

‘To share a great God’s pain’: Bertrand Brasnett (1893–1988) and the consolation of sorrow

Alison Peden

Alison Peden is a retired historian and priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Abstract

This article explores a resource for the consolation of enduring suffering. Bertrand Brasnett, writing in the 1920s and 30s, redefined God’s eschatological bliss as an undefeated will to love humanity, even if that love were rejected thus causing eternal divine anguish and sorrow, inviting the disciple to follow Christ by participating in this loving pain in union with God. The paper explores how Brasnett’s views were unusual amongst the extensive theology of suffering after World War I. Today, his theology can offer a pathway for pastoral care through linking Brasnett with the theology of tragedy that grew after the Second World War. Relating enduring wounds of love to a divine reality enables the sufferer to participate in God’s work in a way that brings consolation.



Christians have sought and found consolation in the hope of the final triumph of God’s redeeming love for Creation, with a promised end to all suffering and guaranteed bliss for both God and the believer. Yet theological and pastoral questions have been raised about the nature of God’s triumph and the kind of bliss that might result. Can the sorrow of love rejected ever be forgotten? Is bliss a kind of happiness or the joy of faithfulness even in pain? Bertrand Brasnett was Principal of the (Episcopalian) Edinburgh Theological College from 1930 to 1942 and author of *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (1928), *The Infinity of God*



(1933) and *God the Worshipful* (1935), for which he was awarded a DD. He pursued these questions with a theology that was ‘deep but, perhaps, not cast in the usual mould.’¹ Passionate about the reality of God’s willingness to suffer without temporal limit, he was equally insistent that God’s true followers would want to ‘share a great God’s pain’ even into eternity.² He is little read now, but his first and major work has been cited as ‘an important and neglected book’.³ A century or so later, his thesis can still generate pastoral wisdom on how the suffering of unresolved tragedy might be consoled.

Classical theists assert that God’s impassible nature prevents divine bliss from being impacted by suffering, even if God knows sympathy with those who suffer. They claim that such an immutable God cannot be affected by emotions caused by the pain of Creation, whether as an inevitable part of natural processes or the consequence of human sin. Moreover, Christ as divine Logos was not changed by the suffering his human nature experienced.⁴ Not until the late nineteenth century in Britain was there serious questioning of divine impassibility, intensified by the experience of World War I and popularised by the army chaplain Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy.⁵ In 1924, the Church of England’s doctrinal survey of

¹ Gavin White, *The Scottish Episcopal Church: A New History* (General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church, 1998), 109. On Brasnett as Principal, see Edward Luscombe, *A Seminary of Learning: Edinburgh Theological College, 1810–1994* (General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church, 1994), 18–20. I am grateful to Professor Stewart Brown and Dr Anne Tomlinson for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Bertrand Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (SPCK, 1928), 79, <https://archive.org/details/sufferingofimpas00bras>.

³ Paul L. Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 5n16. Brasnett was also discussed by Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (SCM, 1981), 222n5 and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Vol. V, *The Last Act* (Ignatius Press, 1998), 234–36.

⁴ Summarised in Richard Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God Can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology”, *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984): 6–8, https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_god_bauckham.html.

⁵ Michael W. Brierley, “‘There ain’t no throne’: Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy and the Doctrine of God”, in *Life After Tragedy: Essays on Faith and the First*

impassibility revealed the many dimensions of the issue.⁶ Key questions arose from this debate: If God suffers during the time-span of the created world, does this affect God's and the believer's eternal bliss? If sorrow for suffering is a dimension of the very nature of God, can this suffering come to an end in the eschaton when the redemption of the world is achieved, or is it an everlasting divine condition? And what impact does all this have on our Christian hope? The debate continues in philosophical theology, although its pastoral aspects are rarely considered.⁷

Bertrand Brasnett was a key figure in the passibility debate. He served as an army chaplain in France in 1917, where he would have seen appalling suffering and mortality at first hand, and he began training ordinands in 1922, aiming to equip them to communicate Christian faith in the new post-war world.⁸ He was determined to discern a God who would be robustly acceptable to 'popular religion and to the dominant ideas of modern science'.⁹ Brasnett argued that God is passible in his (*sic*)¹⁰ suffering for Creation's pain, not just because it would make God more attractive to contemporary society but because theology, ethics and psychology indicate that a God who is vulnerable to human suffering is the only credible and moral object of worship for man. Passibility is Trinitarian for Brasnett: Jesus' earthly sorrow and pain revealed eternal divine suffering in the Godhead, and the Holy Spirit is wounded when the love of God is resisted and rejected and the divine purpose for Creation is thwarted. God's suffering is a freely-chosen asceticism that seeks to persuade man to repent of sin by revealing God's self-sacrificing love and gaining their loving response and restored relationship. Brasnett identified as 'impassible' this willingness of God to suffer with unswerving purpose,

World War Evoked by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, eds. Michael W. Brierley and Georgia A. Byrne (Cascade Books, 2017), 75–96.

