

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 3: The Character of Our Triune God

Opening Q: *Which attribute of God comes to your mind first? Which attribute causes you the most confusion?*

The Doctrine of God Has It All

"All the doctrines in dogmatics...are but the explication of the one central dogma of the knowledge of God. All things are considered in light of God, subsumed under him, traced back to him as the starting point." Herman Bavinck

In other words, what we now state about God's character will determine how we understand all of the other topics we study in theology.

This also means that the stakes are high. Michael Allen notes: *"The incomparable nature of the divine being provokes reflection on the not simply difficult but also dangerous work of theology. Thinking about God is no blasé matter. It is playing with live ammo. Thinking about God is no free intellectual speculation. It is engaging with living God."*

This is not an overreaction. The first three of the Ten Commandments insist that we get the doctrine of God correct.

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make an idol to worship or serve.
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [5] You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."*

The Bible vehemently condemns idolatry and shows far more zeal in denouncing it than modern society. Why do you think that is?

Knowing right things about God, of course, is not enough. You can know a great deal about God without knowing God. The aim of this study is to know the One True God.

But, God is so different from us, can we really know him?

Incomprehensible

Westminster Confession of Faith II.1a

*There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, **incomprehensible**...*

Incomprehensible does not mean that he is unknowable, rather it means that we can't fully comprehend him. His is not like us. He is qualitatively different.

- Rom. 11:33 *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*
- Job 11:7 *"Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? 8 It is higher than heaven--what can you do? Deeper than Sheol--what can you know? 9 Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.*
- Job 26:14 *These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?"*
- Ps. 145:1 *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; his greatness is unsearchable.*

Jl Packer writes, *"God is not the sort of person that we are; his wisdom, his aims, his scale of values, his mode of procedure differ so vastly from our own that we cannot possibly guess our way to them by intuition or infer them by analogy from our notion of ideal manhood. We cannot know him unless he speaks and tells us about himself."*

Therefore, we can't simply understand God by taking human characteristics and maximizing them. God isn't known by contemplating what a perfect being would be like in all of his characteristics. We must know God as he has revealed himself.

God has a Name

We tend to view people as religious or not religious, and that all the religious people mean the same thing when we say, "god." God is a common noun. It is a category that refers to any supernatural being.

*How might this assumption about the term "god" affect evangelism? How does it affect your own spirituality?

The risk in referring to God with a title rather than a name is that it can depersonalize him. God is not a concept, a philosophical topic to debate, or a detached, unknowable being. God has revealed himself in personal terms.

Exodus 3:13-14 *"Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' [14] God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

"I am who I am" is a way of saying that God is in a class by himself and cannot be classed with others as a peer. He doesn't offer any comparisons in describing himself. He doesn't say, "I am like ___" or "I am greater than ___".

Moreover, God is referred to by the name YHWH (sometimes pronounced Yahweh) throughout the OT. The word may mean "I AM." English Bibles translate the word LORD. What difference would it make if we used YHWH as God's name instead of the title Lord?

The Attributes of God

God's attributes refer to the qualities that belong to God mentioned in the Bible. These are generally classified in two groups.

Incommunicable: Attributes that belong to God alone. No one else in creation has these same attributes.

Communicable: Attributes that we have in common with God. God has these qualities in an unlimited degree. We have them only in a limited way.

WCF II.1 *There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.*

What stands out to you in this description?

Incommunicable Attributes

God is a spirit, without a body: Sometimes the Bible speaks anthropomorphically about God. His arm saves. His ear hears. But God does not have a body.

What about the incarnation? We will talk more about this under the Doctrine of Christ. Christ is fully God and fully human. His divine and human natures are whole, perfect, and distinct (without conversion, composition, or confusion).

Without Parts (Divine Simplicity): God's attributes are identical with his being. God's attributes are interrelated and never in conflict with each other: For example, his love and justice are perfectly aligned in the cross. This doesn't mean that all attributes are the same.

One attribute doesn't outrank the other; they both reflect his one being. God never wrestles with being omnipotent or kind. When we emphasize one over the other (sovereignty over love), we are becoming idolatrous, not more honoring to God

Independence: God's existence doesn't depend on anyone or anything.

WCF II.2 *“God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them.*

He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleaseth.

In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.”

This doesn't mean that God is detached or disinterested in the events of the world. God loves the world, but he doesn't need the world to exist or to be satisfied.

Is the fact that God doesn't need you good news or bad news?

