

Objectivity, Emotion, and Divine Viewpoint

By Tim Nichols

“You’re being emotional. Come on, let’s be objective about this.” How often have you said this to yourself? How often have you said it to a friend or to your spouse? How often has someone said it to you?

Often, yes? It’s a fixture in our conversation, a deeply rooted part of the categories in which we Westerners think. But is it biblical? In this study we will take up that question. We will consider first whether God is objective, then whether we, as His creatures, ought to be objective. From there we will move on to considering the role of emotion in the Christian life, and finally we will come to discussing what it means to think God’s thoughts after Him in these matters.

Is God Objective?

When attempting to verify the claim that God is, or has, a certain attribute, we can follow one of two distinct procedures, depending on the nature of the case. If Scripture actually uses the language of the claim, then verification is fairly easy. “God is loving” is true; Scripture rather clearly says so. “God is evil” is false; Scripture clearly denies it, and in exactly those terms.

However, not every claim we make about God can be tested in this fashion. Take the doctrine of the Trinity, for example. We say “God is a trinity.” We cannot test this claim simply by looking in the Bible for a statement that God is, or is not, a trinity, because no such statement exists. “Trinity” is not a biblical word; it never appears in either Old or New Testament. Therefore, we have to use a second procedure here. Before we can investigate the claim biblically, we need to understand what we *mean* by the word we are using.

So continuing the example, we begin by asking what we mean by “God is a trinity.” There are more complicated ways of saying it, but in brief, we mean that there is only one God, eternally existing in three distinct, co-equal Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This definition translates into a series of questions that we can take to the Scriptures: Are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all personal beings? Are they said to be one? Are they actually distinct from each other? Are they equal with each other? And so on.

The statement “God is objective” likewise falls into this second category. No such statement exists in the Bible; in fact, “objective” is not a biblical word at all. Therefore, it is impossible to establish a biblically supportable definition for “objectivity.” Rather, we must ask what it means in the English language to say that someone is objective, and then when we have established that meaning, we can go to Scripture and see whether we can ascribe that quality to God.

Since we're investigating the English meaning of "objectivity," in order to handle this properly, we're going to have to crawl further down the rabbit hole than I normally like to go in these discussions—deep into the world of lexicography and the history of philosophy. If you can stick with me, I'll make it worth your while. If you just can't take it, then skip to the next page where it says **IN SIMPLER TERMS, AND WITH PICTURES**. For those of you who are going to tough it out, we will begin with a few dictionary definitions.

According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged, "objective" means

contained in, constituting, or having the status of an object: as (1): existing only in relation to mind: relating to the thing known considered merely in its relation to the knowing subject or to the thing willed or desired in relation to the agent willing or desiring (2): existing independent of mind: relating to an object as it is in itself or as distinguished from consciousness or the subject (3): belonging to nature or to the sensible world: publicly or intersubjectively observable or verifiable esp. by scientific methods: independent of what is personal or private in our apprehension and feelings: of such nature that rational minds agree in holding it real or true or valid.

In case you didn't catch it, (1) and (2) are directly contradictory. The first says "objective" refers to something "existing *only in relation to mind*," while the second says it means "existing *independent of mind*." Not extraordinarily helpful. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. sheds a little more light on the subject.

2. *Philos.* Used of the existence or nature of a thing *as an object of consciousness* (as distinguished from an existence or nature termed subjective)

So far, so good. "Objective" and "subjective" are opposites. The next part is where things get tricky.

The Scholastic Philosophy made the distinction between what belongs to things subjectively (*subjective*), or as they are 'in themselves', and what belongs to them objectively (*objective*), as they are presented to consciousness. In later times the custom of considering the perceiving or thinking consciousness as pre-eminently 'the subject' brought about a different use of these words, which now prevails in philosophical language. According to this, what is considered as belonging to the perceiving or thinking self is called *subjective* and what is considered as independent of the perceiving or thinking self is called in contrast *objective*. As to this transition of use (which primarily concerns the word *subjective*, and affects *objective* as its antithesis) resulting in what is almost an exchange of sense between the two adjectives, see HAMILTON *Reid's Wks.* 806 note, R. L. NETTLESHIP *Philos. Lect. & Remains* I. 193.

a. Opposed to *subjective* in the older sense = 'in itself': Existing as an object of consciousness as distinct from having any real existence;

considered only as presented to the mind (not as it is, or may be, in itself or its own nature)