⁶ John K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1926).

⁷ James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Eerdmans, 2009).

⁸ Alison Peden, "Episcopalian Theology in the Twentieth Century", in *The History of Scottish Theology*, vol. III, eds. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford University Press, 2019), 333–36.

⁹ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 85.

¹⁰ I have followed Brasnett's use of 'he' for God and for humans in general when referencing his work.



to 'put his trust in the conquering power of a suffering love [...] to win men's hearts to him by the bleeding of his own heart for them'.¹¹

Brasnett's theology of a kenotic, passible God with an impassible will to save was not unique at the time, but his relentless probing of the issues from all directions led him ultimately to an unusual conclusion not shared by his contemporaries. He raised the possibility that God's attempts to persuade the sinful to repent through suffering love might not avail in the end, so that the 'finally impenitent' might defeat his eternal will to redeem all and triumph over evil. Christ came into the world, he argued, to reveal and embody God's eternal sorrowing and suffering for humanity, borne with a tenacity and compassion that God hopes may move his creatures to repentance and salvation. 'If we can gaze upon it and yet remain unmoved not even God can help us further'.¹² When considering what this says about divine omnipotence, Brasnett pointed to the Gospels, where Jesus' parables and prophecy do not indicate universal salvation, and he also pointed to the evidence of those who deliberately reject God. He described an Atonement which is not purely 'objective' but rather a work of partnership: 'if man withholds the co-operation of his penitence the work is not fully and finally accomplished'.¹³ However, commented Brasnett, this all depends on the relationship between God and time. If time is conceived as real and everlasting, this might indicate that God will strive to win souls unendingly; or it may be that there is a gradual separation of good and bad into two changeless groups independent of time.¹⁴ Even this possible ultimate failure of God's power to persuade does not mean the failure of his infinite love, for that love continues unconquered despite the inevitable pain God suffers by its rejection.¹⁵

Passibilist theologians in the 1920s, such as William Temple and Brasnett's ordaining bishop Charles Gore, also discerned the suffering at the heart of God's being because of sin in Creation, but they anticipated the end of all suffering when redemption was finally completed and God was all in all.¹⁶ However, Brasnett claimed that God's age-long anguish

¹¹ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 64.

¹² Brasnett, *Suffering*, 78.

¹³ Bertrand Brasnett, *The Infinity of God* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1933), 136–50, quotation p. 149.

¹⁴ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 86–89.

¹⁵ Brasnett, *Infinity*, 184–91.

¹⁶ Charles Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief* (John Murray, 1926), I.v, 166–7,



would continue whether or not his final triumph were achieved, because of his omniscience. If some remained ‘finally impenitent’, resisting for ever the offer of a loving relationship with God, then eternal divine sorrow is more readily understandable. But Brasnett argued that even if there is a final triumph of divine love, an omniscient God will still always suffer pain, because he will always have known that Creation will suffer because of sin and always have shared that suffering. Moreover, in Christ he knew suffering with and for humanity, and for all time God cannot erase his memory of the rejection in the life of the world of his loving purpose, even if in the end all were redeemed: ‘There must have ever have been sorrow in the heart of God because of sin; whilst yet it was far away the black shadow of its coming was grief to an all-knowing God’. The knowledge of ‘the good unrealised [and the] evil done’ can never ‘be as though they were not’ for God, whose wounded heart may be for ever be scarred by them.¹⁷