“Whatever relationship God chooses to have to that which is other than God is free rather than necessary...The covenantal relationship, in which the transcendent God condescends to bind himself free to creatures, exhibits the utter freedom of God's love and the significance of those he created in his own image for that relationship.”
Michael Horton

Immutable: God doesn't change.

Does this mean that God cannot not answer prayer?

What about all the instances of God changing?

- Moses interceding for Israel after the Golden Calf (Ex. 32)
- God relenting from judgment on Nineveh (Jonah 3)
- God regretting making Saul king (1 Sam. 15)

What about the incarnation?

Immutability implies that God is eternally perfect. Change involves either improvement or loss, but God remains the same.

“One should not be misled into thinking that God's immutability is like the immutability of a rock only more so...God is unchangeable not because he is inert or static like a rock, but for just the opposite reason. He is so dynamic, so active that no change can make him more active.” Thomas Weinandy

The persons of the Trinity are immutable not because they are static or inert in their relationships, but precisely the opposite. They are constantly interacting, in their self-giving to one another without loss or change.

What about passages where it says God relents? What about prayer?

God may choose to work out his sovereign will apart from our decisions, in accord with our actions, over against our actions, or even contingent upon our behavior and prayers. He is free to act as he wills.

Weinandy explains how God can express different emotions and yet remain completely unchanged:

"If a person sins, he or she knows and experiences God's love as a rebuke and as an admonishment. If the person repents, he or she knows and experiences God's love as compassionate and forgiving, and so rejoices in his merciful love. If a person suffers due to injustice, he or she knows, in faith and sometimes by experience, that God's lovingkindness and consolation are present. God's love as fully actualized is 'ready made' to meet any situation, and human beings are able to know and experience this love in all its varied actualized fulness."

Without Passion: God doesn't suffer.

Scripture clearly depicts God as a God of passions and emotions. He loves, grieves, becomes angry, jealous, and shows compassion. And, doesn't God suffer on the cross?

Again, this does not mean that God is aloof and Stoic. It does, however, mean that he is consistently true to himself.

"To say that God does not suffer means not only that he does not feel any physical pain, since he is not corporeal, but also that he does not undergo some passible changes of state whereby he experiences some form of divine emotional agitation, anguish, agony, or distress. God is never in a state of inner angst." Weinandy

Horton writes, *"God is not like the pagan deities, which were little more than exalted human beings. Determined by their passing whims and passions, the gods could without notice range from beneficent aid to benign neglect to drunken rage. Slaves of their lust, greed, and power, they could also exhibit virtue on occasion."*

Is this good news? Does a God who does not suffer mean a God that lacks empathy? It is far more palatable for God to know suffering when you are going through the horrors of personal suffering or global injustice.

"Actually, since God does not suffer, his love becomes absolutely free in its expression and supremely pure his purpose. If God did suffer, it would mean that God would need not only alleviate the suffering of others, but also his own suffering, unless there would be an inbuilt self-interest in God's loving and consolation. However, since God does not suffer, his care for those who do suffer is freely given and not evoked by some need on his part. His love is freely expressed entirely for the sake of those he loves." Weinandy

Even better news: We know that God will not be overcome by rage or jealousy to destroy us. He will not sway from one emotion to the next, leaving us guessing at his mindset.

Immense and Eternal: God transcends space and time.

This is a difficult concept to wrap our minds around. It is true that he can be everywhere, but also with us. He can be in all time, yet present.

Communicable Attributes

What is the value of knowing that we shares some of the same attributes as God? God has them in greater degree, but sharing them can be another way we relate to God.

Wisdom: Discerning right from wrong, good and evil.

Knowledge: God knows all truth. His perspective on all things is the true perspective.

Power: God's ability to act. He is all powerful. Can God do anything? Can God create a rock so heavy that even he cannot lift it?

God can do anything that does not contradict his character, his covenant, or his decrees.

Holiness: God's holiness is separation from all unrighteousness and injustice. This doesn't mean that God is unable to relate to us.

"It is fatally easy to think of God's holiness simply as a mode of God's sheer otherness and transcendence—that is, as the opposite of relational; as concerned, not with God with us, but God with God apart from us...God is holy precisely as the one who in majesty and freedom and sovereign power bends down to us in mercy." John Webster

In the gospel, God uses his holiness to make us holy.

Righteousness: God is unable to sin.

Justice: God doesn't play favorites. He is committed to what is right.

