

# **THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD**

**by Robert C. Walton**



# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD I

## Incomprehensibility and Knowability

Before we begin our study of the attributes of God, we must first ask a fundamental question: Can God be known, and if so, how? If God cannot be known, then our quest is futile and we might as well sleep in on Sunday mornings. But if God can indeed be known, it is of vital importance to each of us, not only to know how this might be accomplished, but also to pursue it with all that is in us.

### THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD

The task before us at first must rightly seem impossible because of the very fact of who God is. Because God is infinite and we are finite, the chasm that separates us is quite simply too large for us to cross (Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-34). Yet these verses indicating the extent to which God is so far above us that knowledge of His ways is beyond our reach also give us hope. If we examine the context of the famous passage in Isaiah 55, we find that the assertion of the incomprehensibility of God is made in the midst of the promise of His amazing mercy, implying that what is most incomprehensible about God is the fact that He gives grace to unworthy sinners. Furthermore, the doxology in Romans 11 was written by the Apostle Paul, who knew God better than most people who have ever lived.

While biblical affirmations of the incomprehensibility of God should give us hope in our endeavor, they should also instill in us a profound sense of humility. Many who seek the knowledge of God approach the matter by placing preconditions on that knowledge, insisting that God must fit into the framework of their desires, and becoming angry and resentful when what they discover in God's Word does not conform to the dictates of their reason. An important aspect of seeking the knowledge of God is to anticipate that there will be much about God that we cannot understand and that may not make sense to us, perhaps even some things that may offend our reason or our sensibilities. What Christians have not at one time or another struggled to try to understand the Trinity, the humanity and deity of Christ, the sovereignty of God and human responsibility, and the problem of evil? But one who approaches the study of God with humility will acknowledge that this is as things ought to be; after all, if God could be squeezed into the limited scope of the human mind, what sort of God would He be? Furthermore, when our knowledge of God clashes with our reason or our expectations, we must understand that our reason and expectations are at fault and in need of adjustment rather than blaming God or rejecting Him as beyond belief.

### THE NECESSITY OF REVELATION

If the finite cannot reach into the infinite, the only way of knowing God is if He chooses to reveal Himself to His creatures. God, in His mercy, has done so - in His world (Psalm 24:1; Romans 1:20), in His Word (Psalm 19:7-8), and in His Son (John 1:18; 17:3). Apart from this revelation of God, we cannot have knowledge of ourselves, understanding of the world around us, meaning in this life, or hope in the life to come.

## THE EXISTENCE AND INADEQUACY OF GENERAL REVELATION

The clearest statement concerning general revelation is found in the first step of Paul's explication of the Gospel in the book of Romans. In Romans 1:18-32, the apostle tells us several important things about general revelation:

- General revelation is universal. No human being in history has lacked access to the revelation of God in nature.
- General revelation is limited. Nature preaches no Gospel (contrary to the advocates of natural law during the Enlightenment), but clearly reveals the existence of a Supreme Being.
- General revelation is universally rejected. The Athenians were not saved because they prayed to the Unknown God (Acts 17:23); that altar was simply another manifestation of man's universal rejection of God's revelation of Himself. When sinful men encounter God's revelation, they reject the very idea of submitting to an authority higher than themselves, refuse to submit to moral restraints, and replace the True God with gods of their own making, and finally with self-worship.
- The inadequacy of general revelation in no way implies that God Himself is at fault. His revelation of Himself in nature is perfect and magnificent. The fault lies in human sin and rebellion, which blinds the eyes to what is clearly visible all around.
- The concept of the noble savage or moral pagan, the idea of the Elysian Fields or Limbo as a place for the ignorant but righteous, or worse yet the teaching that anyone can be saved without Christ thus have no place in Paul's theology.
- General revelation is only valuable in helping a man see God when he approaches nature with the eyes of faith (Psalm 24:1-2).

## THE EXISTENCE AND SUFFICIENCY OF SPECIAL REVELATION

If the existence of general revelation accomplishes nothing but to bring the wrath of God down on the heads of the rebellious, how can we then know God? The answer, of course, lies in the fact that God has not stopped with general revelation. He has also given us His Word (II Peter 1:20-21). In it we find words that He has spoken, acts He has performed, and preeminently the revelation that He has given by sending His Son. In God's Word we find all that we need for life and godliness (II Peter 1:3) and everything necessary to be completely equipped for living in this world (II Timothy 3:16-17).

This self-revelation of God, if indeed it is all we need, must be recognized as completely authoritative, not only for our understanding of God, but also for our knowledge of ourselves, the people around us, history, society, morality, meaning, and life after death. Human reason and human experience must always be kept in submission to God's revelation, for our sin will always lead us astray if we fail to check our own thoughts and actions against the infallible standard that God has provided.

## THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH GOD MAY BE KNOWN

Because of man's finiteness, God may only be known on the basis of His own revelation. But because of man's sin, God may only be known if God changes the heart of stone into a heart of

flesh. Thus, in order for man to know God, something must happen inside the knower; information from outside is simply not enough to produce real knowledge of God. God's initiative thus consists, not only of speaking into the world of His creatures and sending His Son to live among those creatures, but also in changing those creatures to give them ears to hear (I Corinthians 2:14-16) and hearts to understand. In other words, regeneration is essential to knowing God. Nicodemus had a lot of information, but he needed to be born again (John 3:3).

## THE NATURE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

All too often, the study of God takes place in an academic setting. While this is appropriate to the extent that the revelation of God provides plenty to occupy the mind for many lifetimes, such a study can never really produce knowledge of God in the sense that the Bible uses the term and in the sense that man really needs. Note the following:

- Knowledge of God begins with truth. We must affirm about God the things He affirms about Himself. Error concerning who God is should not be countenanced as if painting a false picture of God were something of little importance. False views of God are nothing more nor less than idolatry - the worship of a man-made *mental* image.
- Knowledge cannot end with truth. Many people know facts about God, but have no commitment to those facts - they do not influence their lives, their choices, their values, or their priorities (Matthew 7:21-23; James 2:19).
- Knowledge of God involves a relationship with God; it is *personal*. I know a fair amount about Abraham Lincoln and admire the man very much, but I have no personal relationship with him; should I travel back in time to the middle of the nineteenth century and walk past him on the street, he wouldn't stop to ask me how my teaching was going. Knowledge of God is more like the euphemism used in Genesis 4:1 where we are told that "Adam knew his wife," obviously not in any sexual sense, but in the sense of *intimacy* (cf. the difference between the French verbs *savoir* and *connaitre*, one of which refers to knowledge of facts and the other to knowledge of persons). God loves me, I speak to Him, He influences my life and my choices.
- Knowledge of God involves submission to God's authority. The relationship of believers to God is that of subject to King, sheep to Shepherd, wife to Husband, child to Father. Though Jesus called His disciples "friends" (John 15:15) because He spoke to them whatever the Father had revealed to Him, God is not a *pal* or *buddy* to be approached cavalierly.
- Knowledge of God is transforming. Because of my relationship with God, I am a different person than I would be otherwise. One who claims to know God but lives as if God did not exist is simply revealing his unregenerate state.
- Knowledge of God is paramount to the one who possesses it. Nothing is more important than knowing God (Jeremiah 9:23-24; John 17:3). It is in the context of these truths that we approach our study of the attributes of God.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD II

### Infinity and Eternality

Theologians have often sought to classify the attributes of God as an aid in understanding them, and we will be doing the same. We will divide the attributes of God revealed in Scripture into three categories - Absolute Incommunicable Attributes (those possessed by God alone), Absolute Communicable Attributes (those that, in some small sense, God shares with His creatures, and thus help to define what it means for man to bear God's image), and Relative Attributes (those that are not essential to God's character, but describe how He relates to His creatures and are thus derived from the absolute attributes). The first two Absolute Incommunicable Attributes, which we will study today, are God's infinity and eternity.

