

DIVINE PAIN AS A MISSING PIECE TO THE STRUCTURE OF  
GOD'S HOLY LOVE: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF FORSYTH'S  
CRUCIALITY OF THE CROSS

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**ABSTRACT:** This article will engage with the nature and experience of pain as it pertains to the Divine Nature. Acknowledging holiness as a grounding attribute of God, Forsyth's emphasis of holy love will provide a new lens through which the conception of God's suffering and the means of humanity's redemption can be assessed. The Cross as the symbol of divine pain and suffering holds together God's holiness and love. Holy love logically entails the Cross event as an antidote to the prevalent lightheartedness of American evangelical circles which is oftentimes lopsided on grace and prosperity. As a result, the late and post-Christendom Christianity in the West tends to overlook the other side of the Gospel, that is, the holiness and rigorousness of the divine law as revealed in the Old Testament. Law represents the divine holy nature, without which grace can be cheap, and love can be licentiousness. God never forsakes the divine law, nor His holiness. It is the divine holiness that reveals the depth and height of the divine love. The divine holy love has always been transformative, with holiness as the content and goal of the divine love. The holiness of God bespeaks the fact that God is not pleased with fallen humanity. For a holy God to love fallen humanity, there must be a lot of pain and agony involved. Divine agony found an epitomized expression in the historical event of crucifixion.

**KEY WORDS:** Forsyth, Passibility, Impassibility, Augustine, Moltmann

**Divine Pain as a Missing Piece to the Structure of God's Holy Love: A  
Theological Analysis of Forsyth's Cruciality of the Cross**

**Introduction**

Following Forsyth's steps, this article attempts to press further on the theme of divine holy love by questing into a missing piece between divine holiness and divine love,

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namely, divine pain. When we piece together holiness and love, it inevitably gives rise to the concept of pain, a theme that runs throughout the redemptive history. Apart from pain, holiness and love seem incompatible to each other, at least within this side of the eschaton. The biblical image of God affirms relentlessly both the theme of divine love and the theme of divine holiness, which drives inevitably to the theme of divine suffering. The loving God in His Holiness suffers constantly and severely in seeking for intimacy with sinful and broken humanity. An analysis of divine suffering, I believe, will carry further the Forsyth thesis on divine holiness.

Can God suffer? If He can, to what extent? Theological consensus on this topic halts at the passibility of the human nature of the second person of the Trinity. Traditional impassibilists maintain the doctrine of divine impassibility, asserting that the hypostatic union does not render the divine nature passible nor does it impart impassibility to the human nature. Some qualified passibilists emphasize the wholeness of the Cross event, arguing that both Christ's divine and human natures are passible. Strong passibilists, such as process theologians, advocate for a comprehensive passibility within divine nature, will and knowledge (cf., Oord 2019). Among all arguments, a hard line lies in whether God the Father is passible or not. Allowing passibility, especially suffering, in the first Person of the Trinity renders the argument susceptible to patripassianism, a modalist heresy that was opposed by the Church Fathers.

This article intends to revisit the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, to reevaluate the doctrine on the basis of biblical evidence by borrowing insights from Augustine, Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and some Process theologians. It aims at striking a balance between the polarized arguments from the extreme positions of the spectrum. Along the doctrine of *opus dei ad extra internum*, I will affirm the passibility of all persons of the Trinity under the condition that God chose to suffer in relation to the world. While affirming pain and suffering extends to the core of divine nature, the divine transcendency retains the impassible aspect because of the radical freedom prior to the decision of creating the world *ex nihilo*. Integrating pain and suffering into the divine nature will hopefully shed new lights on Forsyth's thesis on God's holy love. It enriches the divine love by coupling it intricately with the divine holiness with which God never abrogates holiness as the perfect standard of His evaluative love. The Cross as both the symbol of love and holiness happened as a necessary historical event that expressed the apex of divine pain. The cruciality of the Cross stands not merely at the center of redemption, it penetrates to the divine essence. The Cross as the symbol of divine pain and suffering holds together God's holiness and love. Holy love logically entails the Cross event as an antidote to the prevalent lightheartedness of American evangelical circles which is oftentimes lop-

sided on grace and prosperity. As a result, the late and post-Christendom Christianity in the West tends to overlook the other side of the Gospel, that is, the holiness and rigorousness of the divine law as revealed in the Old Testament. Law represents the divine holy nature, without which grace can be cheap, and love can be licentiousness. God never forsakes the divine law, nor His holiness. It is the divine holiness that reveals the depth and height of the divine love. The divine holy love has always been transformative, with holiness as the content and goal of the divine love. The holiness of God bespeaks the fact that God is not pleased with fallen humanity. For a holy God to love fallen humanity, there must be a lot of pain and agony involved. Divine agony found an epitomized expression in the historical event of crucifixion. The theology of Cross, though a Lutheran term, served as solace and encouragement to suffering Christian communities, both in the early church and the contemporary Christian communities that are oppressed by political coercion or economic exploitation. The agony that the church suffers or suffered as the body of Christ finds comforts, or some answers even, in a version of divine essence that understands and empathizes the pain, a ubiquitous feeling that plagues the living creatures, humanity included.