This everlasting sorrow of God means that Brasnett’s image of God’s bliss, or eternal perfect joy and blessedness, diverged from that of most theologians. He challenged both his contemporary impassibilists, such as Friedrich von Hügel and Marshall Randles, who asserted the untroubled eternal bliss of God, and also passibilist theologians such as Henry Maldwyn Hughes, who admitted that God might suffer but that he remained blessed because God was sure that his will to save would triumph in the end,¹⁸ a view that most passibilists upheld. Brasnett claimed that what prevails is God’s will to love his Creation even if his purpose to redeem it fully was defeated; he is as glorious in defeat as in victory, prepared to accept that he will never know the full happiness of perfect fulfilment of his purposes.¹⁹ How attractive a prospect for his followers was sharing this ascetic bliss with God? Brasnett was deeply concerned to protect the moral seriousness of passibilism. He thought that if God’s suffering for sin and evil were thought to be limited in time and degree, they might be considered less serious. That mattered for discipleship, he argued, since God does not compel obedience but rather seeks to draw men

III.x.947; William Temple, *Christus Veritas* (Macmillan, 1924), 262; cf. Mozley, *Impassibility*, 152–66.

¹⁷ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 71, 61, 65; cf. 154, *Infinity*, 137–38. Cf. also Vernon F. Storr, *The Problem of the Cross* (John Murray, 1919), 114.

¹⁸ Henry Maldwyn Hughes, *What is the Atonement?* (James Clarke & Co, 1924), 91–92; cf. Brasnett, *Suffering* 146–47.

¹⁹ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 115–50, 70–71.



to himself by the depth of suffering love he extends to them. If the consequences of sin for God are minimalised so that his bliss is untouched, God would then have less power to persuade broken humanity to turn and follow him in self-transcending, suffering love.²⁰

The greatest test of such love is whether the Christian is willing to share God's pain even if it continues into eternity. Brasnett claimed that the Holy Spirit increases the believer's capacity for sympathy and suffering the closer they draw to union with God, and will become ever more honoured to share it in heaven; consequently 'there may be an element of pain in the highest bliss attainable by man'.²¹ The Church of England's Doctrine Commission of 1922 had described heaven for the redeemed as 'fellowship with God who is Love [...] bliss to the soul purged of self-interest',²² but Brasnett was going much further in transcendence of self than most theologians demanded of faith. He did not even guarantee that repentant sinners would forget their sinfulness in the hereafter, as had, for example, Charles Dinsmore, who described God's merciful 'River of Forgetfulness' which offers sinners the eternal peace of a purged conscience.²³ Brasnett's model for the believer was Christ, 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' but full of joy in the union of his will with God. He articulated this ideal in a martial image of God as a steadfast leader inspiring loyalty and enthusiasm in his followers' hearts by his acceptance of pain in a great cause and inviting their solidarity in victory or defeat. A near-contemporary, Evelyn Underhill, used a similarly 'virile' and military approach, describing spiritual struggles in terms of 'muddy trenches [...] and no certainty as to whether we are winning or not'.²⁴ It was an image perhaps owing much to the searing experience of World War I which was prompting the attempts of theologians and mystics alike to find ways to speak about it, whether directly or not.

²⁰ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 72; *Infinity*, 138–39.

²¹ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 67–70.

²² *Doctrine in the Church of England: The Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine 1922* (SPCK, 1938), 219, <https://archive.org/details/doctrine-in-the-church-of-england/page/n223/mode/2up>.

²³ Charles A. Dinsmore, *Atonement in Literature and Life* (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1906), 238, <https://archive.org/details/atonementinliter0000char/page/n238/mode/2up>. Cf. Brasnett, *Infinity*, 138.

²⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *School of Charity* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1934), 80–81.



Brasnett often reads like a theologian struggling alone with the implications of his deepest religious instincts, testing the rigour of his arguments, probing the reasons for his disagreements with contemporaries. His theology of a God who hands himself over to his own Creation without assured success for the divine purpose led Brasnett into pathways that were problematic. He ascribed a power to sin and evil – the resistance of the ‘finally impenitent’ – which could be considered dangerously dualist in its tragic implications. Such tragedy might imply despair in the face of unconquerable evil. While contemporary theologians challenged the way radical passibilism simply made God appear weak and helpless, future critics would highlight the apparent semi-Manichaeism of theologians of the tragic such as the Scottish Episcopalian Donald MacKinnon.²⁵ In any case, discomfort with the idea of a populated hell had grown with the century. For example, Gore hoped that the sinful might lose personal consciousness at death and thus not endure eternal suffering.²⁶ In his 1922 Gifford Lectures, Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison argued that the perfection of real selfhood – the soul – might well take more than earthly life to complete. But divine compassion is infinite in time and its purpose of universal restoration unconquerable. In fact, he argues, the absolute freedom of humans to resist grace is ‘an abstraction of the intellect’, for it would require the impossibility of a creature created wholly evil.²⁷ Three other Reformed Scottish theologians of the time had also raised the possibility of an intermediate state after death preparing unbelievers for heaven, not least because of concerns about the fate of the soldiers who had died young before they could come to evident faith.²⁸

Another of the complexities involved in describing the suffering of God and of believers is the notion of time, as Brasnett acknowledged. He was concerned to safeguard the reality of time for God and his creation

²⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 109–15.