### THE INFINITY OF GOD

The first attribute before us is very broad, and in some ways can be seen as a summary of all the Absolute Incommunicable Attributes of God. Simply stated, by *infinity* we mean that God has no limits; He is not limited in what He can do (omnipotence), nor in His knowledge (omniscience), not limited by circumstances (immutability), by space (omnipresence), or by time (eternality).

The infinity of God is an Absolute Incommunicable Attribute because it is an essential aspect of the Creator/creature distinction. God is infinite and we are not. As we saw last week, this is directly related to the incomprehensibility of God; because we are finite, we cannot hope to "put God in a box," nor should we try to do so. Yet certain implications of the infinity of God are within our grasp through God's revelation of Himself in the Scriptures. While we will consider a number of these in greater detail in the coming weeks, we may at least glimpse some of those implications today, and we will do so by examining a few theological terms in order to seek greater understanding.

- Spirituality - The infinity of God with respect to space implies that He is a spirit, as Jesus clearly taught in John 4:24.
- Incorporeality/Invisibility - God has no body (Deuteronomy 4:12) and cannot be seen (John 1:18). He is able to appear in visible form (these are called *theophanies*), as He occasionally did in the Old Testament, and preeminently in the Incarnation, but a bodily form is not His natural state. This is one of the principal justifications for the Second Commandment (Deuteronomy 5:15-19). Anthropomorphic references to the hand, arm, or feet of God are metaphorical and are not intended to say anything about God's actual appearance. The same is true with visions such as those experienced by the prophets (note the frequent use of the phrase "appearance like unto . . .").
- Immensity - This is another term sometimes used to indicate that God is not limited by space, and implies that He has no *size*, that He is not *measurable*. People who hear the term today often misunderstand it, thinking that it means that God is really big. That, of course, is not the point. Nor should we think of the term as implying that one part of God is closer to any individual than any other part (e.g., if God is really big, perhaps His ear is closer to me today, but tomorrow I might be near His foot, so He won't be able to hear me as well). Note also that the fact that God is immeasurable implies that His creation is finite (Job 11:7-9); the universe may be really big, but it is not infinite - only God is without measure.

The fact that God is infinite is difficult for our finite minds to grasp, and that should not be surprising. We should also note, however, that many over the years have objected to the concept because of its implications. One of the greatest is what the infinity of God suggests concerning the problem of evil. If God is indeed not limited in any way, how can evil exist, and how can tragedies and disasters continue to plague the innocent? Others, unable to reduce an infinite God to manageable terms, choose to worship finite deities instead, whether the gods of polytheism or the man-sized mediators of those who venerate saints and images. Some seek to limit God in order to glorify man, arguing that, if God indeed is without limits, man cannot be truly free, so the idea of a limitless God must give way before the requirement of an autonomous man.

But what of the passages in Scripture that ascribe limits to God? God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18), He cannot deny Himself (II Timothy 2:13), and by implication He cannot sin (I John 3:9). Anyone who would object to these passages as constituting limitations falls into the same category as one who would object to the infinity of God because He can't make a rock so large He can't lift it or devise a proposition that is both true and false in the same sense at the same time. The infinity of God is not contradicted by the fact that He cannot cease to be Himself or deny His own nature.

## THE ETERNALITY OF GOD

This attribute speaks specifically of the fact that God is not limited by *time*. Though some of His creatures are eternal in the sense that they will always exist in the future - man, but also angels and demons - the distinction between Creator and creature here rests in the fact that men, angels, and demons all had a beginning, while God did not (Psalm 45:6; 90:2; 102:24-27; Isaiah 44:6; 57:15; Habakkuk 1:12; Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 1:8). The Bible starts with the words, "in the beginning *God*" (Genesis 1:1), not "in the beginning matter" (or energy, etc.).

Philosophers over the years have tried to argue the eternity of God in the form of the Cosmological Argument. According to this argument, popularized by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, everything has a cause, much like a row of falling dominoes or a nuclear chain reaction (Aquinas obviously didn't use these examples!). But there must have been an eternally-existent First Cause, or else none of the subsequent causes would have occurred and nothing would be happening at all. Unless someone wishes to postulate the spontaneous generation of the universe, everyone must start with something eternal and uncaused, whether it be God, matter, or energy, so the argument in itself is not preposterous, but we must recognize its limitations, especially since it leads to Deism and makes God the author of evil. Mercifully, we are not dependent on philosophy to establish the eternity of God, since Scripture states it so clearly. The eternity of God does imply, however, that He is both uncaused and the cause of everything else.

The teaching of the eternity of God implies that God is outside the realm of time in the same way that He is outside the realm of space. The latter concept is somehow easier for us to grasp. Even in primitive times, the cosmology of Ptolemy pictured crystalline concentric spheres with the realm of God's abode beyond the outermost sphere - God existing beyond the realm of space was in some sense comprehensible. Yet we are so much tied to the concept of time - it is the ocean in which we swim and the air we breathe, so to speak - that we cannot imagine something or someone existing outside of that ocean (though science fiction writers have certainly tried with their varieties of time travel scenarios).



The important thing to remember here is that God is not subject to the limitations of time, neither in His knowledge (see lesson on Omniscience) nor in His activity. Some have been reluctant to speak of God as being supratemporal for fear of undermining His immanence, but we must recognize that God is no more prevented from sustaining and intervening in human history because He exists outside of it than He is prevented from sustaining and intervening in earthly space because He exists outside of it. While we may observe the usual tendency people have when approaching a paradox - to deny one of its components in order to make it more logically manageable - we cannot do this when we approach the immanence and the transcendence of God. Muslims deny immanence in order to affirm transcendence, while Pantheists deny transcendence in order to affirm immanence, but Scripture will allow neither of those reductionist approaches.

Why are the matters before us today important? The infinity of God, both in space and time, is essential with regard to providence, prayer, and prophecy. Only an infinite God can order the affairs of the universe and the lives of His people; only an infinite God can hear all prayers simultaneously and answer them according to His will, and only an infinite God can speak with assurance about the future and fulfill His promises.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD III

### Immutability

To be human is to change. We are born, we grow and mature, we decay and die. The same is true of the entire created universe. The Second Law of Thermodynamics pictures the deterioration of all things, leading ultimately to the heat death of the universe. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus argued that change was the essence of reality. Yet our God never changes. His immutability sets Him apart from His creatures, both animate and inanimate. Today we will consider some of the implications of this Absolute Incommunicable Attribute of God.

#### BIBLICAL AFFIRMATIONS

The Bible overwhelmingly teaches that the true God is one who does not change:

- Malachi 3:6 - "I the Lord do not change."
- Hebrews 6:17-18 describe God's purpose and God's oath as unchangeable.
- Hebrews 13:8 - "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."
- James 1:17 tells us that God "does not change like shifting shadows."
- Isaiah 14:24 - "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."
- Numbers 23:19 and I Samuel 15:29 teach that God does not "repent" or change His mind.

#### THE REPENTANCE OF GOD

How, then, are we to understand those passages of Scripture that speak of God repenting (Genesis 6:6; I Samuel 15:11; II Samuel 24:16; Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:10)?

- Certainly they cannot be understood in the common sense of turning away from sin; God by His character defines what is righteous, and therefore cannot sin. The unwillingness of most modern translations even to use the KJV rendering of *repent* indicates a desire to avoid this misunderstanding.
- Modern translations speak of God *relenting, being grieved, being sorry, regretting, or having compassion*. Do these translations help? Not if they suggest that God can ever be surprised or manipulated by the actions of His creatures - there is no Plan B with God, nor does He ever have to say "Oops."
- These incidents must be understood, not in terms of God changing, but in terms of Him being consistent with His character. God is a holy and merciful Sovereign who judges the wicked and shows compassion to those who repent. In none of these situations can God be charged with lack of faithfulness to His own nature.
- The descriptions of these incidents are thus to some extent anthropomorphic, not describing a change in God, but what from the human perspective is perceived as a change in His behavior toward His creatures - patience turns to wrath, judgment to mercy.