### **Divine impassibility, Is It a Greek Idea?**

Christianity, from its very beginning, stood in contrast to both the Jewish religion and Greek philosophy. It absorbed ingredients from each and strived for its distinctive identity. Regarding the issue of divine (im)passibility, some of the early church Fathers apparently inherited elements from Greek philosophy that affirms the divine *apatheia*. It has been a long-debated topic in contemporary theology that divine impassibility features itself as a Hellenization hypothesis (Oord 2019).

*Apatheia* in Greek philosophy means incapable of being affected by outside influences. When applied to the ultimacy, it denotes unchangeableness, a status free from internal needs and external disturbance. The concept finds its way into Christian theology, laying the foundation for divine aseity. According to Plato, the capricious, envious, vengeful gods of Greek mythology are inappropriate for the form of perfection. Plato believed that 'a perfectly good being cannot be liable to change' (Plato 1888: 380d-e). In Book II of *The Republic*, Plato argues that the gods do not change or deceive, suggesting a form of impassibility in their nature. The platonic theory prefers the Forms, which are eternal and immutable, over gods in the personal sense. This decisive move, on the one hand, purges *pathe* from the ensuing discussion on divine nature and, on the other hand, boldly elevates the impassible rational nature as the core of divine essence. Plato set a general tone of this notion, which paves a path for further development. The signatory Greek doctrine of divine impassibility was, however, coined by Aristotle. In *Metaphysics* (Book VII), Aristotle employed the

term "Unmoved Mover" (ὁ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ) to describe the ultimate cause of motion in the universe (Aristotle 1924: XII:1072a). According to Aristotle, God as pure actuality cannot change because change inevitably involves moving from potentiality to actuality. The Aristotelian God exists as perfect, complete actuality, not susceptible to motion or passion. In addition to the concept of Unmoved Mover, Aristotle also envisioned God as 'Thought Thinking Itself.' In other words, God as pure act (*actus purus*) characterizes the divine self as 'thinking of thinking' (νόησις νοήσεως) (Aristotle 1924: VII; IX:1074b34-1075a10), an eternal self-contemplating activity that is fully actualized and self-sufficient, not needing to interact with the world or be affected by it. these Aristotelian concepts made their way into Christian theology through efforts of a variety of figures, including some of the early church Fathers, Augustine, and then Thomas Aquinas. They played an essential role in shaping the theological tenet of divine impassibility.

Another strand of the pan-Hellenistic school that ethicalized and practiced impassibility as a desirable way of life is Stoicism. Zeno of Citium (c.334-c.262), the founder of Stoicism, recognized Good as the only goal worthy of striving for. The stoic notion of Good is single and simple and can be achieved through the use of right reason. Reason on the human level is expected to be aligned with the universal reason, the logos that governs everything. Within the Stoic framework, feeling (*pathos*) are considered as disturbances to reason, and against nature. Zeno identified four negative pathos, namely, desire (ἐπιθυμία), fear (φόβος), pleasure (ἡδονή) and sorrow (λύπη), as well three pathos that are positive: will (βούλησις), caution (εὐλάβεια) and joy (χαρά) ((Laërtius, 1925, § 110). Nevertheless, all pathos are categorized as impulses that are excessive and disobedient to the dictates of reason, or movements that are irrational and contrary to nature (Strobaeus 1894: 65A). The Stoics famously, or infamously, argue that the virtuous agent feels no passions (*pathê*) and, so, that the happy life is entirely passion-free (*apathês*).

The early Church Fathers widely discussed the concept of divine impassibility. The impassibility of God was an idea cherished by the Greek Fathers, with the exception of Origen. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) upheld the belief in an immutable and impassible God, asserting the perfection and constancy of divine nature. Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373 AD) defended the doctrine of impassibility in his argument against Arianism. Athanasius maintained that the divine nature is unchangeable even in the event of incarnation since it involved the assumption of human nature without compromising the impassibility on the divine side. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407 AD) affirmed the constancy of divine love and goodness by highlighting that divine mercy and justice are not subject to capricious moods or fluctuations. This theme is further solidified by Augustine of Hippo (354-430

AD), who emphasized divine immutability. For Augustine, God's interactions with the temporal world do not affect His eternal nature because His love and justice are merely expressions of an unchanging divine will (Augustine 1887: Books 1, 5, 7). Even Origen (c. 184-253 AD) as an exception still acknowledged the impassibility of God, only that he also emphasized God's active engagement with the world. For Origen, God can express love and concern for humanity without suffering or changing, for divine actions are grounded in will and knowledge rather than emotions (Origen 1973: Book I and Book II).

Divine impassibility as a main feature of divine nature remained a vibrant topic in Medieval theology. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* theologized the Aristotelian concept of "unmoved mover" and made it a central theme for the existence of God. According to Aquinas,

Whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; ... Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God. (Aquinas 1947: I, Q.2, A.3).