²⁶ Gore, *Reconstruction*, III.ix, 927–28, cf. Temple, *Christus Veritas*, 209, 277.

²⁷ Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of Immortality* (Clarendon Press, 1922), 201–04.

²⁸ Stewart J. Brown, “‘Where are our Dead?’: Changing Views of Death and the Afterlife in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Scottish Presbyterianism”, in *Death in Modern Scotland, 1855–1955: Beliefs, Attitudes and Practices*, ed. Susan Buckham, Peter C. Jupp and Julie Rugg (Peter Lang, 2016), 277–85.



and thus the heavy significance of moral choices, but this flung him into the controversy about the relationship between real time, everlastingness, timelessness and eternity. For a strict impassibilist, God is timeless and unchanging, unmoved by emotion or suffering. For Brasnett, God is immersed in time, working creatively to save and redeem along with believers, who have reason to hope into the future because time may be everlasting. Even if they are perfectly good, the redeemed may still change from one mode of perfection to another. Although Brasnett admitted the possibility of timeless eternity without change, he clearly leant towards 'beings who are throbbing and alive, with active, energising wills' even in heaven, perhaps tuning in to the contemporary beginnings of process theology. The debate about God's temporality continues unabated.²⁹

Brasnett admitted that some might find his creed a gloomy one, but appealed to a heroism that 'cannot be disowned by the followers of a religion that points for its standard to a cross'.³⁰ The lingering shadow of a wartime ideal lay across his books, as well as the urgency of restorative action in the broken world of the 1920s, where societal as well as economic depression was rife.³¹ Brasnett was writing speculative doctrine and apologetics, not pastoral theology, but his bold doctrine of the eternal sorrow of God – and of the redeemed in heaven – holds value for those today who engage with unconsolated pain and tragedy. For, accommodating the stark reality of such suffering within a triumphant eschatology can be complex. Rarely do modern theologians admit that God may not find pure bliss in a glorious consummation of the world or at least assert that the Christian eschatological hope is for 'a non-tragic outcome of history which yet does full justice to the tragic'.³² A notable exception is Paul Fiddes, who suggests that God (although not God's creatures, who will 'know bliss in the contemplation of their creator') may know ultimately that Creation's full potential has not been fulfilled, thus leaving 'a blend of victory and

²⁹ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 80–89, quotation p. 89; see most recently, Ryan Mullins, *From Divine Timemaker to Divine Watchmaker: An Exploration of God's Temporality* (Routledge, 2024).

³⁰ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 97–98.

³¹ Richard Overby, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (Allen Lane, 2009).

³² David Ford, "Tragedy and Atonement", in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 129.



tragedy in God's own experience of the end'.³³ Can a theology of tragedy offer a pathway to the pastoral consolation of ongoing sorrow?

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, her character, Reverend John Ames, muses on eternity. He wonders whether 'when the light comes' all fear and grief will be swept away and we will 'forget our sorrows altogether'. But, he reflects, you would still remember your life, and 'sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life'.³⁴ His particular sorrow is that he suspects he is too old to see his son grow to maturity; it is an irreducible fact rather than a sin or injury, but it creates a wound nonetheless. Ames envisages his present sorrow continuing into eternity because it is part of his essential identity and a measure of the love he has for his son. To lose that would be to diminish his humanity. How might such enduring wounds be tended in pastoral care? And how might those who have undergone traumatic suffering, whether as victims of abuse, war or other injury, and also those grappling with their own failures or with rejection of their love, come to terms with their experience?