We must therefore affirm that the immutability of God is most directly understood in terms of His nature. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

## GOD'S CHARACTER DOES NOT CHANGE

A perfect being cannot change, for He cannot become better than He is, and if He is perfect, He cannot decline in His perfections. This does not mean, however, as Thomas Aquinas argued, that God is without emotion. Human emotion is changeable, but God's is not. His wrath is perfect, and so is His love. This should serve as a great comfort to the believer who fears that his repeated sins and failures will separate him from the love of God, for we know that this is not the case (Romans 8:35-39). On the other hand, the unbeliever can never find comfort in the illusion that God is getting soft in His old age, becoming more tolerant of sin as His creatures always seem to be. Just because modern conceptions of God have altered does not mean that God Himself has changed in any particular. The immutability of God thus functions like the pillar of cloud that separated the Egyptians from the Israelites before the Red Sea, a source of light for the believer and deep darkness for the unbeliever.

Furthermore, the immutability of the character of God means that, while the events of Bible times may seem far distant from our experience and we may be tempted to wonder what has become of the God of miracles, we may be confident that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Elijah and the prophets, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same as He always was. The popular slogan gets to the point: "If God seems far away, who moved?"

## GOD'S WORD DOES NOT CHANGE

The main implication of the immutability of God here is that God will follow through on what He has promised. The fulfillment of prophecy is only one indicator of the steadfastness of God's Word, but certainly serves as evidence that the promises that have yet to be fulfilled will surely come to pass (II Peter 3:8-10). Even those passages that appear to show God going back on His Word (God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22, the mixed messages received by Paul about his journey to Jerusalem in Acts 21:1-14) indicate a consistency of character that simply was not visible to the human participants at the time.

Furthermore, the *standards* of God's Word do not change. We live in a relativistic age in which most people think that all standards of behavior are flexible, subject to variation according to culture and circumstances. God's law is not like that, however (Matthew 5:18). Godliness is grounded on the Rock of God's character rather than the shifting sands of human trends and fads.

## GOD'S PURPOSES DO NOT CHANGE

The clearest indication of this is the steadfastness of God's declared purpose to redeem the human race. Despite the Fall, the Flood, the persistent wickedness and rebellion of Israel, attempts to destroy God's plan of salvation by Satan directly, but also through Herod the Great and Pilate, God's purpose never changed - a truth for which we should be immensely grateful.

## THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD AND THE INCARNATION

The mystery of the Incarnation has been used by some to challenge the immutability of God. Clearly the Second Person of the Trinity changed when He became man, and in His human nature

learned, grew, suffered, and died. We should note, however, that all of these experiences were part of God's fixed purpose from all eternity - Christ behaved in a way that was consistent with what He and the Father had determined to do before time began. Experiencing the changeful life of man was a means of carrying out the unchanging merciful purposes of God. We should note, however, that despite the attempts of theologians to explain how one who knew everything could learn or profess ignorance of God's timing, much of this does and should remain mysterious. We must expect that certain aspects of who God is are beyond our comprehension, and to demand explanations for what He has chosen not to reveal to us is arrogant at best.

#### THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD AND PRAYER

Lastly, we should note the connection between the immutability of God and prayer. Some argue that the immutability of God leads to the conclusion that prayer is futile, but just the opposite is the case. When God's people come before Him in prayer, we need not worry about His mood that day. He is always glad to hear the petitions of His people; He never sleeps, nor is He preoccupied with more important things. Furthermore, His will does not change, so that when we come to Him according to His will, we know that He will hear us and answer.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IV

### Omnipotence

“Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” These words from Revelation 19:6 serve as the centerpiece of *The Hallelujah Chorus* in Handel’s *Messiah*. No attribute of God sets Him more fully apart from His creatures than His omnipotence. We often will, but are unable to perform; even great and powerful leaders in the world rarely are able to carry out the promises they make when they seek power from the people. Yet our God is omnipotent - a fact that is clearly affirmed in Scripture and has a multitude of implications for our own lives.

#### THE FOUNDATIONAL NATURE OF DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

We have seen already the extent to which the attributes of God are interconnected and inseparable; in a study such as this, we divide and distinguish only to assist in understanding a subject so vast as to be beyond human comprehension. Thus the first thing we must recognize about the omnipotence of God is that it is foundational to the attributes of God that describe how He relates to His creatures. God’s decrees would be meaningless if He could not bring them to pass, His love and compassion would be of little value if He could do no more than wring His hands in anguish at the sufferings of His people, His promises would mean nothing if He could not carry them out, and salvation itself would be left in question if God could not finish what He has started. Thus omnipotence is central to our understanding of God and to our faith in Him.

#### THE UNIQUENESS OF DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

The uniqueness of God above all pretended deities is affirmed clearly in Scripture (e.g., Psalm 86:8; 95:3). Indeed, the God of the Scriptures is the only one even presented as omnipotent (Islam, the world’s other monotheistic religion, derives this belief from the Judeo-Christian tradition, though Muhammad perverted the Bible’s understanding of God’s omnipotence). Polytheistic religions by their very nature present limited deities, since each is limited by the others. Thus the Christian tradition alone pictures a truly sovereign God, thus one who is truly worthy of worship and complete trust and submission.

#### QUALIFICATIONS OF DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

Those who mock the Christian teaching of an Almighty God often do so with foolish questions such as, “Can God make a rock so big He can’t lift it?” This leads us to a necessary discussion of the qualifications of divine omniscience. Note that these take the form, not of limitations on God’s power, but of definitions of what we mean when we say that God is omnipotent.

- God’s power cannot be challenged by assertions that rest in logic or definition. If God is omnipotent, a rock so big He can’t lift it by definition cannot exist, so to say that He cannot do what by definition is impossible is absurd. One might as well challenge His omnipotence on the ground that He, unlike George Orwell’s Big Brother, cannot make two plus two equal five.
- God’s power is always exercised in the context of His character. It is no limitation on God’s power to suggest that He is less than omnipotent because He cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18) or

cannot deny Himself (II Timothy 2:13). One might as well challenge His omnipotence with the taunt that He cannot cease to be God!

- God's power is always exercised in the context of His Word. What He says He will do, He will do, and His refusal to break His Word in no way is a limitation on His power. His covenant with His people is inviolable and His promises are sure, and these in no way impinge upon His freedom of action or His ability to do all things. Islam, in contrast, guards the sovereignty of Allah to such an extent that salvation is ultimately determined when the dead person walks across a thin thread strung over the Pit of Fire; whether the thread holds or breaks is entirely the will of Allah.
- God's power is not limited because He delegates it. Man exercises derivative dominion (Genesis 1:26), and rulers exercise God-given authority (Romans 13:1). The reality of secondary causes in no way limits God's power, though we have a hard time understanding the apparent contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Even when man sins, God's purposes are still being carried out. Christians, unlike Muslims, need not view God as the direct cause of evil in order to maintain His sovereignty.

## GOD'S POWER OVER NATURE IN CREATION

We now turn to some of the manifestations of God's omnipotence. The first one we will consider is His power over His created universe. He brought it into being from nothing by the word of His mouth. God's work in creation is perhaps the most frequently-cited evidence for His omnipotence in Scripture (e.g., Psalm 33:6; 100:3; 121:2; Isaiah 40:26, 28; Hebrews 11:3). God neither worked with pre-existing matter nor fought primeval chaos, but brought everything into being through the agency of His Son (John 1:3).

## GOD'S POWER OVER NATURE IN PROVIDENCE

The God of the Scriptures is not a deistic God who made everything and then left it to run on its own (note that this is one of the implications, not only of the Cosmological Argument of Thomas Aquinas, but also of Theistic Evolution). The thinkers of the Enlightenment sought to reduce God to a "God of the Gaps" who was needed only to explain what man could not explain on his own using the laws of nature. Inevitably such a God was ultimately crowded out of the picture entirely when Creation, the only thing by then left to God, was "explained" by Darwin.