Aquinas adapted Aristotle's philosophical insight and made it a foundational principle of his understanding of divine nature. God as "unmoved mover" was later on integrated into Aquinas' broader theological scheme, presenting God as the initiator of all motion and sources of all existences. Divine impassibility was thus elevated by Aquinas as among the first principles of Christian theology.

Divine impassibility along its historical development evolved and acquired the status as a doctrine which found its way into theological endeavors in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. Overall speaking, this doctrine does not align well with Martin Luther as he pivoted his theological thoughts and practices around the theme of *theologia crucis*, a theology that features the passion of God towards sinful men and women. Lutheran theology anchors on the idea of divine passion which reveals itself in the passion of Christ. To Luther, the Cross revealed the suffering nature of God with a passionate love for His lost creatures, a suffering prepared for sacrifice. To a certain extent, Forsyth's emphasis on the cruciality of the Cross echoes Luther's conviction of divine enmeshment with the troublesome human existential condition. However, Luther never outspokenly positioned his dispute against the doctrine of divine impassibility. He distinguished between the *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and the *Deus revelatus* (the revealed God), a scheme within which the transcendental

dimensions of divine incomprehensibility and unchangeableness were retained but never unpacked.

Comparing with Luther, John Calvin was much more vocal on this topic and was more ready to embrace divine impassibility as a doctrine which fits comfortably in his grander tapestry of protestant scholasticism. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin affirms that God is unchanging in essence, will and purpose. The immutable God, as Calvin states, cannot be subject to external change through emotions or suffering (Calvin, 1989: I.2). Meanwhile, Calvin was also aware of the fact that the Bible often uses anthropomorphic language to describe God, attributing human emotions and actions to God. For instance, the Bible talks about divine anger, grief, jealousy and a bunch of other emotions. But Calvin interpreted them as accommodations to human comprehension rather than literal descriptions. Calvin employed some signatory terms, such as "prattling" and "lisped", to describe the divine accommodation: 'For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express clearly what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness' (Calvin, 1989: I.13)

In addition to Luther and Calvin, there has been a long list of Protestant theologians and churchmen supporting divine impassibility, which includes Heinrich Bullinger, William Ames, William Perkins, Stephen Charnock, John Owen, just to name a few.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine made its way into some confessional documents such as the 42/39 Articles of the Church of England (1552, 1563), the French Confession (1559), the Belgic Confession (1566), Irish Articles (1615), the First London Baptist Confession of Faith (1644), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) and etc.

It is also worth mentioning a historical debate in the early church which augmented the formation of this doctrine, namely the Patripassianism controversy. Patripassianism as a theological term conjoins the Latin words *Patri* (Father) and *passio* (suffering), insinuating that God the Father suffered on the cross, not just God the Son: '[A]ccording to this view, Father, Son, and Spirit are modes of the same being, perhaps temporary and successive roles adopted for the purpose of the divine plan of redemption, but in no way corresponding to anything in the ultimate nature of the Godhead, since the three titles are purely adjectival' (Chadwick 1968: 87).

Patripassianism denies the hypostatic distinctions between the Father and the Son. It prioritizes the oneness of the Trinity at the expense of the threeness. When authentic distinctions are eliminated, Trinity is reduced to a single person who manifests in different modes, just as the same actor playing multiple roles by wearing var-

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive list can be found in *God without Passions, a Reader*, edited by Samuel Renihan, (RBAP, 2015).

ious masks. This trinitarian heresy arose in the second and third centuries as part of the broader debate on Monarchianism and was decisively discredited by the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed in which the consubstantiality and distinctiveness of the Son was unambiguously affirmed. By highlighting the suffering subject on the Cross was not the Father but the Son, Patripassianism as a theory does help to expose modalistic nature of Sabellianism. Nevertheless, emphasizing that it was not the Father who suffered on the Cross does not necessary lead to the conclusion that the Father cannot suffer at all. It is more logical to say that the Father may, and should, experience agony when watching His beloved Son writhing on the Cross in great pain. Employing Patripassianism as an argument against divine passion commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, where the focal point should be on the personal distinctiveness of the Son, rather than on whether the Father can or cannot suffer.

Paralleling with the arguments for and beliefs in divine impassibility, there have been plenty of biblical evidence and theological endeavors that argue for the existence and prevalence of divine passion. To achieve a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand, we hereby start to examine the other side of the spectrum.

### **Divine Passion, Is It Biblically and Theologically Sound?**

If we truly embrace the divine revelation that God is love, it is almost impossible to deny the existence of divine passion, unless you remove love as a component of passion. The real issue is not whether God loves or not, but whether God experiences suffering. It is not a question whether God the Son suffered, giving the passion of Christ being the center of the kerygma. There has been a debate whether the divine nature of the hyperstatic union in Jesus Christ suffered with the human nature, of which the principle of *communicatio idiomatum* might offer a viable solution. Due to the limitation of this article, we'll just focus on whether God the Father is capable of suffering. If we come to a convincing answer on the level of Theology Proper, the corresponding debates on the Christological level can be resolved preemptively, since the undergirding issue boils down to the passibility/impassibility of the divine nature. What follows are a series of biblical and theological arguments to frame a thesis that the divine nature is capable of suffering at least on the imminent or economic level. Biblically, I intend to build the case though analyzing one biblical pericope—the test of Abraham in Genesis 22, an occasion in which the patriarch was called to enter into the dark experience of divine pang. Theologically, this article intends to bolster the thesis by interacting with theologians like Abraham Heschel, Karl Barth, and Jürgen Moltmann, as representatives who provided strong arguments for divine passibility.

