

Systematic Theology, Week 2 summer 2015

“What is God Like? - Part 1

On January 7, 1855, the minister of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, England, opened his morning sermon as follows:

There is something exceeding improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass’s colt; and with solemn exclamation, “I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.” No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thought of God....

And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently consolatory. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that subject that I invite you this morning.

These words, spoken over a century ago by C.H. Spurgeon (at that time, incredibly, only twenty years old) were true then, and they are true now. They make a fitting preface at a series of studies on the nature and character of God. (Packer, Knowing God, pp.17-18)

God exists and has revealed himself.

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Acts 17:24-28 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;

As even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

Romans 1:19-24 **for** what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

What does it mean to know an incomprehensible God?

Psalm 145:3 *Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.*

1. While we will never fully know God, we can _____ know God.

2. In addition to knowing God, we can know about him from what he
_____ on the pages of Scripture.

God reveals Himself to us by teaching us his divine attributes.

1 John 1:5 *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*

1 John 4:8 *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

God's Attributes Can Be Placed in Two Categories.

Several different methods of classifying God's attributes have been used. The most commonly used classification is this: the *incommunicable attributes* of God (that is, those attributes that God does not share or "communicate" to others) and the *communicable attributes* of God (those God shares or "communicates" with us).

In the book *Christian Beliefs* Grudem lists the following 24 "attributes of God. In his systematic theology he identifies the attributes of Independence, unchangeability, eternality, omnipresence, and unity, all as incommunicable attributes.

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|-----|---------------------|-----|---------------------|
| 1. | Existence | 13. | Love |
| 2. | Knowable | 14. | Holy |
| 3. | <u>Independent</u> | 15. | Righteous and Just |
| 4. | <u>Unchangeable</u> | 16. | Jealous |
| 5. | <u>Eternal</u> | 17. | Wrathful toward sin |
| 6. | <u>Omnipresent</u> | 18. | Wills what he will |
| 7. | Spiritual | 19. | Free |
| 8. | Invisible | 20. | Omnipotent |
| 9. | Omniscient | 21. | Perfect |
| 10. | Wise | 22. | Blessed |
| 11. | Truthful | 23. | Beautiful |
| 12. | Good | 24. | <u>Unity</u> |

An Overview of the Attributes of God.

1. God Is Independent

Acts 17:24-25: *"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything"*

Job 44:11 *"Who has given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine"*

God's independence is defined as follows: God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything. This attribute of God is sometimes called his self-existence or his *aseity* (from the Latin words *a se* which mean "from himself").

2. God Is Unchangeable

We can define the unchangeableness of God as follows: God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations. This attribute of God is also called God's immutability.

Psalms. 102:25-27

*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like raiment, and they pass away;
but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

Malachi. 3:6: *For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" Here God uses a general statement of his unchangeableness to refer to some specific ways in which he does not change.*

James 1:17 *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

Does God Sometimes Change His Mind? When we talk about God being unchanging in his purposes, we may wonder about places in Scripture where God said he would judge his people and then because of prayer or the people's repentance (or both) God relented and did not bring judgment as he had said he would. Examples of such withdrawing from threatened judgment include the successful intervention of Moses in prayer to prevent the destruction of the people of Israel (Ex. 32:9-14), the adding of another fifteen years to the life of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1-6), or the failure to bring promised judgment upon Nineveh when the people repented (Jonah 3:4, 10). There are other passages where God is said to be sorry that he had carried out some previous action. One thinks of God being sorry that he had made man upon the earth (Gen. 6:6), or sorry that he had made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:10). Did not God's purposes change in these cases?

These instances should all be understood as true expressions of God's present attitude or intention with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment. If the situation changes, then of course God's attitude or expression of intention will also change. This is just saying that God responds differently to different situations. The example of Jonah preaching to Nineveh is helpful here. God sees the wickedness of Nineveh and sends Jonah to proclaim, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The possibility that God would withhold judgment if the people repented is not explicitly mentioned in Jonah's proclamation as recorded in Scripture, but it is of course implicit in that warning: the purpose for proclaiming a warning is to bring about repentance. Once the people repented, the situation was different, and God responded differently to that changed situation. *The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.* Our faith and hope and knowledge all ultimately depend on a person who is infinitely worthy of trust-- because he is absolutely and eternally unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises.