Yet we must recognize that, in the strict sense of the phrase, the "laws of nature" do not exist. We should not imagine that God has built laws into His creation that He only violates occasionally by stepping in and performing what we call miracles. Instead, what we call the laws of nature are nothing more than an indication of God's faithfulness. Christ "sustains all things by His powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3), and "in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). The only reason the seasons succeed one another in an orderly fashion and the rain falls on the just and the unjust is because God makes it to be so. Again, a contrast with Islam is illustrative; Muslims believe that Allah recreates the universe in every instant, and thus deny cause and effect in any sense, but also deny regularity, predictability, and ultimately the possibility of science. How ironic is it that scientists who vaunt their own powers by denying the sovereignty of God in nature undermine the possibility of science in the process, since only the faithfulness of God allows us to predict with any assurance the behavior of the created universe.



## GOD'S POWER OVER ANGELS, SATAN, AND DEMONS

If Christians are not Deists, they also are not dualists. Scripture does not picture a world that is a battleground between two equal and opposing forces of good and evil. If angelic beings are completely under God's control (Daniel 4:35), so too are Satan and his minions. God created them, they can do nothing without His permission and must obey His commands (Job 1:12; 2:6; Mark 5:11-13; Luke 22:31-32), and ultimately He will destroy them in eternal fire (Revelation 20:10).

## GOD'S POWER OVER HUMAN BEINGS

We like to think that we are in control of our own lives, though given our track record, it's hard to imagine why. But Scripture clearly indicates that God gives life (Job 1:21; Psalm 139:13-16), determines the conditions under which we are born (Acts 17:25-26) and the unique aspects of who we are (Exodus 4:11), and is sovereign over the events of our lives (I Chronicles 29:11-12; James 4:12-15). He hardens the hearts of the wicked (Exodus 11:10; Romans 9:17-18) and softens the hard hearts of the elect (John 1:13; Romans 9:15). He determines the days of our lives and alone decides when they will end (Psalm 90:3, 5; Luke 12:16-21), then raises from the dead those who belong to Him (Job 19:25-27; John 11:25-26; I Corinthians 15:51-52).

## OBJECTIONS TO DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

Challenges to the omnipotence of God take many forms, but ultimately rest in the sinful rebellion of man against the authority of God in his life. Romans 1:18-32 speaks of that rebellion explicitly as being against knowledge of God's eternal power, which sinful men seek to deny by cutting God down to size and worshiping a god of their own making - the creature rather than the Creator. The consequences of such rebellion are severe indeed, and Paul traces all the evils of the human race back to a denial of God's sovereign power.

We should not then be surprised when man seeks to blame God for the evil that he himself has initiated. The problem of evil is perhaps the source of the most frequent and most serious challenges to the omnipotence of God. After all, the very existence of evil in the world implies that the God of the Bible cannot exist. If God were both loving and all-powerful, evil would not exist. For if God could eradicate evil and chooses not to do so, He clearly is not loving, and if God is loving and truly desires to remove evil from the world, He obviously lacks the power to do so. The existence of evil in the world, which has its source in man's Satanically-motivated rebellion against God, thus becomes just one further justification for rejecting that same God. Though we don't have time in this lesson to respond to the problem of evil in all its complexity, we should note that the ultimate answer to the problem of evil is the Cross, where God demonstrated both His love and power in taking sin upon Himself and destroying its grip forever.

Others deny the omnipotence of God in a seemingly more positive way by seeking to protect God from the implications of His own omnipotence. Jewish Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a popular book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* in which his answer was to deny the omnipotence of God in order to sustain belief in His compassion. God is really a loving God who tries His best to mitigate the consequences of evil in the world, but, after all, what can He do about it? Such a picture of impotence is little comfort to those who are suffering, despite the fact that such

comfort is exactly what Kushner intends to provide. In a similar vein are the advocates of Open Theism, who seek to explain the problem of evil by denying God's omniscience (more on this next week).

#### BLESSINGS OF DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE

Much could be noted here, but suffice it to say that a God who is not omnipotent cannot provide help in time of need. He cannot save (Hebrews 7:25), cannot keep (John 10:28-29), cannot strengthen (Isaiah 40:29-31), cannot protect (Romans 8:31-39), and cannot guarantee that His promises will be fulfilled (Philippians 1:6). Praying to Him is a questionable venture at best because, though He may want to help, we have no assurance that He is able to do so.

## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD V

### Omniscience

The next of the Absolute Incommunicable Attributes is the omniscience of God. In simple terms, God knows everything. While this may seem totally obvious and a necessary characteristic of a Being deserving of the name of God, we will find that it, like others of God's attributes, raises questions and generates challenges, but at the same time is a great comfort to those who belong to and worship God.

#### BIBLICAL AFFIRMATION

The Bible clearly teaches the omniscience of God. General statements of the truth that God knows everything may be found in passages such as Isaiah 40:13-14, Romans 11:33, and I John 3:20. Note, also, some of the more specific affirmations of God's omniscience:

- God knows everything about His created universe, from the names of the stars (Psalm 147:4) to the sparrows flitting in the air (Matthew 10:29). The entire conversation between God and Job in Job 38-41 consists of rhetorical questions in which God asserts His knowledge of things that are unknown to Job.
- God knows everything about each human being, including his needs and desires (Isaiah 65:24; Matthew 6:8), his thoughts, words, actions, and movements (Psalm 139:1-4; 94:11; Isaiah 66:18; Ezekiel 11:5), the innermost intents of his heart (Hebrews 4:12-13; Acts 1:24), his sins (Hosea 7:2; Psalm 90:8; Proverbs 15:3), and his sufferings (Exodus 3:7).
- God knows everything about history - the past (Acts 15:18 KJV), the present (Hebrews 4:13), and the future (cf. predictive prophecy).

#### OBJECTIONS TO DIVINE OMNISCIENCE

Those who object to the doctrine of the omniscience of God fall into two categories - those who do so in order to protect man's prerogatives, and those who do so in order to protect God Himself.

From a secular perspective, we see the first clearly presented in the teachings of twentieth-century existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre, perhaps the best known of the existentialist writers, argued that the essence of humanity was the power of self-definition. To be human is to define oneself ("existence precedes essence"). Thus the greatest horror a person can experience is to be defined by others (see Sartre's *No Exit*, where three people in Hell suffer eternally because they cannot avoid being defined by one another, leading to the famous conclusion that "Hell is other people"). Thus an omniscient God must be repudiated, for One who knows us completely also defines us, robbing us of our humanity. Existentialism thus for some inevitably implied atheism.

Christians, too, over the years have sought to protect human prerogatives by denying God's omniscience. The major concern here, ironically similar to that of existentialists, is the desire to preserve man's free will. While Arminians would not overtly deny the omniscience of God, they make God's foreknowledge in the realm of salvation contingent on human choices - God chooses those He knows will someday believe. This attempt to separate God's knowledge from His decree

for the sake of affirming the absolute freedom of the human will is ultimately contradictory, however. If God knows something for all eternity, can it fail to come to pass? What, then, is left of contingency based on supposed human freedom of choice? Thus sovereign election is an inevitable conclusion of God's omniscience.

In recent years, a much more radical form of Arminianism - in fact, the logical extreme to which consistent Arminianism must go - has appeared under the name of Open Theism. Those who promote this teaching openly deny the omniscience of God (Clark Pinnock is a good example of one who realized the logical necessity of moving from Arminianism to this belief), affirming that, while God knows the past and the present, He does not know the future, which is contingent on human choices. Thus the desire to protect the dignity of man at the expense of the sovereignty of God has reached its logical but sad conclusion among professing Christians.

Others have sought to deny the omniscience of God in a futile and foolish attempt to protect God Himself. Such denials are usually associated with the desire to avoid the implication that God is responsible for evil. The problem of evil, which, as we noted last week, causes some to deny the omnipotence of God, leads them to deny His omniscience for the same reason. The connection is obvious. If God knew something before it happened and did not do anything to prevent it, is He not then ultimately responsible? God, of course, does not need us to protect Him. The Bible affirms His exhaustive knowledge of all things, and that should be sufficient for us. We need not worry that our finite minds cannot see how all these things fit together.