The test of Abraham in Genesis 22 depicts the most enigmatic story in which God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his son, as a burnt offering. The event

bears quintessential significance both in Jewish and Christian theology. We'll examine the pericope from the angle of God the Father who discloses to Abraham the secret plan enshrined in the deepest part of the divine heart, namely, the salvation for His people through the substitutional death of His Son Jesus Christ, an *euangelion* to the beneficiaries yet not without excruciating pain on the divine side. The narrative in Genesis 22 highlights the torment of Abraham the father of the one who's about to be slaughtered, complimentary to the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospels where God the Son was the suffering subject. God considered Abraham His friend (Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23, Genesis 18:17), with whom God confided His secrets and plans. The divine secret being revealed to Abraham here is that God will offer His beloved Son as a sacrifice to redeem His people. The divine love and pang embodied in this plan goes beyond the level of anthropomorphism. God revealed to Abraham, His friend, the agony He's about to go through in the execution of this plan. It also serves as the precursor of the *euangelion* that blesses Abraham and his descendants, only through a drama in which Abraham will participate experientially.

Genesis 22 starts with a statement on the theme of the episode 'that God tested Abraham' (22:1), a phrase that mitigates the emotional impacts on the readers. Abraham as the main character, however, was kept in the dark so as to keep the tension in its fullest extent. As Wenham noticed: 'Abraham was unaware that his trial was a test; for him it was totally real...it must not obscure the awful situation Abraham found himself confronted with – torn between his faith in the divine promises and the command that promised to nullify them, between his affection for his only surviving son and heir and his love for God' (Wenham 1994: 113). The divine command *take* is followed by the particle  $\mathfrak{N}$ , which is normally translated as "please" or "I beg you". As V. P. Hamilton pointed out, 'It might seem strange to some modern readers for God to say to Abraham "Take, please, your son" or "Take, I beg you, your son"' (Hamilton 1995: 103), but according to Hamilton, each time when the expression was employed, 'God asks the individual to do something staggering, something that defies rational explanation or understanding' (Hamilton 1995: 103). It is 'an inkling at least that God is fully aware of the magnitude of his test for Abraham' (Crenshaw 1984: 14).

The perspective of the narrative was firmly anchored from the position as a father: 'take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac' (Genesis 22:2). Abraham is the protagonist of the trial and Isaac the supporting character, whereas in the Gospel narrative of the crucifixion the Son is the protagonist and the Father the observer standing in distance. The endearment of the father to the son finds the fullest expression in this multifold characterization, which precludes 'any reading of the story that would see Abraham as callous and hard-hearted. Far from it – obedience to God and

love for his son will hear him in diametrically opposed directions' (Wenham 1994: 104). Similar nomenclature appeared multiple times where God the Father refers to Jesus as 'my beloved Son' (Matthew 3:17, 17:5; Mark 1:11, 9:7; Luke 3:22, 9:35), a parallelism so obvious that bridging the experiences of both fathers appears far from arbitrary. In Genesis 21:2, God explains that he wants Abraham to 'offer him thee as a burnt offering.' A burnt offering involves cutting up and burning the whole animal on the altar and was the commonest type of sacrifice. It is crystal clear to Abraham that a complete obedience to the divine demand means the death of his son. The illogical sequence of a series of waw-consecutives in verse 3, 'saddled... took... cut,' can probably be understood as a hint that the patriarch is 'trying to postpone the most painful part of the preparation till last' (Wenham 1994: 106). The wood on Isaac's back looks forward to the moment when Isaac will be lying on his back on the wood (v.9), with his father, knife in hand, ready to slay him (v.10). This fact 'did not escape the NT writer's description of the *via dolorosa*' (Hamilton 1995: 109).

The terse exchange between the father and the son amidst the intense silence is saturated with inimitable pathos: 'The artless curiosity of the child, the irrepressible affection of the father, and the stern ambiguity of his reply can hardly be read without tears' (Skinner 1910: 329-30); 'One sees that the final part of the way was traversed in silence' (von Rad 1972: 236); that's 'the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature' (Speiser 1964: 165). Abraham journeyed three days before reaching the foot of the mountain. Three days is a typical period of preparation for something important. John Calvin observes that the delay made Abraham's ordeal the more painful: 'God does not require him to put his son immediately to death, but compels him to revolve this execution in his mind during three whole days, that in preparing to sacrifice his son, he may still more severely torture all his own senses' (Calvin 1989: I:565). In the same line, Skinner comments 'We are left to imagine the pang that shot through the father's heart when he caught sight of it' (1910: 329). Again, the three days that wracked havoc in the father's emotional life reminds us of another beloved son who will suffer, die and be buried in the three day period (Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42). The pang of Abraham bespeaks the pathos of God the Father in the thunder-loud divine silence.