The challenge for pastoral care is to widen the frame of reference for the consolation of suffering. As Oscar Wilde wrote, 'Suffering is one very long moment. [...] With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle around one centre of pain.'³⁵ A first step is to name and remember the pain, so that there is no evasion of the reality of tragic events, even if there has been a measure of forgiveness. This offers what Rowan Williams describes as a communal opportunity for developing a 'tragic imagination', the space for recognition and creative language that can take the sufferer beyond isolated pessimism.³⁶ The Christian path to this is to align the sufferer's story with that of God, and especially of the incarnate Christ. We have seen above how Brasnett finds in the story of Christ's suffering and the Passion the persuasive power to convert and redeem. For example, in his *God the Worshipful*, he drew a particular parallel with human lives in Jesus' earthly experience of loneliness: the desolation of others' sinfulness, of rejection of his love and of his own

³³ Paul S. Fiddes, "Creation Out of Love", in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (SPCK, 2001), 191; cf. his *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 140–42 and *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Blackwell, 2000), 178–79.

³⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Virago Press, 2005), 118–19.

³⁵ "De profundis", in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Collins, 1931), 431.

³⁶ Williams, *Tragic Imagination*, 46–51, 114–15.



sense of ‘utter spiritual dereliction’.³⁷ However, in pastoral terms, the comfort in knowing that another has experienced something similar to one’s own suffering is limited. It cannot always break through one’s own ‘circle of pain’.

Progression from lamenting or protesting against personal suffering involves entering into a still-wider dimension, which in pastoral theology means the divine reality. Here, Brasnett’s thesis about the eternal suffering of God offers an imaginative space for pastoral wisdom. For Brasnett, God’s sorrow arises from the particular instances of suffering that humanity undergoes because of sin and the contingency of Creation; God suffers – eternally – these same instances. It would follow from this that the tragedies of human life are experienced deep within God. As Timothy Rees put it in a hymn (“God is Love, let heaven adore him”) written in 1922:

And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow’s iron rod,
then they find that selfsame aching
deep within the heart of God.

So consolation arises not simply from the parallel of another’s story – that would be more like classical tragedy – but from the deep dwelling of the sufferer in God. The eternity of God safeguards the ongoing presence of sorrow (important to those who cannot forget³⁸) and also opens up a new horizon where the sufferer may begin to participate in God’s life, because they already find themselves within it.

The final stage is the faithful response of the sufferer to God. This is where Brasnett offers something new to the pastoral trajectory of consolation. His unusual theology of discipleship held out the prospect of a final bliss in which both God *and the faithful* might still suffer sorrow and pain because of all Creation’s tragedies. But the faithful would still enjoy the joy and glory that God does, not because suffering is in any way glorious but because they seek the unity of their human will with the

³⁷ Bertrand Brasnett, *God the Worshipful* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), 174, <https://archive.org/details/godworshipful0000bras>.

³⁸ Cf. Ulrich Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz* (SPCK, 1978), 111: ‘Auschwitz need not be forgotten – indeed how could it be? – but it can now be forgiven, because the torment has not only ceased but is established in the divine life itself.’



steadfast divine will and purpose to love Creation whatever the outcome.³⁹ The greater the awareness of actually participating in the whole divine story, the greater the understanding and growth for the sufferer. A striking illustration of this process beginning is the poem “I Know Not Where They Have Laid Him” by Studdert Kennedy. It recounts the experience of a mother devastated by the grief of her son’s death on a First World War battlefield; he remains unburied. The mother remembers the willing pain she bore to bring him to birth and then wonders who will bear the pain of his second birth into eternal life. Realising it will be God, she begs to share that pain:

Don’t keep it all to yourself, Good Lord,
But give ’is old mother a share.
Gimme a share of the travail pain
Of my own son’s second birth [...]
Gimme the sorrow and not the joy
If that ’as to be your will;
Gimme the labour and not the pride,
But make me ’is mother still.⁴⁰

The mother is still praying from within her own grief but has entered into an imaginative space where she can willingly offer to share God’s pain in its transformation. The acceptance of pain, of enduring vulnerability in cooperating with God’s purposes, then deepens and broadens intercession and enlarges the vision and compassionate action of the sufferer.

Brasnett was an idiosyncratic contributor to the vigorous debate on passibilism in the 1920 and 30s. His argument for the eternal sorrow and suffering of God ran counter to most theologians’ assertion of an ultimate redemptive triumph and was vulnerable not only to impassibilist challenge but to contemporary explorations of time. Brasnett was arguing for a heroic creed that took suffering and pain seriously and found reward in the steadfastness of a loving will and commitment. Whilst his theology reflects a post-war mood, it also suggests ways to approach contemporary unconsolated suffering through weaving the experience of pain and sorrow into God’s life, thus ‘sharing a great God’s pain’.

³⁹ Brasnett, *Suffering*, 68.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Unutterable Beauty* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), 147–49.