#### THE TERROR OF DIVINE OMNISCIENCE

When we arrive at the practical implications of the doctrine of the omniscience of God, we must recognize immediately that a God who knows everything can be the cause of profound discomfort, unease, and even terror. Note the following:

- To be human is to conceal. After the Fall, Adam and Eve sought out fig leaves. Today we still try to hide our nakedness. We wear clothes and use blinds, curtains, doors, and shower curtains. In short, we like our privacy. We all recognize that certain aspects of ourselves are not suitable to reveal to others.
- We take this desire to conceal to the point of hypocrisy. Not only do we want to hide certain parts of our lives from others, but we also want to give the impression to others that we are something different from what we really are.
- Do we not then have good reason to fear a God who knows everything about us, even down to the thoughts and intents of the heart? God's omniscience goes far beyond the supposed powers of Santa Claus, who "knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows when you've been bad or good." How much more should we be fearful when we know that God is holy and we decidedly are not and that much more is at stake than gifts under the Christmas tree?

#### THE BLESSING OF DIVINE OMNISCIENCE

Yet when we turn to the Scriptures and their application of the doctrine of the omniscience of God, we find for the believer not terror, but great comfort. Note the following:

- In the same way that God covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve by His own initiative (Genesis 3:21), He clothes His people with garments of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10; Zechariah 3:3-5). When God's people stand before Him, they wear (and He sees), not their sin, but the righteousness of Christ (Revelation 3:4-5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9).
- The fact that God knows our sin down to the smallest detail - in fact, the very worst that we would hope to conceal from everyone else - becomes a comfort when we realize that, despite that exhaustive knowledge of how bad we are, He loves us anyway. Nothing can ever happen to surprise Him, disgust Him, and make Him change His mind about the love He has determined to shower upon His children.
- He knows our weaknesses and our limitations (Psalm 103:14). He will give us the strength to do all that He requires (I Corinthians 10:13), but will never require anything beyond that for which He equips. God will never overestimate the powers of His weak and sinful children, and we have no reason to pretend to be something other than what we really are before Him.
- God's omniscience is a comfort when those around us judge us unfairly. Paul was content to let God judge His ministry even when those to whom he ministered were critical of it (I Corinthians 4:1-5). God knows the motives from which we act even when they are unappreciated by others.
- God's omniscience should encourage us to seek knowledge. The God who knows everything has revealed to us great things about Himself, about the world in which we live, and about ourselves, and these things are worth knowing. We who are made in God's image should seek to think God's thoughts after Him.
- God's omniscience is a comfort in prayer. He knows our needs and desires even before we speak them, and the Holy Spirit within enunciates them for us even when we are incapable of putting them into words (Romans 8:26-27). The fact that God knows our prayers ahead of time does not mean that we need not pray, nor that praying is an exercise in futility, but rather that God has determined from the beginning of time to use our prayers to accomplish His purposes in our lives and in the lives of others.
- God's omniscience is a comfort in suffering (Job 23:10). He knows what we are going through, and He cares deeply for the pain His people experience, even to the extent of sending His Son to share those sufferings and pay for the sin that ultimately caused them.
- God's omniscience is a comfort for the future. When God speaks of His final purposes for His children (Romans 8:28-29) and gives assurance of their security (Romans 8:31-39), we have no reason to doubt the certainty of God's plans for us. There are no unforeseen contingencies that could alter these gracious purposes.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD VI

### Omnipresence

This study is the last on the Absolute Incommunicable Attributes of God. When we speak of His omnipresence, we simply mean that He is present everywhere - that there is no place where God is not. Like the omniscience of God, His omnipresence is a source of great comfort to those who believe and of great terror to those who do not.

#### BIBLICAL AFFIRMATIONS

Scripture affirms the omnipresence of God in many places and in many ways. As we go through today's lesson, we will look at some of those contexts and their implications. But first we should note clear general statements of God's omnipresence. Perhaps the most familiar is Psalm 139:7-12, where David asserts the impossibility of escaping from the presence of God, whether in height or depth, in the far reaches of the globe, or in the deepest darkness. The mixed emotions expressed here show that David knew both the terrors and comforts of God's presence, which we will consider later in the lesson. A similar affirmation can be found in Jeremiah 23:23-24.

#### IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

God's words through Jeremiah also open the door for the discussion of the immanence and the transcendence of God. Scripture clearly affirms both. Some religious traditions over the years have spoken of a transcendent God who is so far above us that we have little hope of knowing Him and surely cannot anticipate His involvement in our daily lives. While Muslims hold these beliefs out of a desire to preserve the greatness of God by separating Him from the messiness of human experience, Deists emphasized God's transcendence in order to push Him out the door and leave man in control of the created universe. But such a transcendent God provides little help or comfort; He is cold and unfeeling, unable to be reached when needed, like the caricature of Baal painted by Elijah in I Kings 18:27.

On the other hand, many have concentrated so entirely on the immanence of God that they have espoused pantheism - the teaching that God is everything and everything is God - thus making God coextensive with the universe or the universe an emanation of God. Ironically, the pantheism of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism ultimately is self-defeating because, in breaking down any distinction between God and the universe, it makes God impersonal, thus denying human personality in the process. Furthermore, if God is coextensive with the universe, whatever is must be a manifestation of God, thus breaking down any distinction between good and evil.

#### THE COMINGS AND GOINGS OF GOD

How, then, can we understand statements in Scripture that speak of changes in God's presence - references to God coming and going, or of Him being particularly present in one location? We will consider these one at a time.

Scripture often speaks of God coming to a particular place. A few examples:

- In Genesis 3:8, God comes down to the Garden of Eden to take a walk in the cool of the day.
- In Exodus 19:18, God descends on Mount Sinai.
- God enters Solomon's Temple (I Kings 8:10-11).
- God comes to His prophets (Isaiah 6 among many other examples).
- God promises that He will come (Malachi 3:1).
- God comes among His people in the person of His Son (John 1:14).
- God sends His Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).
- Christ promises that, after He goes away, He will return (John 14:1-3).

The Bible also speaks of the withdrawal of God's presence:

- God casts Adam and Eve out of His presence in Genesis 3:23-24.
- God withdraws His presence from Israel because of the sin of Achan (Joshua 7:12).
- The Lord left Samson (Judges 16:20) and Saul (I Samuel 18:12).
- David spoke of being forsaken by God (Psalm 22:1) - a verse later quoted by Jesus when He was experiencing the wrath of God on the Cross (Mark 15:34) - and feared that God would leave him (Psalm 51:11).
- Israel complained of being hidden from the Lord (Isaiah 40:27) and in fact was separated from God (Isaiah 59:1-2) and walking in darkness (Isaiah 50:10).
- In Ezekiel 10, God's presence departs from the Temple and from the city of Jerusalem.

What are we to make of these in the light of assertions of God's omnipresence? In short, what we have here is an indication that, while God is always present, His presence takes on different characteristics at different times and places. At times, He is present through visible manifestations, though normally He is invisible. At times, He designates a particular location to be set apart for worshiping Him. At times, He is present in judgment rather than in blessing (and sometimes both). At times, His presence is associated with different persons of the Godhead. Thus these passages must be seen as refining our understanding of the significance of God's presence, which in all cases is inescapable.

## HEAVEN AND HELL

The same may be said of our understanding of Heaven and Hell, of course. In the same way that the identification of the Holy of Holies in the Temple as the dwelling place of God does not mitigate against His omnipresence, but speaks of the particular quality of His presence in that place, so the fact that Heaven is the dwelling place of God does not mean that He is not present in all places. In Heaven, the saints know God's presence in an unadulterated and undiluted form that we on earth cannot experience - His presence is mediated by no derivative form of light or sustenance, nor is it obscured by sin or sadness (Revelation 7:15-17).

But what of the idea that Hell is primarily to be understood as exclusion from the presence of God? When Satan and his demons were cast out of Heaven, and when unbelievers are cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10-15), they are totally excluded from God's blessing - even the blessings of common grace - but are not excluded from the presence of His wrath.