3. God Is Eternal

Psalm 90:2-4 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³ You return man to dust
and say, "Return, O children of man!"^l

⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

John 8:58 "Before Abraham was, I am".

4. God Is Omnipresent

Jeremiah. 23:23-24 "Am I a God at hand, says the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD"

Acts 17:28 "In him we live and move and have our being,"

Just as God is unlimited or infinite with respect to time, so God is unlimited with respect to space. The Latin prefix omni- means "all". God's omnipresence may be defined as follows: God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.

God can be present in a special way to bless: David says, "in your presence there is fulness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11).

Herman Bavinck, in *The Doctrine of God* quotes a beautiful paragraph illustrating the practical application of the doctrine of God's omnipresence: *"Wherever, therefore, you shall have fled, there he is. From yourself, whither will you flee? Will you not follow yourself wherever you shall flee? But since there is One more inward even than yourself, there is no place where*

you may flee from God angry but to God reconciled. There is no place at all whither you may flee. Will you flee from him? Flee unto him."

5. God Is Spirit

John 4:24 "God is spirit"

God exists in such a way that his being is not made of any matter. He has no parts, no size, and no dimensions. He is unable to be perceived by our bodily senses. To think of his being in terms of anything else in the created universe would be a misrepresentation, for he is more excellent than any other kind of existence.

6. God Is Invisible

Because God is spirit, God is also invisible. "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18).

Although no one can ever see God's total essence, which is invisible, God has at times chosen to show something of himself to people through visible, created things, and especially through the person of Jesus Christ.

7. God Is Omniscient

Psalms 147:5, Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

1 John 3:19-20, By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

God is always, at all times, fully aware of everything. His knowledge never changes or grows. Nothing surprises him; nothing is hidden from him. From all eternity God has known all things that would happen and all things that he would do.

8. God Is Wise

Romans 11:33; Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

Colossians 1:16. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him.

God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals. This definition goes beyond the idea of God knowing all things and specifies that God's decisions about what he will do are always wise decisions: that is, they always will bring about the best results (from God's ultimate perspective), and they will bring about those results through the best possible means.

9. God Is Truthful

Isaiah 45:19 "I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right".

"The LORD is the true God" (Jer. 10:10). All his knowledge and all his words are both true and the final standard of truth. Once he says something, we can count on his doing it; we can count on him to be forever faithful to his promises (Num. 23:19). In fact, the essence of true faith is taking God at his word and relying on him to do as he promised.

10. God Is Good

Psalms 86:5. You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.

Psalms 118:29 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

God is good, that is, perfectly holy in Himself. His goodness is not dependant on someone else's declaration of goodness as we are. Ultimately, therefore, God's being and actions are perfectly worthy of his own approval. He is therefore the final standard of good. Jesus implies this when he says, "No one is good but God alone" (Luke 18:19).

11. God Is Love

The unmerited love of God which reveals itself in pardoning sin is called His grace,

Ephesians 1:6, 7; In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,

That love relieving the misery of those who are bearing the consequences of sin is known as His mercy or tender compassion,

Ephesians 2:4. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved,

12. God Is Holy

Isaiah 57:15 For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Isaiah 6:3b. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

God's holiness is first of all that divine perfection by which He is absolutely distinct from all His creatures, and exalted above them in infinite majesty. But it denotes in the second place that He is free from all moral impurity or sin, and is therefore morally perfect. In the presence of the holy God man is deeply conscious of his sin,

13. God Is Righteous and Just.

Deuteronomy 32:4 All his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he" **God's** righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.

God also speaks and commands what is right: *"The precepts of the LORD are right rejoicing the heart"* (Ps. 19:8). And God says of himself, *"I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right"* (Isa. 45:19).