Jealousy: It is right for God to be jealous, because we belong to him.

Wrath: God's holy response to sin.

Goodness: God is that standard of good.

Love: God's love utterly free. He does not need our love, but offers his without obligation.

Mercy: God's favor toward those who deserve wrath.

The Trinity

WCF II.3 *In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither*

begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

The Trinity is a mystery. All worldly analogies break down and veer off into dangerous heresies. It is, though, a revealed mystery. We know a great deal about the nature of the Trinity from what the Bible tells us.

A Defense of the Doctrine of the Trinity from Scripture

1. That God is One is well-established biblically.

- Deut. 6:4 “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”
- 1 Cor. 8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

2. That this One God is yet three in Persons is established by the following: a. The title of God is applied to each of the three Persons of the Trinity

The Father:

- John 6:27 “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, {even} God, has set His seal.”
- John 20:17 Jesus *said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”
- Rom. 1:7 to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called {as} saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 1 Cor. 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2) The Son:

- John 1:18 No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained {Him.}
- John 5:18 For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.
- Rom. 9:5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.
- John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

3) The Holy Spirit

- Is. 6:8 Then I heard *the voice of the Lord*, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”
- Is. 6:9 And He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.’”
- Acts 28:25 And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, “The Holy *Spirit rightly spoke* through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, 26 saying, ‘Go to this people and say, “You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;”’

Trinitarian formula in Scripture:

- 2 Corinthians 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
- Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
- Also 1Cor. 6,11; I Cor. 12,4f.; 2 Cor. 1, 21f., I Thess. 5, 18f....I Pet. 1, 2.)

“The Trinitarianism of the New Testament is rarely explicit; but the frequency with which the triadic schema recurs suggests that this pattern was implicit in Christian theology from the start. The impression inevitably conveyed is that the conception of the threefold manifestation of the Godhead was embedded deeply in Christian thinking from the start, and provided a ready-to-hand mold in which the ideas of the apostolic writers took shape.” J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds

The Trinity Means God is Personal

Trinity is personal. God reveals himself in personal terms and the Three Persons of the Trinity relate to each other. Especially note relevance to the rise of Eastern religions and the a-personal conception of God.

The Trinity Means We Can Truly Know Him

“If Jesus Christ and God are not of one and the same being, then we really do not know God, for he is some hidden inscrutable Deity behind the back of Jesus, of whom we can only be terrified—and then the final judgment of the world will be a judgment apart from and without respect of Jesus Christ and is forgiving love and atoning sacrifice. Cut the bond in being between Jesus Christ and God, and the Gospel message becomes an empty mockery.” T.F. Torrance

The Son reveals the Father not by being Father but by being Son. We could say the same about the Father and the Spirit. The Son incarnate gives us access to the Father by sharing with us his Sonship.

Torrance again:

“How could the Spirit pour the love of God into our hearts, how could the Spirit mediate Christ to us, and how could Christ be present to us in the Spirit, if the Spirit were not himself divine like the Father and the Son and of one and the same being himself divine like the Father and the Son and of one and the same being with them? Like the Son of God the Holy Spirit is no mere cosmic power intermediate between God and the world, but is the very Spirit of God who eternally dwells in him and in whom God knows himself, so that for us to know God in his Spirit is to know him in the hidden depths of his Triune Being as Holy Spirit as well as Father and Son. Apart from the Communion of the Holy Spirit we could not enjoy the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God the Father.”

Christocentric Trinity?

The trend in modern theology has been to emphasize the Trinity. What could be wrong with that? Doesn't that balance out a Christianity that typically focuses on Christ?

When missions' movements began emphasizing the Trinity, they did so specifically to downplay Christ. Focus on the Spirit became a way to depersonalize God, avoid uncomfortable topics like the exclusivity of Christ, sin, judgment, and the need for salvation.

Lesslie Newbigin wrote: *"the Trinitarian perspective can be only an enlargement and development of a Christo-centric one, and not an alternative set over against it, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the theological articulation of what it means to say that Jesus is the unique Word of God incarnate in world history."*

Scripture presents the Trinity in Christ-centered terms. As we saw last time, special revelation's focus is redemption. God the Father sends the Son. The Spirit guides us to the Son and applies Christ's redemption to us.

The central theme of this study has been the personal nature of God. God is relational. This is clearly evident in the Trinity. He is personal.

This study is incomplete if it just remains knowledge about God. Knowing about him is important, but only as it is an aid to knowing him.