, the aggrieved husband, is laying out the charges against the unfaithful bride and expressing what he will do in consequence of her unfaithfulness. But as the prophecy unfolds, we learn that God has not yet given up on his unfaithful bride. In a remarkable passage, he speaks of wooing her all over again:

*"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt."*

(Hosea 1:14,15)

And what will characterise this (re)union between God and His bride? The answer is spelled out in verses 19 and 20:

*"And I will betroth you to me forever. Yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion. And I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord."*

Ephraim's turning away from God and casting affection upon other gods is nothing short of treachery and betrayal. But in spite of the intense and prolonged provocation, God's lovingkindness means that he will not give up on the relationship:

*"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within me. All my compassions are kindled. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."*

(Hosea 11:8-9)

Here the imagery is that of a father and his intense love for his son. Admah and Zeboiim are cities that are listed along with Sodom and Gomorrah as having been overthrown by God in his anger (Deuteronomy 29:23). Clearly, Ephraim is just as guilty as those cities. But here we have Yahweh suppressing His own legal rights in favour of continuing the relationship. The series of rhetorical questions in verse 8 expresses not only the anguish of God that Ephraim has deserted Him, but at the same time also, His refusal to carry out His covenant wrath. It is the *hesed* of God in relation to His covenant people that "wins out" and provides a resolution to His "dilemma".

This is not to say that God's wrath is never expressed in the covenant relationship. It is, and we will consider that in a moment. But the point that Hosea makes is that God never functions as a cool, distant, uncaring parent or husband. The covenant bond means that He feels intensely for His people and will go to astounding lengths to restore the relationship when it is broken. We should remember this when we are dealing with young people who have grown up in the covenant relationship but have at this point departed from God. Hosea persistently appealed to his own countrymen in the strongest of terms.

## **Wrath**

Sometimes the wrath of God is seen as diametrically opposed to His love. How can God be a God of love and of wrath at the same time? Does He have a split personality? Actually, these are not

opposites at all, but rather, two sides of the same coin. God is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness (cf. Exodus 34:6, Psalm 103:8), but within the covenant bond, God's wrath is aroused precisely because He is involved and not neutral or dispassionately removed from His people. The opposite of love is not wrath; rather, the opposite of both is apathy, disinterest, distance, neutrality.

When God's wrath fell upon Judah during the period of the Babylonian Captivity, its purpose was not only to express the just judgement of God, but also to draw His people back into covenant relationship with Him. Thus, in a passage which sets forth God's intention to restore His people and have compassion on them, rebuilding the ruined city of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 30:18ff), we have the following:

*Behold the tempest Of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a sweeping tempest; it will burst on the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back, until he has performed, and until he has accomplished the intent of his heart; in the latter days you will understand this. "At that time," declares the Lord, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people."*

(Jeremiah 30:23, 24; 31:1)

Again, in this covenant context God's anger has a specific intent to make His covenant partner realise that he has forsaken the Lord and bring about a restoration to the relationship. It is precisely for this reason that the most powerful presenters of God's wrath in the Old Testament, Jeremiah and Hosea, are also the most powerful presenters of his love.

We should remember this when we are tempted to become permissive in the exercise of discipline. Is it loving when a church exercises disinclination against its members, or when parents discipline a teenager who is rebellious? Yes indeed! God disciplines those whom He loves (cf. Hebrews 12:6) *precisely because He loves them* and for no other reason. It would be a lack of love – apathy, an attitude that couldn't care less – that would withdraw and allow rebellious behaviour to continue. But remember too that the object of discipline is to restore the erring church member or child, never to drive them away or distance them indefinitely. Removing someone's name from the church roll does not mean that we can forget all about them. God most certainly does not forget and neither should we.

There are other emotions of God that we could consider but space permits only one more in this article, the quality of jealousy.

## **Jealousy**

Sometimes this quality is misunderstood because when we use the term "jealousy", we frequently mean "envy". So-and-so is jealous of another's achievements, means that he or she is envious and would very much like to have achieved this for himself. Of course, God is never jealous in that sense. He has no reason to envy anybody anything since He is absolute and all-glorious. In Scripture the term jealous, when applied to God, means that He cares very much for His people and will be moved to act when anything threatens the relationship that He enjoys with them. When a husband is jealous for his wife, it means that he values the relationship so highly that he will be intensely aroused if another man tries to take his wife from him. So it is with God in the covenant bond that He has with us. In fact, the Scripture does not hesitate to declare that God's very name is Jealous (Exodus 34:14). This statement is unique to the Bible. None of the other religions that Israel knew spoke of the gods as being jealous in this sense.

Perhaps even more graphically than Hosea, Ezekiel expresses this concept in relation to unfaithful Jerusalem, which is characterised in chapter 16 of his prophecy as a young woman whom God married when she was ready:

*"Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread my skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became mine," declares the Lord God.*

(Ezekiel 16:8)

As the dramatic picture unfolds, Yahweh sets forth the unfaithfulness of His bride, which in turn arouses His wrath and jealousy:

*"So I shall calm my fury against you, and my jealousy will depart from you, and I shall be pacified and angry no more. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth but have enraged me by all these things, behold, I in turn will bring your conduct down on your own head," declares the Lord God, "so that you will not commit this lewdness on top of all your other abominations"*

(Ezekiel 16:42, 43).

But yet again, the passage ends with a promise of the restoration of the covenant relationship in verses 60-63. As an interesting postscript, the prophet returns to the theme of Yahweh's jealousy in chapter 39. Here the express motivation for God's restoration of His people is His jealousy – jealousy for His own Name in the sight of the nations:

*Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Now I shall restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I shall be jealous for my holy name. And they shall forget their disgrace and their treachery which they perpetrated against me, when they live securely on their own land with no one to make them afraid. When I bring them back from the lands of their enemies, then I shall be sanctified through them in the sight of the many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer."*

(Ezekiel 16:25-28)

Here again, the jealousy of God becomes linked to His covenant love and His faithfulness. It is more than a category of abstract and dispassionate justice since it moves beyond judgement to mercy and salvation. And significantly, it is God's jealousy for his *covenant* name, Yahweh, and the way that Name will be spoken of among the nations, that moves Him to restore the covenant bond.

## **Conclusion**

The Bible does not hesitate to speak of God's intense involvement with His people in the language of emotion. When God enters into covenant with us, He is not cold and distant. On the contrary, He feels for us and is affected by the way we treat Him. But the covenant relationship is two sided. God's faithfulness and love towards us require a reciprocal faithfulness towards Him. To break the covenant relationship is nothing short of treachery and betrayal. Because God cares for His covenant people so deeply, this will inevitably arouse His wrath, but this is for the purpose of winning His erring people back and restoring the covenant bond.

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