After several preparatory scenes, the narrative pace slows for the climactic scenes on the mountaintop. Isaac is now bound, probably by his hands and feet. The verb  $\text{קָשַׁר}$  occurs only here in the OT and gives rise to the Jewish term for this story, the *Aqedah*, i.e. the binding of Isaac. That an elderly man was able to bind the hands and feet of a lively teenager strongly suggests Isaac's consent, which confirms the impression that Isaac was an unblemished subject for sacrifice who was ready to obey his father just as his father had showed his willingness to obey God to the uttermost

(Wenham 1994: 110). Right at the moment when Abraham reached out his hand for the knife to slay (טָּחַטַּח) his son, the angel of the Lord called from heaven and said "Abraham, Abraham!" (v.11). The urgent double call shows the angel's anxiety that he could be too late (Wenham 1994: 111). The timeliness of the divine intervention indicates the constant presence of God, anxiously observing the whole scene. The same principle applies to the Cross event when the beloved Son was crucified: the Father was never absent. Even though the Father didn't suffer in the manner of Patripassianism, the Father did suffer as Abraham suffered acutely throughout the event.

The ever presence of the Lord is reinforced by the name of the mountain on which the Abrahamic trial happened, namely, Mount Moriah (מֹרְיָה), a term which literally means 'seen of Yah(weh)', or 'vision of Yah(weh)' (Hamilton 1995: 104). Abraham names this place 'Yahweh sees, or provides' (יְהוָה יִרְאֶה), because it was at this place the Lord provided a ram as surrogate for Isaac. The only other OT use of this name is in 2 Chronicles 3:1. There Moriah is connected with Jerusalem where Solomon built the temple. As noticed by Hamilton: '2 Chronicles 3:1 makes no reference to Moriah as the place where Abraham bound Isaac on the altar. It is remembered in Chronicles as the site of a theophany to David, rather than to Abraham' (Hamilton 1995: 103). We have reason to postulate that Moriah is very likely the place where the beloved Son of the Father was sacrificed. The ram that surrogated Isaac points to the antitype of all sacrifices—the perfect sacrifice made by Jesus (Hebrews 10:4-10), who is the ultimate lamb of God taking away the sins of the world (John 1:29). God the Father called Abraham His friend into the mystery of salvation, a mystery that pierces the heart of the Father. The trial of Abraham turns out to be the trial of God the Father who is the One sacrificed His beloved Son on the altar!

Søren Kierkegaard pointed out another dimension of Abraham's suffering due to a warp between the current divine command and the divine promise in the past and for the future. For Kierkegaard there are two Abrahams. One is the ethical Abraham for whom the moral law is universal and has a categorical claim to obedience. The other Abraham is a 'knight of faith' who knows of a higher obedience than even that to universal moral law, and this may lead to the taking of the life of another, 'the teleological suspension of the ethical.' Thus, for Kierkegaard, Abraham is torn between his obligation to obey God and whether the command he accepts is really from God (Kierkegaard 1983: 54ff). By calling Abraham His friend into a drama that embodies the key elements of the kerygma, God disclosed an earnest conflict embedded in the inner chamber of the divine heart, that is, the irreconcilable tension between the divine holiness and divine *hesed*, the two essential dimensions of the divine nature, in facing a world filled with wayward and sinful human beings. To love unholy objects despite the holy nature, the divine inner life must experience discomfort, uneasi-

ness, regret, painfulness, disappointment, jealousy, anger, agony, acute pang etc. The whole spectrum of divine suffering found an ultimate and climaxed expression in the life, suffering, humiliation, crucifixion and death of the second person of the Trinity. When Forsyth endeavors to unsurprisingly hold both poles of divine nature, love and holiness, together, the incompatibility of these two natures can only be reconciled by divine pang, a piece that's already in the Forsyth theology, waiting to be brought forth from the background to the frontline.

In addition to the above analysis of Genesis 22, there is a tsunami of evidence in the Bible that overwhelmingly supports the pathos of God. Here, we focus on suffering as an ingredient of the divine pathos as expressed in the prophetic literature. In a manner similar to that of Abraham, God called Hosea to enter into the dark depth of divine pang by marrying a harlot. The prevalent Baal worship practiced by Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II tormented God severely, just as an unfaithful wife stirs up storms in the emotions of a loving husband. Hosea was called to substantiate the acute pang in the divine life by marrying a practitioner of harlotry. Hosea is asked by God to live out a married life that corresponds to the situation in which God finds Himself in relationship to the 'wife of harlotry,' which is Israel (Hosea 1:2, 2:2-5, 2:13, 3:1, 4:12-15, 5:3-4, 9:1). As Mauser puts it: 'Both God and prophet have in common a bond which attaches them to similarly faithless partners' (Mauser 1970: 353). Hosea suffered in his own life the agony of God as 'the prophet has been invaded and permeated by the presence of Yahweh in such a way that he has become a living monstrosity of the divine reality' (Terrien 1983: 246). Alongside Hosea, Jeremiah substantiated divine suffering as he was filled with divinely assigned indignation. God's pain of holding back the burning anger finds apt expression in the prophet, whose bones are all broken up because of the Word of God which he embodies but holds back (Jeremiah 23:9). There are occasions where both God and the prophet enter the mourning of the people as fellow sufferers of their anguish (Jeremiah 4:19, 8:18-9:1). Some prophets bemoaned the grief of God over nations other than the Israelites (Ezekiel 27:1, Isa. 21:3-4).