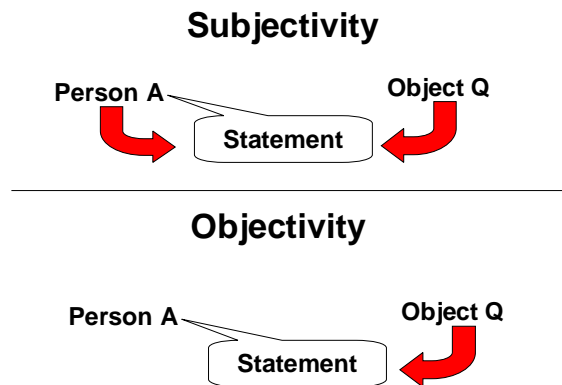
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b. Opposed to *subjective* in the modern sense: that is or belongs to what is presented to consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness itself; that is the object of perception or thought, as distinct from the perceiving or thinking subject; hence, that is, or has the character of being, a ‘thing’ external to the mind; real

Like *Webster’s, Oxford* has contradictory definitions, but at least they tell us a little about them. The older usage and the modern usage are virtually direct opposites. The last definition (b., above) is the modern usage of “objective,” and parallels *Webster’s* definitions (2) and (3). When we use the word today, that’s what we mean by it.

IN SIMPLER TERMS, AND WITH PICTURES, we can look at it this way: we have a person—the subject—that is looking at something, and we have something—the object—that is being looked at. When we talk about someone being *subjective*, we mean that his perception of the object is colored not only by the nature of the object itself, but also by his own personal feelings, beliefs, desires, etc. By contrast, an *objective* evaluation depends only on the traits of the object itself, that is, it sees the object *as it is*.

By way of example, suppose we have Person A looking at Object Q. If Person A makes a *subjective* statement about Q, then the statement depends partly on the nature of A, and partly on the nature of Q. We may not only say that the statement is *subjective*; we could also say that in this case, Person A is being *subjective*.



On the other hand, if Person A makes an *objective* statement about Q, the statement depends *only* on the nature of Q, and we could get that same statement from any other person who looks at Q *objectively*. This person is keeping his personal biases and feelings out of the picture; he is being *neutral* and simply making statements about Q based on *what Q is in itself*. We would say that this person is being *objective*.

Having established an understanding of objectivity, we may now inquire whether the Bible describes God as objective. Let’s consider the biblical picture of God. God is the Creator. He has imbued everything in the universe with meaning, and He interprets it all. He is the standard by which our interpretations of our world are judged correct or not, whether we’re talking about algebra, getting stuck in traffic, or being saved from the

lake of fire. Moreover, God knows all things exhaustively and truly, and always has; He does not learn, and consequently His interpretations do not change. Therefore, God has a fixed opinion about everything, which is to say, He is deeply and comprehensively biased; He is not neutral about anything.

Moreover, God *cannot* set aside His biases. He does not set aside His Personal opinion and simply look at the facts of, say, rocks, “as they are.” In order for such a thing to be possible, rocks would have to be (at least) equally ultimate with God. But they aren’t; rocks are *dependent* on God. Were God to set aside His opinion of rocks, rocks would cease to exist. Rocks only exist to start with because God spoke them into existence; they only continue to exist because He upholds them by the word of His power. In other words, God is not simply interpreting something according to the way it is; rather, *it is the way it is because that’s how God interprets it*. God speaks, and it is so. His interpretation is not mere description; it’s law. It is constitutive, normative, and absolutely binding.

As you can see, “objective” is at best an awkward way of describing this God. We use “objective” to refer to “seeing things as they are,” and of course God does see things as they are. However, “objective” also comes with the unwanted connotation that what we see *depends upon the facts*, and of course, that is not true for God. As we have seen, God’s perceptions do not simply depend upon the facts; rather, the facts depend upon God, and they are what they are because of the way God interprets them. Far from being independently ‘just there,’ the facts cannot exist apart from God. Simply put, *any god that can be objective in the normal sense of the word is not the God of the Bible*.

For this reason, using “objective” to describe the God of the Bible is at best a bit unwise. If we mean to convey that God is impartial, then we can say, as Paul did, “There is no partiality with God.” If we mean to convey that God’s judgments are always just, righteous, and accurate, we may say that God is just, righteous, and true, and his evaluations are always absolutely correct. Or if we’re poetically inclined, we might say with David,

The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul;
 The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
 The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
 The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;
 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
 The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
 They are more to be desired than gold—even much fine gold;
 Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
 Moreover, by them Your servant is warned,
 And in keeping them is great reward.”