## THE TERRORS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

The fact that God is a consuming fire makes David's ambivalence about the impossibility of escaping His presence in Psalm 139 understandable. Like the prophet in Jonah 1:3, one who chooses to disobey God while being certain of His existence has the irresistible urge to get as far away from Him as possible. Even those who love Him, like Moses (Exodus 3:6) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), tremble in His presence. Those who face His wrath may hide and wish for the rocks to fall on them (Revelation 6:15-17), but ultimately find no place to hide and must bow before Him (Philippians 2:10-11). As we noted in connection with our study of divine omniscience last week, God is not the lenient, grandfatherly figure that so many imagine Him to be, and we must understand the rightness of the fear of God being associated with His presence.

## THE COMFORTS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

For the believer, however, the omnipresence of God is a source of comfort and encouragement in the Scriptures. Note the following:

- God promises that He will always be with His people (Joshua 1:5).
- God's perpetual presence is a source of guidance and protection (Psalm 139:10; 23:4; Isaiah 43:2) even in the gravest of dangers. The feeling that God is not with us in trials is more a function of our lack of faith and tendency to become self-absorbed at such times. Though Mary Stevenson's poem *Footprints in the Sand* (1936) has been so overused that it has become something of a cliché, it nonetheless speaks truth in this regard.
- God's presence gives comfort when the entire world seems to be collapsing (Psalm 46:1-2 - the psalm that was the basis for Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*).
- God's presence provides both encouragement and power for evangelism (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).
- The Spirit of God guarantees the constant presence of God in the hearts of His children (John 14:16-20), bringing peace, understanding, and joy.
- Because Christians as individuals and the Church as a corporate body are said to be the Temple of God, we are both commanded and empowered to seek unity, mutual edification (I Corinthians 3:16-17), and personal holiness (I Corinthians 6:19-20).
- As we have noted with other attributes, God's omnipresence is an encouragement to prayer. God is never too far away to hear or too busy to listen, but is within us at all times, ready to hear and desiring communion with His children.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD VII

### Wisdom

We now begin our study of the Absolute Communicable Attributes of God - those that are necessary in order for Him to be God, yet ones that He in a sense shares with His creatures, thus helping us to understand what it means to be made in God's image. We should expect relationships to exist between the Absolute Incommunicable Attributes we have already studied and the Absolute Communicable Attributes we now prepare to consider. The first of these is wisdom, which is clearly related to the omniscience of God, among others.

#### WHAT IS WISDOM?

Wisdom has often been described as the ability to use knowledge rightly. James I, the English king who authorized the King James Version of the Bible, was described by his critics as "the wisest fool in Christendom" - though he possessed a great deal of book learning, he constantly undermined the effectiveness of his reign by making foolish decisions that alienated all around him. We all know people like this - those who know a lot, but somehow are incapable of using their knowledge in ways that benefit themselves or others. Plato argued for the necessity of wisdom in *The Republic* when he insisted that the best rulers are philosopher-kings who possess the characteristic of wisdom. Today, we use derogatory terms like *nerd*, *geek*, or even *idiot savant* to describe those who have a lot of knowledge in their heads but are totally impractical in their ability to use that knowledge in the real world.

#### WISDOM AS AN ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

Scripture tells us that we worship "the only wise God" (I Timothy 1:17). God's wisdom is related, not only to His omniscience, but also to His omnipotence. He knows all, and is able to put His knowledge to good use without fear of frustration by anyone or anything (unlike the wisest of men, whose wisdom is often frustrated by fools - Socrates was forced to drink hemlock, while the wise counselor Ahithophel committed suicide when Absalom ignored his good advice in II Samuel 17). This is why God's wisdom is so often associated with His power in Scripture (e.g., Job 9:4; 12:13; 36:5; Daniel 2:20). If God were not omnipotent, His wisdom would be no more than advice; if He were not wise, His omnipotence would be positively terrifying.

Furthermore, God's wisdom consists in His choice, not only of the ends, but also of the means by which those ends are to be attained. When we are told that all things work together for good to those who love God (Romans 8:28), we may be sure, not only that God is able to bring good out of evil, but that the very means that He ordains for bringing about the good are in themselves part of His providential care. Note the following:

- The end toward which God moves is not our comfort, or even our salvation, but His own glory. It's all about Him, not all about us. Too many who question the wisdom of God do so because they conclude that a wise God would never do anything that was not pleasurable for His creatures, let alone His children. God's wisdom does not require that He make sinners happy.

- God is glorified when He is worshiped, and all of human history is geared toward that ultimate end (Philippians 2:10-11). But God is also glorified when His children are godly, and suffering is often the means by which He achieves that end, whether we look at the character-building effects of suffering in the life of Joseph or Moses, the impact of Paul's thorn in the flesh in teaching him humility (II Corinthians 12:1-10), or even the role of suffering in the earthly life of Jesus Himself (Hebrews 5:7-10).
- God's wisdom in bringing suffering into the lives of His children may also serve as a form of discipline intended to produce godliness (Hebrews 12:7-13), may be a means of demonstrating His power (John 9:3), or may equip us for ministry (II Corinthians 1:4).
- While we tend to focus in discussions like this on defending the wisdom of God in the face of suffering (who questions the wisdom of God when he is the recipient of His blessing?), God also knows when and how to bless His children, even (and sometimes especially) when we don't deserve to be blessed. After all, how often did He feed and care for the Israelites in the wilderness when all they seemed to do was complain about His providence in their lives? He even sends His rain on the unjust as well as the just (Matthew 5:45) and shows His kindness in order to draw sinners to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Thus God is no pragmatist - His wisdom does not take the path of the end justifying the means, where anything is permissible as long as the desired end is achieved. Instead, He chooses exactly the right means that will best accomplish His goals in history and in our lives.

#### WISDOM AS A COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

Wisdom, as a communicable attribute of God, characterizes His human creatures who are made in His image as well. Wisdom is an important quality in human beings, as the book of Proverbs clearly demonstrates. Note the following:

- Wisdom is not primarily an intellectual quality, but a moral one. The book of Proverbs does not teach young men to acquire huge mountains of facts, but to live godly lives.
- Wisdom, like every other aspect of the divine image in man, has been corrupted by the Fall. Instead of seeking godly means to achieve godly ends, those who reputedly possess human wisdom use it for deceitful or self-aggrandizing purposes. They are tricksters who seek power over others and reject the authority of God in their lives. Thinking themselves to be wise, they are in reality fools (Romans 1:21-23). Thus the wisdom valued by this world is foolishness to God, while human wisdom rejects the wisdom that comes down from above (I Corinthians 1:18-31). Sin has thus inverted the quality of wisdom, calling that which is wise foolish and insisting that what is profoundly foolish is really the height of wisdom.
- God is in the process of repairing the damage done by the Fall and is eager to give wisdom to those who seek it (James 1:5). Christians are to pray for wisdom (Colossians 1:9) and live wisely (Ephesians 5:15-17; Colossians 4:5).
- Those who would attain wisdom must begin with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10). Humility before the God of all wisdom, the recognition that we are utterly dependent on Him rather than ourselves, and the assurance that His revelation of truth is all we need (Psalm 119:99-100; Colossians 3:16; II Timothy 3:15-17) are all essential prerequisites for obtaining wisdom. The wise are not inaccessible gurus before whom men kneel in awe, but rather those who bow in awe before God, without whom no wisdom is possible.