Among twentieth century theologians, Abraham Heschel heralded an insightful voice for divine pathos, especially in his 1962 book, *The Prophets*. Heschel, a rabbi and scholar, meticulously worked through the biblical texts and the rabbinic tradition, successfully portrayed the prophets as deeply empathetic figures, torn between the divine demands and human failure (Heschel 2001: 127-130). Heschel regards divine pathos as the cornerstone of the prophetic mission. To Heschel, God of the prophets is not detached or impassive, as in some philosophical traditions, but a God who feels deeply, experiencing love, anger, sorrow, and longing in response to human actions. In short, God involves emotionally in this world (Heschel 2001: 288). Un-

like human emotions that were usually depicted as weakness in some philosophical traditions, Heschel affirms the divine pathos as expressions of 'divine concern for humanity's moral and spiritual state' (Heschel 2001: 289-290). God is affected by human deeds, rejoicing in righteousness and grieving over sin. Divine pathos, according to Heschel, implies a reciprocal relationship between God and humanity. God's covenant with Israel makes Him responsive to human behavior, not indifferent (Heschel 2001: 299-301). Heschel argues that the biblical image of God as revealed in the Hebrew prophecies stands at odds with other religious traditions, where gods are often aloof (Heschel 2001: 292-294). Heschel showcased his thesis on divine pathos with analysis on individual prophets. For example, Jeremiah's anguish mirrors God's pain over Israel's betrayal, whereas in Hosea God's love is likened to a husband's longing for an unfaithful spouse (Heschel 2001: 112-115). Heschel singles out suffering as an essential element of divine pathos, emphasizing that God suffers when humanity sins or suffers. For instance, God says in Hosea: 'My heart recoils within me' (Hosea 11:8), reflecting vividly the divine pain caused by human infidelity. Similarly, God laments through Jeremiah: 'I am broken for the brokenness of my people' (Jeremiah 8:21) (Heschel 2001: 62; 115). Heschel stands for an insightful voice from the Jewish and Rabbanic tradition. In addition to Heschel, more and more modern Protestant scholars challenged the tradition of divine impassibility, out of which we'll focus on two scholars who represent this line of thought—Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann.

The Barthian view on divine passibility oscillates between two poles of the divine nature, freedom and grace. Barth asserts that, in His aseity, God remains the only source of His own being and actions. God freely chooses to act in ways consistent with His nature, without being constrained by external forces or human expectations (Barth 1975: I/1: 301, 315). Out of the sheer freedom of His divine nature, God chooses to love and relate to humanity, particularly through Jesus Christ, to reconcile and to save humanity (Barth 1975: IV/1: 213). The Triune God, as Barth believes, is both immanent and economic, and both 'in Himself' and 'God for us'. Nevertheless, there should be a gap between the immanent and the economic Trinity if to allow room for God's freedom to reveal Himself in works of sheer grace (Barth 1975: I/1: 172). An inevitable dilemma arises between the two poles—whether God is ultimately impassible in His freedom or passible in His gracious action of salvation. This tension relieves when taking into consideration a doctrine to which Barth appeals from time to time, *opus dei ad extra internum* (the work of God, externally internal), which paves the path for Barth to speak of a passion of God in the immanent Trinity. Though Barth remains reluctant to put it in plain words, the Barthian theological method implicitly leads to that conclusion. Barth maintains that God's suffering is based in his free choice, but the premises he laid down does not allow an *otherwise*

to what God has acted and revealed in history. Despite the efforts of preserving in the divine nature an area that is always impassible, Barth tips towards the economic pole of the Trinity: 'In this primal decision God does not choose only Himself. In this choice of self He also chooses another, that other which is man. Man is the outward cause and object of this overflowing of the divine glory' (Barth 1975: II/2: 169).