Should We Be Objective?

If God is not objective because His perceptions and interpretations are not dependent on the Creation, then the next question is “Shouldn’t we be objective?” After all, shouldn’t our perceptions depend only on what really is there?

The short answer is no. Objectivity is not just an awkward term for describing our God, it is also a singularly poor category for describing the perception that a Christian should have. The idea of objectivity presupposes that a person could be objective, and that engaging the world without biases is a good idea. Neither of these things is true.

Objectivity is impossible. It is well established that it is impossible to remove the subject from the act of perception. The idea that such a thing is possible is not even false so much as it is simply nonsense. There can be no seeing if there is *no one there* to do the seeing: no subject, no act of perception. Once we are in the picture as perceivers, there is automatically a problem, because we are not blank slates which simply receive impressions; we are incurable filterers and interpreters of the world around us. We cannot weigh all things equally; even our “raw” sense impressions are heavily filtered.

Second, we were never meant to engage the world apart from God’s interpretation of it. As we have already seen, the world is not “just there.” Rather, the world comes pre-interpreted by God. God made it, and it has the meaning He assigns to it. Accordingly, we aren’t designed to see a world that is “just there,” but to interpret the world based on God’s revelation to us. The real question for us is not how to eliminate our biases, but how to have the same biases God has. To see this in action, let’s begin by looking at Genesis 1-2. Notice as you read the story that God doesn’t simply plop Adam and Eve into the Garden and let them figure it all out for themselves. Ever wonder why not? After all, the world was made for them, and them for it; they were genetically perfect, and they were not fallen. Surely they could have figured it out for themselves, right? But no. God gives them instructions, and they are intended to interact with the creation based on those instructions. To see this concept in more detail, let’s look at Genesis 3.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?”

And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

So when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Eve based her decision to eat on three things. First, she “saw that the tree was good for food.” Let’s think about that statement for a moment. Is “good for food” something that the eyes are capable of sensing? Of course not. So we’re not talking about raw sensory experience here. A wax apple looks “good for food,” but it tastes terrible. Why does it look “good for food?” Because we’ve tasted apples before, and this one looks similar to the ones we’ve tasted. In other words, this is a rational calculation based on prior raw sense experiences. Eve had been eating fruit from the other trees in

the garden, and it was good. She saw the fruit on this tree, and it looked similar to the fruits she had eaten before. Therefore, she formed the conclusion that it was good for food.

Second, Eve saw that the fruit was “pleasant to the eyes.” This is raw sensory experience—it looked aesthetically pleasing. Finally, she saw that was “a tree desirable to make one wise.” Like the first reason, this one is not raw sensory data, so where did she get it? Straight from the serpent.

What did she forget to factor into her calculations? God’s revelation. God had very clearly commanded not to eat of that tree, and she knew it. But she drifted away from God’s command, and drunk on a heady cocktail of autonomous reason, sense experience, and satanic lies, she made a bad decision.

By comparison, consider what might have happened if she had kept God’s command in mind. Knowing that she would die if she ate the fruit, she could nonetheless look at it and see that it was aesthetically pleasing, and that it appeared outwardly like all the other (tasty) fruit in the garden. Combining her reason and her senses with God’s command, she would conclude that her reason and her senses are not sufficient guides to allow her to make a good decision; she also needs God’s revelation. She might, on that basis, be profoundly grateful to God for providing her with the necessary revelation to make the right decision. And keeping that revelation in mind (along with the command to have dominion over the animals), when one of the animals comes along and calls God a liar, it wouldn’t be hard to figure that situation out, would it?

The lesson here is that we were never meant to be “objective,” to put aside all interpretive bias and simply engage the world with our reason and our senses. Rather, God made us to need Him, which is totally appropriate. After all, He’s God and we’re not. God made us to rely on His revelation to us first of all, and *then* to use our reason and our senses on that basis. What this means, however, is that we must begin by assuming God’s interpretation of the world. As we have already seen, “objective” is at best an awkward way to describe that interpretation. “Just,” “righteous,” and “true” are much better words for what we want to say.

Should We Be Emotional?