- Wisdom from God is not special insight into His secret purposes or providential acts. The wise man knows no more than the fool of why God does the things He does, at least not in any specific sense (contra. those who boldly proclaimed the hidden purposes of God shortly after the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11), though in the past God has revealed His purposes to “His servants the prophets.” Instead, it involves the ability to respond in the godly way to providential acts for which the reasons are not known and may never be known. Job knew nothing about the reasons behind his suffering, yet he responded in such a wise way that God set him forth as an example of righteousness and wisdom to his supposedly wise friends (Job 42:7-8). The wise are not those who can read hidden signs that no one else can understand, but those who can respond in godly ways when all around them seems to contradict God’s wisdom and throw everyone else into confusion, panic, and distress. The wise man does not ask “Why?” but asks for strength to live in a godly way in the face of troubles for which the reasons may never be known.
- Wisdom is thus a practical manifestation of faith in the life of the Christian. It is a gift of God, a mark of significant healing of the damage done by the Fall, and evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. A mark of true human wisdom is that the one who has it trusts God’s providential wisdom. This is not the same as fatalism - “Oh, well, God is going to do what He’s going to do, and there’s nothing I can do about it, so I might as well make the best of it.” Instead, the man who possesses godly wisdom will look for aspects of his character that God may be seeking to change and respond with humility to the shaping and molding work of God in his life.
- Ultimately, Christ is our wisdom (I Corinthians 1:24; Colossians 2:3).



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD VIII

### Holiness

As we continue this week with our study of the Absolute Communicable Attributes of God, we arrive at His quality of holiness. No attribute is more frequently associated with God in the Scriptures. His name is “The Holy One” (Isaiah 41:14). Holiness is the primary attribute addressed when He is worshiped by saints (Revelation 4:8) and angels (Isaiah 6:3) and is part of the title most frequently used to describe the Third Person of the Trinity.

#### WHAT IS HOLINESS?

When we hear the word *holiness*, we most often think of it in terms of moral perfection. But while moral perfection is certainly one of the aspects of the holiness of God, that is not the fundamental meaning of this attribute. The root behind the Hebrew and Greek words translated *holy* is to be *set apart*. The furniture in the Tabernacle that was set apart for special use was called *holy*, as were the priestly garments and the anointing oil (Exodus 28:2; 30:25; 40:9). These obviously were not morally pure, but were dedicated to particular uses that set them apart from other furniture, garments, and oil. Thus the holiness of God speaks to us primarily of the extent to which God is different from all other beings.

#### HOLINESS AS AN ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

If holiness is an essential part of God’s character, what does this tell us about Him? Note the following:

- The holiness of God is related to His transcendence. God is high and lifted up, worthy of worship and awe. He is to be approached with fear as one who cannot even be looked upon (Exodus 3:6; Isaiah 6:5; Revelation 1:17). He is holy in a sense that no one or nothing else can ever be (Revelation 15:4). Anyone who thinks that God is like us makes a sad mistake (Psalm 50:21). In fact, anyone who comes face to face with the holiness of God will either hate his sin, as in the cases above, or hate God, seeking either to flee from Him or to deny Him altogether. Like Moses at the burning bush, we are both drawn by holiness and terrified of it when we see it for what it is.
- The holiness of God speaks of His absolute moral purity. He has no evil or darkness in Himself (I John 1:5) and cannot look upon sin (Habakkuk 1:13).

We should note here that the moral purity of God does not constitute adherence to some abstract standard of righteousness, because God Himself is that standard. Holiness is defined by His character, and all that is contrary to that character is wicked. How absurd then are those who charge God with immoral behavior because they object to the way He is running the universe! Bertrand Russell, in his address entitled *Why I Am Not a Christian*, argues that Jesus was not as moral as some other men in history [himself perhaps?] because He believed in Hell and because He cursed the fig tree. And how many have charged the God of the Old Testament with being vengeful and vindictive because He “visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate [Him],” among other things?

Furthermore, if God is holy in the sense of being characterized by moral perfection, His law is also holy (Romans 7:12). It is an expression both of the character and the will of God, and is therefore perfect (Psalm 19:7). It is the standard by which human behavior is measured (Leviticus 11:44-45; Matthew 5:48; I Peter 1:16) and through which human sin is revealed (Romans 7:7), demonstrating the universal need for the redemptive work of Christ.

- The holiness of God is illustrated by the procedures established to worship Him under the Old Covenant, starting with the limited access to His presence. The Temple was set up in such a way that, as one moved toward the center where the presence of God was represented in the Holy of Holies, fewer people could gain entrance. Gentiles were restricted to the outer court (the Court of the Gentiles); Israelite women could go no further than the Court of Women; the Court of Israel was the closest to God that the typical Jewish man could hope to come, while priests could enter the Court of the Priests. Only certain priests at certain times could enter the Holy Place, while only the High Priest, once a year and fortified with multiple sacrifices and rituals, could enter the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God Himself. The entire sacrificial system and priesthood demonstrated the holiness of God because of the need for mediation, expiation and propitiation. We should also note, of course, that this same God who was too holy to be approached was constantly in the midst of His people - not a comforting thought when the least deviation from the prescribed rituals could mean instant death.
- The holiness of God is illustrated preeminently in the Cross of Christ. What gives us a more perfect picture of the extent to which God is unable to tolerate or look on sin than the pouring out of wrath upon His own beloved Son? This is not an indulgent God who can simply turn a blind eye and let sin slide.
- The holiness of God should impact our worship, our prayer, and in fact every aspect of life. Though the presence of a holy God does not take visible form in our day as it did with the Tabernacle in the wilderness, it is no less true. We deny the holiness of God when we seek worship centered on our own pleasures or treat prayer flippantly or as a matter of routine. Remember that Isaiah's response to the presence of God characterized a man who was the recipient of God's special mercy and divine call.

## HOLINESS AS A COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

Given the truths expressed above concerning the holiness of God and the extent to which it sets Him apart from all His creatures, the great wonder before us today is that holiness is an *Absolute Communicable Attribute*. Note the following:

- Adam and Eve were created in the Garden of Eden in perfect righteousness, which is part of what it means for man to bear the divine image, and that is the state to which God intends to restore His people (Ephesians 4:24).
- God calls His children *saints* (Romans 1:7; I Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2). We are not yet morally perfect, but we have been set apart by His grace to be the recipients of Christ's atoning sacrifice and the instruments of His work in the world. We are holy in the sight of God because we wear the righteousness of Christ, which has been imputed to us by God.



- The Church is called a holy nation (I Peter 2:9). While the people of God are all too often anything but morally flawless, He has nonetheless chosen to bring about the triumph of His Kingdom in the world through weak and sinful vessels.
- God's children are called to holy living (Matthew 5:48; I Peter 1:16). This commandment is not an exercise in futility on the part of God. Though sanctification is gradual and will not reach completion until we enter God's presence, real growth, maturity, and progress can be experienced because of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the believer (II Peter 1:3). Ultimately, we will live forever beholding the face of the One whose face we cannot look upon and live (I Corinthians 13:12) because He has completely purified the sin that He cannot tolerate through His own initiative.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IX

### Justice

People delight in contemplating a God of love and compassion, but would prefer not to discuss or even think about a God who is a just Judge - one who pours out His wrath on evildoers. Those who choose to worship a God of their own imaginings are understandably reluctant to see God as a Judge. Sadly, however, Christians are too often intimidated by the world around them to downplay or remain silent about this aspect of God's character, and some professing Christians even deny it altogether.

#### WHAT IS JUSTICE?

Justice, in simple terms, involves being completely fair, and in the process approving and rewarding what is good and right and hating and punishing what is wrong and sinful. Justice is thus rooted in the idea of *retribution* - that people should get what they deserve.

- Too often the justice and wrath of God are viewed as objectionable simply because people wish to impose upon God their own definitions of goodness and righteousness. The bottom line is often that evil is defined as what is done by others, but certainly not what I do - that ought to be dismissed as mere weakness, failing, shortcoming, or foible. But we live in God's universe, where His character is the basis for determining good and evil, not our desire to be graded on a curve.
- Others object to the justice of God simply because of the presence of evil in the world [How often has this come up in our study?]. How can a holy and just God allow evil to exist? His reasons for doing so are unknown to us, yet perhaps we have a small hint in Romans 9:23, which implies that certain aspects of God's character would be unknown to His creatures had not He revealed Himself, both as the holy God who judges sin and as the merciful God who justifies sinners through the sacrifice of His Son.