Where Barth remains silent, Rahner states plainly: 'The basic thesis which... presents the Trinity as a mystery of salvation (in its reality and not merely as a doctrine) might be formulated as follows: the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity, and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity' (Rahner 1970: 21-22). Paul Fiddes, following Barth's logic, puts it this way:

We only speak of God as Trinity, as a complex of relationships, because we find God revealed in the cross.... When we ask, 'Who is God?' we are confronted by an event which we can only describe in relational terms: we speak of a son relating to a father in suffering and love. There is a son crying out to a Father whom he has lost ('My God, why have you forsaken me?') and so there is implied a Father who suffers the loss of a son, with a Spirit of abandonment between them' (Fiddes 1988: 123)

It was Moltmann who drove home Rahner's principle on Trinity by collapsing completely the distinctions between the immanent and economic Trinity. With this radical move, Moltmann unequivocally brings divine passibility to the innermost chamber of the divine life, the immanent Trinity. Moltmann locates suffering within the immanent Trinity (Moltmann 1981: 57-58; cf. Moltmann 1974: 240-243, 245-246). According to Moltmann, the cross is not merely an economic act of God but reflects the immanent life of the Trinity. The suffering of Jesus on the cross is a Trinitarian event involving the Father, Son, and Spirit, where God experiences suffering within Godself: 'The Father suffers the death of the Son, and the Son suffers the abandonment of the Father. The Spirit is the bond of love that holds this suffering together' (Moltmann 1974: 243); 'The Father suffers in his love for the Son, and the Son suffers in his love for the Father' (Moltmann 1974: 243). This intra-Trinitarian suffering affirms emphatically that suffering as part of the divine pathos penetrates the essence of divine nature, laying waste the traditional notions of divine impassibility. Following Rahner, Moltmann argues that the economic Trinity is identical to the immanent Trinity. The cross, hence, reveals God's inner life, where suffering is not accidental but essential to divine love. Moltmann considers the cross of Jesus as the 'foundation and criticism' of Christian theology. A fair understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, immanent and economic alike, must anchor on the event of cross (Moltmann 1974: 240). God does not stand aloof to human pain but enters into it. The Triune God 'makes our suffering His suffering' and becomes 'the crucified God—for us victims

and perpetrators' (Moltmann 1974: 246). Moltmann argues that God's love requires relationality and reciprocity, both 'love and suffering entail relations that are mutually affected' and 'If God is love, then he does not merely emanate, flow out of himself; he also expects and needs love' (Moltmann 1981: 57). Likewise, God's suffering on the cross amounts to a divine response to human suffering whereas God enters into the same conditions of pain, shame, and abandonment (Moltmann 1974: 27).

Moltmann's attention on the theme of divine passibility is deeply intertwined with his personal experience, especially his time as a prisoner of war during World War II. While being imprisoned from 1945 to 1948, Moltmann witnessed the horrors of Nazi atrocities, which shattered his identity as a German and plunged him into despair (Moltmann 1980: 7). It was in the midst of shame and suffering that he had access to the Scripture which sparked a spiritual awakening. After the war, Moltmann embarked on studies of theology at the University of Göttingen under mentors who are deeply influenced by Karl Barth. The Barthian opening to the divine pathos as we mentioned above leads to his rejection of a distant, impassible God and embrace of a theology that underlines the divine participation in human suffering. On the cross, as Moltmann writes: 'He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion with him' (Moltmann 1974: 276). This represents God's solidarity with humanity's suffering, particularly in moments of abandonment. For Moltmann, Christian theology must address 'how a person can speak of God "after Auschwitz"' (Moltmann 1974: 278). Moltmann disagrees with what he calls the "Hellenistic-influenced" hypothesis on divine impassibility of traditional theology, which he criticized as an importation of Greek metaphysics incompatible with the biblical revelation of a God who loves and suffers.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Protestant tradition, there is a rich list of theologians and scholars who challenged the tradition and argue in favor of divine possibility (Oord 2019: 135n10). The collective view of these scholars indicate that there are rooms to accommodate both mutable and immutable dimensions in divine nature. It is rational, or even necessary, to understand the divine nature in dialectical structure. We now come to a place where a more balanced stance can be achieved by juxtaposing the arguments from both camps.

### **A Brief Conclusion, Forsyth on Divine Pain and Suffering**

Can we, or shall we, discredit the doctrine of divine impassibility entirely simply because it was heavily loaded with Hellenistic influences? Is it wise, as suggested by

2 More elaborated argument can be found in Daniel Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?" in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 61, Issue 4, November 2008, pp.396-407.

Rahner, Moltmann and Process theologians, to eliminate the distinctions between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity by embracing fully the Rahner thesis? Even though I advocate a trinitarian version of divine passibility which affirms suffering as experiences affecting not merely the Son and the Spirit, but also the Father, I am not ready to dismiss the transcendent God who's aseitic, sovereign, eternal, immutable, perfect and pure. Even after integrating arguments from Heschel, Barth, Moltmann and other like-minded theologians, there are still sufficient reasons to maintain a dimension within the divine life that's above and other than the world. Here are the reasons that still stand in facing the most radical arguments from Process theologians. First, God is radically free even after He chose graciously to create and interact with the world. Before and after the existence of the world that's contingent, God has always been and will be free. That dimension of free and sufficient divine nature remains eternal and immutable. Second, God the creator created everything *ex nihilo*. Moltmann pointed out, in order to make room from creation, God kenotically makes a space of nothingness inside Himself where creation might take place (Moltmann 1993: 118-119). Nevertheless, even the *nihilo* out of which all things were created does not lie beyond God, but a space from which God voluntarily withdrew yet is still within God. No matter what happens in that space of nothingness, the divine aseity remains unchanged. Thirdly, categories such as sin, punishment and suffering are contingent and temporal, which means there was a time they were not, and they will not exist forever. Before and after the existence of these contingent categories, God exists eternally. Hence, divine impassibility as a traditional doctrine stands before and beyond Hellenistic influences. It is a Christian doctrine with its own merit, standing as fair description of the transcend dimension of divine life.