Western, analytical culture trains us to classify reactions and thoughts into one of two categories: “objective” (=good) and “emotional” (=bad). That which is not “objective” is “emotional”. And now we have a problem: we’re not supposed to be objective, so where does that leave us? Surely we shouldn’t just be emotional all the time!

There is a valid concern here. We all know people who are ruled by their emotions, and we see both the violations of Scripture that occur in their lives and the practical problems that result. Surely that can’t be what God has in mind for us. In order to address this concern properly, we need to revisit Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Again, God made us to function by relying on His revelation first of all. It was precisely this point where Eve failed, and it is also at this point where a person who is

ruled by his emotions fails. By relying first of all on his feelings, this person disregards God's revelation just as surely as Eve did by relying on her reason and senses and Satan's lies. It's just a different version of the same sin. So if that's what we mean by "emotional," then of course we should not be emotional.

Here again, though, we have a problem with the language. In common usage, *even our own common usage*, "emotional" often means simply that a person *has* emotions or is experiencing strong emotions at the moment. When we see someone get red in the face, or begin to raise his voice, or break down and cry, we think "Oh, he's just being emotional. He should be more objective." *When pressed, we'll retreat to the definition "ruled by emotion," but in reality, we'll invoke "emotional=bad" for any display of emotion that we don't happen to like, no matter how well-controlled the person might be.* As with "objective," an ill-chosen term breeds very sloppy thinking.

Rather than finding ourselves at the mercy of our own linguistic sloppiness, we might rather begin with what the Bible teaches about the proper exercise of emotions in human life. This is a topic for a book, not a short paper, so by way of example, I'll confine this discussion to some of the biblical commands regarding joy and sorrow.

There are certain times when God commands displays of emotion. For example, consider Joel 1:5:

Awake, you drunkards, and weep;
And wail, all you drinkers of wine,
Because of the new wine,
For it has been cut off from your mouth.

The New Testament has a similar command in James 4:8-10:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Suppose one of the addressees of these commands doesn't see the need for sorrow. Suppose he says "Look, James, I know that what I did is wrong, and I've stopped. I'm confessing my sin, and I will forsake it, but I don't see the need for tears here." How shall we diagnose this person? *If* he is really one of the people that James is talking to, then we have to say that something is still wrong with him. God thinks he should be crying, and he doesn't agree. He may be absolutely sincere in his disagreement, but we would still have to say that he does not have the perspective God wants him to have, and we would urge him to confess this to the Lord and ask God to give him the wisdom to see his situation correctly.

Sorrow is not merely permitted in these cases, as though it were a tolerable human weakness and God is willing to be patient with it; rather, sorrow is required. Furthermore, not only is sorrow necessary, but in some cases, it can bring about cause for rejoicing. Paul describes such a case in 2 Corinthians 7:8-11:

Even if I grieved you with my letter, I do not regret it; even if I have regretted it previously; for I perceive that the same letter grieved you, though only for a while. Now, however, I rejoice, not that you were

grieved, but that you were grieved unto repentance, for you were grieved according to God, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly grief produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but worldly grief produces death. For—notice—this same thing, your godly grief: what diligence it produced in you, what demonstrations of your innocence, what indignation, what reverence, what ardent longing, what zeal, what rendering of justice! In all things you proved yourselves to be pure in this matter.

What is it that Paul is rejoicing in here? He specifically says that he is not rejoicing in their sorrow as such, but rather in its effects. And what are these effects? Godly action, (diligence, demonstration of innocence, rendering of justice) and also godly emotions: indignation, reverence, ardent longing, and zeal.

It ought not to surprise us that these emotions are cause for rejoicing. Indeed, God not only commands displays of sorrow at times, but also displays of joy, as in Deuteronomy 12:5-7:

But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, **and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you.**

In fact, beyond a simple instruction to rejoice in worship, God institutes a tax: they are to spend 10% of their income on the feast. The details are in Deuteronomy 14:22-26.

You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year, and you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.

But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry *the tithe*, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, then you shall exchange *it* for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, **and you shall rejoice, you and your household.**

For a broader picture of what such rejoicing looked like, we can mine the riches of the Psalms for examples of how to pour out holy joy in worship before the Lord. (In fact, the Psalms give us an understanding of holiness expressed in the full range of human emotions: not just rejoicing, but lament, anger, longing, and many more as well. There is much more to say about the Psalms in this regard, but they are a topic unto themselves.)