As a result of God's righteousness, it is necessary that God punish sin; it is wrong and deserves punishment. This is why Paul says that when God sent Christ as a sacrifice to bear the punishment for sin, it *"was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus"* (Rom. 3:25-26). When Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins it showed that God was truly righteous, because he did give appropriate punishment to sin, even though he did forgive his people their sins.

14. God Is Jealous

While explaining the first of the Ten Commandments, God says, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5). In his jealousy, God continually seeks to protect his loved ones from estranged affections that are dishonoring to him and harmful to us. That is why he can rightly say, "My glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:11).

15. God Is Wrathful toward Sin

God intensely hates all sin. As Jesus said, "Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). It is the "wrath of God," Paul says, that "is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18). If God delighted in or was not troubled by sin, he wouldn't be a God worthy of our worship or praise. In the case of those who trust Christ, God's wrath is satisfied because the just punishment fell on Christ at the cross (Rom. 3:25; 5:8–9). Thus, the wrath of God is not something those who believe in Jesus have any need to fear.

16. God is Sovereign. (Wills what he wills & Free)

Psalms 115:3 Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Ephesians 1:11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,

Acts 2:22-24 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

On the basis of Deut. 29:29 it is customary to distinguish between the secret and the revealed

will of God. *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.* The former is the will of God's decree, which is hidden in God and can be known only from its effects, and the latter is the will of His precept, which is revealed in the law and in the gospel.

17. God Is Omnipotent

Genesis 18:14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

Revelation 19:6b"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

As Jesus says, "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). God's power is infinite.

But there are some things God cannot do. He can neither will nor do anything that denies his own character. For example, he cannot lie (Titus 1:2), he cannot be tempted with evil (James 1:13), and he cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). Therefore, God's use of his infinite power is qualified by his other attributes and by the nature of what power can do. *God can do with power anything power can do.*

18. God Is Perfect

Matthew 5:48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This means God fully possesses all excellent qualities and lacks no part of any qualities that would be desirable for him. We can imitate his perfection by striving to "be perfect," as Jesus commanded us to do (Matt. 5:48). Although we won't attain the perfection we often desire here on earth, through the work of Christ on our behalf we can continually make progress toward that perfection throughout our life.

20. God is Blessed

1 Timothy 1:11 ... the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

1 Timothy 6:15 —he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords,

To be "blessed" is to be happy in a very full and rich sense. Thus, God's blessedness may be defined as follows: *God's blessedness means that God delights fully in himself and in all that reflects his character.* In this definition the idea of God's happiness or blessedness is connected directly to his own person as the focus of all that is worthy of joy or delight. This definition indicates that God is perfectly happy, that he has fullness of joy in himself.

When we remember that the sum of everything that is desirable or excellent is found in infinite measure in God himself, then we realize that it could not be otherwise: *whatever* excellence there is in the universe, *whatever* is desirable, must ultimately have come from him, for he is the Creator of all and he is the source of all good. *"Every* good endowment and *every* perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).

19. God Is Beautiful

Psalm 27:4 one thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Psalm 145:1-7

1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
2 Every day I will bless you
and praise your name forever and ever.
3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.
4 One generation shall commend your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
6 They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds,
and I will declare your greatness.
7 They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

God is the sum of all desirable qualities, and he possesses every quality that is truly desirable. Therefore, as David discovered, all our longings and all our desires will only ultimately find their fulfillment in God, the only one who is truly beautiful.

“I could sooner pour the Pacific Ocean into a thimble than write on one sheet of paper all that might be said about the **‘greatest and best of beings’**, God Himself. All I can hope to do is barely acquaint you with **‘Him with whom we have to do’**, so that you may not only think rightly of Him, but be led to seek after Him with all your heart. No one appreciates being misrepresented and thought of wrongly, especially God. We do Him a great dishonor when we think too lowly or falsely of Him. He is worthy of the creature’s highest and best thought. What Luther said to Erasmus over 400 years ago, can be applied to multitudes today, **‘Your thoughts of God are too human’**.” Unknown Theologian