How then shall we reconcile the doctrinal tension between divine pathos, particularly suffering, and divine immutability? To find a viable path out of this conundrum, there is a need to go through a paradigm shift, a shift from the paradigm of *function* to a paradigm of *person*. Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity are distinguished in terms of their functional relationship with the created order. What's more essential than the function is the concept of person. Trinity consists of three divine persons who share the same essence. Genuine persons change in reciprocal interactions with other persons. To be a person means to be affected by other persons. Person comes naturally with pathos, which is congruent to the biblical image of the personal God who's merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6-7), and is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14). Person by nature is a relational concept structured with changeable and unchangeable elements. The divine person is unchangeable in nature and character in terms of His

loving kindness, yet at the same time passionately empathetic to human sufferings. The divine justice remains immutable, but the divine attitude is changeable depending on whether human beings repent from or continue in their sins. If God ceases to be loving and just, then He's not the God revealed in the Bible who deserves our trust. Hence, some of the divine attributes (e.g. love, holiness, justice and mercy) are immutable. Meanwhile, when relating to the changing world, God must retain some dimension of mutability in order for the divine nature to be qualified as immutable. Hence, God is both changeable and unchangeable, both immutably loving and passionately responding to human suffering, both perfectly holy and regrets when humans repent. It is thus perfectly legitimate for the immutable God to suffer the worst kind of agony as the Trinitarian God did suffer in the event of cross.

Out of practical and pastoral concerns, Forsyth didn't hesitate to flare out his insights on the pain and suffering of God. He argues straightforwardly that 'Holiness must suffer in the midst of sin' (Forsyth 1910: 204). Further, he states: 'Love in sacrifice means pain. But for holy love it means moral pain. And moral pain is something more than passive; it is active. It is not the pain of a sting merely, but of wrath' (Forsyth 1910: 207-208). Forsyth denies that sin is an injury only to man and not to God (Forsyth 1910: 126). The pain caused by sin 'cannot be conquered till it is expressed. And that was what Christ did in God and God in Christ' (Forsyth 1910: 116-117). God's evaluative love cannot ignore sin, since if 'man is not felt to be on his trial before God, God is put on His trial before man' (Forsyth 1910: 120). God is not willing to comprise His holiness for the sake of His grace. The tension between the two leads to the suffering and death of Jesus on the Cross, which, as Forsyth puts it, 'is the core of our religion, because it is the crisis of man's moral drama and the solution of that moral tragedy which is his collision with the holy' (Forsyth 1910: 116). In relation with the sinful humanity, the divine holiness and love oppose each other in a conundrum whereas the only path out is the cross, because 'only in the cross as the crowning act of a holy and gracious God—a God holy because He is the whole goodness of existence, and gracious because of the merciful love with which He goes out to save us into His own holiness' (Forsyth 1910: 116). The suffering of Christ, in Forsyth's scheme, goes beyond the human nature of the hypostatic union. It extends to Christ's divine nature, for 'He was born as the result of a death He died in heavenly places before the foundation of the world (Philipp ii. 1-12)' (Forsyth 1910: 139). Forsyth interprets the Cross as Christ's 'perpetual and complete oblation to a holy God. His one continuous outpouring of His soul to death, consummate in suffering on the atoning cross' (Forsyth 1910: 139). In the sacrificial act, Christ suffered the loss of His life. It is a bloody sacrifice. Blood means essential, central, personal moral life (Forsyth 1910: 193)

The conviction of divine suffering as an indispensable aspect of holy love guides Forsyth further in breaking through the confinement of liberal theology. For Forsyth, 'Holiness and judgement are forever inseparable. To ignore them or to sever them is the central failure of theological liberalism' (Forsyth 1910: 205). Furthermore, Forsyth features himself as a strong passibilist with statements that unequivocally affirm the pain and suffering of the Father:

The saving work of God drew blood from Christ as it drew Christ from God—and not from God's side only but from His heart. Christ's work touched the quick of God; as it touched the quick also of His own divine life, and stirred up all that was within Him... God the Father poured out His soul unto death. God, in His insatiable holy love, was exigent even on Him, and spare not His own Son. Man's sin drew upon all God's Son, and taxed the Holiest to the height. It made call upon what is most deep in Christ and dear to God-Himself, His person, His vital soul, His blood. The love of God is only shed into our hearts in the shedding of that most precious blood (Forsyth 1910: 195-196).

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