Returning to our sample topic of rejoicing, God knew that Israel would be tempted not to obey His commands, and for precisely that reason, in Deuteronomy 28:47-48 He made it clear that He would take failure very seriously.

Because you did not serve the LORD your God **with joy and gladness of heart**, for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of everything; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you.

Nor is this command to rejoicing in worship strictly for the Old Covenant. Paul famously commanded, “Rejoice always!” in 1 Thessalonians 5:16. To the Philippians, he commands: “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.” And later, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (Philippians 3:1, 4:4)

In fact, in much the same way that the Old Covenant saints were to rejoice in the worship ceremonies of the tabernacle and temple, believers today are to rejoice in daily service, including our sacrificial suffering. Paul draws exactly this analogy in Philippians 2:16-18:

Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

Nor is this command to rejoice in suffering limited to other people’s suffering. In addressing suffering saints, 1 Peter 4:12-13 commands:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

The apostles did just that when they were persecuted for the faith. Acts 5 records that they left the presence of their persecutors “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for [Christ’s] name.” James 1:2 generalizes the command beyond just suffering for Christian witness: “count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”

Now let’s consider how we usually apply that command. Something goes wrong, and we whine to a friend, who then says “Hey—count it all joy.” That’s enough to shut us up, and shutting up is the extent of our application. *But shutting up is not what the command is about.* God is not satisfied that we merely stop whining; He wants us to *rejoice* in our service to Him, even when it’s painful. How can a believer do such a thing? James continues by explaining that it is because we know what the trial produces that we can be joyful in it (see Romans 5:1-11 for Paul’s explanation of the same truth.) Sometimes, however, we simply can’t get that perspective. It hurts too bad to take the long view. But James is ready for us. In these cases, he says, we lack wisdom, that is, we lack God’s perspective. And we need only ask God, trusting Him to grant the request, and He will freely give us His wisdom, which will enable us to rejoice.

James highlights an important dynamic for our study of emotion. As we gain God’s perspective, that is, divine wisdom, we will also gain holy emotions. This should not surprise us; as our thinking grows further into conformity with the mind of God, we

ought to expect that our emotions will grow further into conformity with His emotions, as well.

Wait A Minute! Are You Saying That God Is Emotional?

If by “God is emotional” we mean “God has emotions,” then yes. Absolutely. As we will see, the fact that the Bible attributes emotions to God is simply not in dispute; the evidence is overwhelming. The dispute lies in how to interpret these passages. Some say that they should be interpreted literally, and others insist that they are merely a figure of speech. But before getting into that argument, let’s look at God’s own self-revelation regarding His emotions.¹

Instances of Divine Emotion	
Rejoicing	De. 28:63, Isa. 62:5, Ps. 104:31
Sorrow/Grief	Gen. 6:6, Ps. 78:40, Eph. 4:30
Anger	Ex. 15:7, Ps. 2:5, 7:11, Nah. 1:2
Hatred	De. 16:22, Ps. 5:5-6, Isa. 1:14, 61:8
Satisfaction	Isa. 53:11
Jealousy	Ex. 20:5, De. 32:16, Nah. 1:2
Zeal	Num. 25:11, 2Ki. 19:31, Isa. 9:7, 37:32
Compassion/Pity	Judg. 2:18, Isa. 63:9, Joel 2:18
Derision	Ps. 2:4, 59:8

This list is only a sample, but it is sufficient to demonstrate that Scripture repeatedly attributes a full range of emotions to God.

So if it’s that clear, what is the argument about? Throughout history, a number of Christians have felt that emotion would contradict God’s nature. Charles Hodge explains one aspect of the objection:

The schoolmen, and often the philosophical theologians, tell us that there is no feeling in God. This, they say, would imply passivity, or susceptibility of impression from without, which it is assumed is incompatible with the nature of God.²

In other words, God can’t be vulnerable to outside influences. But of course, the biblical picture of divine emotion does not require God to be vulnerable to outside influences. God’s character is determined in advance; it is the same from everlasting to everlasting. God acts in time and history as He wills, in accord with His character, which is absolute. So when God makes the promise to Abraham, “I will bless him who blesses you, and him who curses you I will curse,” that promise is in keeping with His unchanging character. And since it is also God’s character to keep His promises, He does. Therefore, when the Pharaoh of Joseph’s day is a blessing to the family of Abraham, God blesses Pharaoh. And when the Pharaoh of Moses’ day is a curse to the family of Abraham, God curses

¹ For the majority of the data in the table to follow, I am indebted to E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* 882-83. In this life, Bullinger would not have approved of the use I am making of his work. He has been with the Lord since 1913, however, and I am confident that he approves now.

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I:428.

him. God's behavior changes toward the rulers of Egypt, and this in response to their actions. But this change in His treatment is a reflection of his unchanging character; it is not God who changed at all, but the Pharaohs. And in the same way, God's emotions express His unchanging character as He interacts with changing men.

Bruce A. Ware discusses the history of a slightly different objection:

The early Church theologians were divided on the issue of whether God had changeable emotions. Arnobius and Augustine, on one side, argued that passions indicate disturbances and weakness and hence are not properly found in God. But thinkers such as Tertullian, Novatian and Lactantius, on the other side, proposed that whereas God is exempt from corruptible emotions as would harm his nature, he experiences true and varying emotions in a manner appropriate to his perfect divine being. The issue is reduced, then, to whether the emotions ascribed to God in the Bible are literally true of him or whether they are mere anthropomorphic expressions.³

In other words—so the objection goes—all those accounts of divine emotion are figures of speech, in much the same way that all the passages that talk about “the hand of God” are speaking of His ability to act, and not His actual hands. Bullinger explains it this way:

Human affections and feelings are attributed to God: not that He has such feelings; but, in infinite condescension, He is thus spoken of in order to enable us to understand Him.⁴

Bullinger does not explain how our understanding would be assisted by attributing to God emotions that He does not actually have. Indeed, compelling explanations have been in very short supply. The fatal blow to this “figure of speech” view, though, is its absolute lack of biblical support.

When we read “He shall cover you with His feathers,” we know that it's painting a picture of God protecting us as a mother bird protects her chicks. We know that God does not actually have wings and feathers. We know this because Scripture plainly tells us “God is spirit” and “a spirit does not have flesh and bones.”⁵ However, when Scripture says “God is angry,” there is no corresponding clear statement that God actually does not have emotion. In fact, very much the opposite: God's emotion is held up as the model for human emotion. One example will suffice for the present. Notice the interplay between God's emotion and man's in Numbers 25:6-13:

And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who *were* weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.

³Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, 445.

⁴ Bullinger, 882.

⁵ Respectively, Psalm 91:4, John 4:24, and Luke 24:39

Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw *it*, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, **because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal.** Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, **because he was zealous for his God,** and made atonement for the children of Israel.’”

Feeling God’s Emotions After Him

We are accustomed to the idea of thinking God’s thoughts after Him. That is what Christian meditation is; it is also the very definition of wisdom, and the foundation for all true knowledge of anything whatsoever. As we saw at the beginning, thinking God’s thoughts after Him does not mean being “objective,” but rather it means striving to have God’s biases toward everything. Of course we cannot do this perfectly: first of all, we are finite, and secondly, we are fallen. But in our own creaturely way, we are to pursue understanding of the world, and ask God to give us His wisdom. As we grow in sanctification, there is a meaningful sense in which we do learn to think as God thinks.

We are less accustomed to the idea that in the same way that we should think what God thinks, we ought also to feel as God feels. That is, we should be more like Phinehas, who was moved to action because he was zealous with God’s zeal.

We fear being motivated by emotions because we are fallen, and we often have sinful emotions. We have often tried to rescue ourselves by ignoring our emotions altogether and retreating into our thoughts. But as we have seen, God demands more than that. God requires not only the right thoughts, but the right emotions that naturally accompany them. In the same way that we are thinking beings, or volitional beings, we are also emotional beings, and God wants not only our minds and our wills, but also our feelings to serve Him.

And just as we cannot think God’s thoughts after Him unless He gives us the necessary wisdom, so we cannot feel God’s feelings after Him unless He enables us. This is not a matter of whipping ourselves into a froth; that’s courting the same sort of disaster as Eve trying to figure out whether she should eat the fruit on her own. We can no more manufacture right feeling on our own than we can manufacture right thinking on our own. In this, as in all things, we rely on the Lord to work a miracle in us. As you struggle with how to do this well, let me again recommend that you study the Psalms, in which a variety of authors display the whole palette of holy emotions, guided by the inerrant hand of God’s Holy Spirit. There are no better examples.