#### JUSTICE AS AN ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

The idea of the justice of God grows directly out of His holiness. If God cannot allow sin in His presence, He must deal with it by the outpouring of His wrath. What kind of God would hate evil and yet do nothing about it? Do we really want to follow the universalist into a world where kindness and cruelty receive the same reward and where the wicked get away with their crimes?

#### AFFIRMATIONS OF GOD'S JUSTICE

Scripture, in fact, has much more to say about the justice of God than it does about the love of God. Note the following:

- God is "the Judge of all the earth" who must do right (Genesis 18:25, cf. Judges 11:27; Psalm 75:7; 82:8; Zephaniah 3:5; Hebrews 12:23) and thus act upon His holiness.
- His judgment is based upon complete and exhaustive knowledge of the deeds, words, and thoughts of everyone (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Romans 2:6-11; II Corinthians 5:10) because He is omniscient.

- The idea that justice is a characteristic of the God of the Old Testament, but that such a primitive view of deity has been supplanted by the New Testament's God of mercy and grace, is utterly foolish. Not only do we find in the words of Jesus some of the most terrifying pronouncements of judgment in the Scriptures (Matthew 7:21-23; 23:1-36; 25:31-46; Mark 9:42-48), but the book of Revelation portrays the justice of God in the clearest possible terms (Revelation 20:11-15).
- Furthermore, the idea of the Father as a stern Judge being placated by the merciful and compassionate Son contradicts the persistent picture of Christ Himself as the Judge (John 5:24-30; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Romans 2:16; James 5:9; I Peter 4:5; Revelation 6:16).
- The caricature of the wrath of God drawn by those who misunderstand Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* of a sadistic deity dangling poor wretches by the thinnest thread over a burning pit of fire and brimstone not only misrepresents Edwards' sermon, but is an insult to the character of God. His wrath is not arbitrary or vindictive, but is justice carried out with sorrow (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11) and after great restraint and patience (Psalm 103:8; II Peter 3:8-9).
- If God is a just God, He must punish sin, so all are deserving of God's wrath (Genesis 2:17; Romans 3:23; 5:12) and are rightly described as children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). The cause for wonder is not that God has designated vessels for wrath (Romans 9:22), but that He has chosen any as vessels of mercy.
- The justice of God is seen in Scripture as a source of comfort for believers. The Psalmist often calls on God as the just Judge to deliver him (Psalm 4:1; 35:24; 94:2; 143:1). In Psalm 73, when Asaph questioned the justice of God because of the prosperity of the wicked, God comforted him with the knowledge that justice delayed in this case is *not* justice denied. Paul, surrounded by criticism, took comfort in the fact that God was the one who would judge his ministry (I Corinthians 4:1-5).

#### GOD'S JUSTICE IN SPECIFIC CASES

God is seen as exercising judgment in specific cases throughout the Bible, whether in casting Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24), banishing Cain (Genesis 4:10-12), destroying most of the earth's population with a great flood (Genesis 6-8), immolating Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19; note that it is in the context of this incident that Abraham affirms the justice of God in 18:25), repeatedly judging the Israelites in the wilderness for their grumbling and disobedience, visiting judgment on their enemies, sending His people into captivity for their wickedness, and punishing specific individual actions (Genesis 38:10; Numbers 20:12; II Samuel 6:7; I Kings 13:11-26; Acts 5:1-11; 12:21-23).

#### GOD'S JUSTICE AS A PRESENT REALITY

When bad things happen to bad people, Christians too often find it easy to see in such events the hand of God's judgment. But without the prophetic word as recorded above in the Scriptures, we lack warrant for such specific pronouncements (e.g., Jerry Falwell's assertion that the destruction of the Twin Towers was God's judgment on America for its immorality). Scripture does allow us to affirm, however, that God's justice is a present reality and not simply something that happened in Bible times. The clearest statement of this truth is found in Romans 1:18-32. Here the wrath of God is pictured as being poured out in the present in response to man's sin. The thing to note here

is that the kind of behavior that is so often pointed out as courting God's judgment is declared by Paul to *be* God's judgment. Yes, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their open homosexuality, but Paul portrays homosexuality as one of the *consequences* of God's judgment. We need not ask if our nation and our world are under the judgment of God; the evidence that such is the case is obvious all around us.

Note that the passage also makes clear the truth that the judgment of God coincides with what people themselves *choose*. God has no need to force the wicked to behave in perverse ways; He simply "gives them up" to their own evil desires. Despite the impenetrable nature of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, "vessels of wrath" deserve that wrath because they love darkness rather than light (John 3:18-21).

### GOD'S JUSTICE ON THE CROSS

As already noted, the most incredible aspect of the justice of God is not that He punishes the wicked, but that He shows mercy on the undeserving. How can God possibly be "just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26)? The answer comes in the biblical teaching concerning *propitiation*. The term refers to the removal of wrath, and is used in Scripture to describe the work of Christ on the cross (Romans 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10). Every sin of every believer was borne by Jesus, and the wrath of God was poured out fully on His Son (Romans 8:32); the cry of Mark 15:34 was very real, as a just God could not but turn His back on sin. Thus no sin goes unpunished, and the full weight of the wrath of God is poured out against it, yet God is just to forgive the sins of those who trust Christ (I John 1:9).

### GOD'S ETERNAL JUSTICE

The doctrine of Hell is much abused and often denied, even by those who profess to be followers of Christ, yet it is the logical consequence of the holiness and justice of God. If God is just, He cannot wink at sin or "let it slide." If He is eternal and cannot look on sin, those who are not covered by the blood of Christ must be eternally under His wrath (Matthew 3:7; I Thessalonians 1:10). Unlike the wishful thinking of some, who trust in reincarnation, Purgatory, or some ill-defined "second chance," we know from Scripture that each man dies only once, and after that comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27). And as horrible as the images of fire and brimstone may be (Mark 9:42-48; Luke 16:24), we must remember that Jesus was making an analogy between Hell and the perpetually-burning garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem (*Gehenna* was the Valley of Hinnom, a place where idols had formerly been worshiped, but which had been desecrated by Josiah and used to burn trash and dead bodies, and thus was a place of perpetual fire and stench in Jesus' day). The flames and maggots are no closer to the terrifying reality of Hell than are the streets of gold and pearly gates a true picture of the glories of Heaven; both are beyond the scope of human language to portray as they really are.

### JUSTICE AS A COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

Justice is included among the Absolute *Communicable* Attributes of God because He requires it of His people and His representatives, as is the case with wisdom and holiness. Note the following:

- The kings and judges of Israel were to rule justly (Deuteronomy 16:18; II Samuel 23:3-4; Proverbs 17:15, 26; 21:15), and God condemned those who did not (Amos 5:12).
- God approves of the just man (Genesis 6:9; Psalm 7:9; Proverbs 3:33; 4:18; 10:6, and many other references) and commends to our minds that which is just (Philippians 4:8).
- Those who engage in business are to deal justly (Leviticus 19:36; Deuteronomy 25:15; Proverbs 11:1; Colossians 4:1).
- Church leaders are to be just (Titus 1:8).
- Christians are to deal justly with one another, adjudicating disputes without the need to take them before worldly authorities (I Corinthians 6:1-8).
- Rulers, even unbelieving ones, are accountable to God to exercise justice (Romans 13:4).

Thus justice should never be a cause for shame or embarrassment to the Christian. We should rejoice that God is a God of justice (and that this does not alone describe His character), and should also seek justice in our own lives, in the church, and in the world around us.

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD X

## Goodness

The Anglo-Saxon root of the English word *God* means *The Good*, thus goodness lies at the very heart of our understanding of who God is. The goodness of God is often cited in Scripture, but is difficult to develop in a course like this for two reasons. The first is that, like Infinity among the Absolute Incommunicable Attributes, it is a bit of a catch-all, incorporating many of the ideas that are treated more directly under other of the Absolute Communicable Attributes of God. The second is that goodness is seen most readily in God's interactions with His creatures, and thus will be addressed most fruitfully under the Relative Attributes, especially common and saving grace.

### GOODNESS AS AN ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

We all think we understand goodness, and we certainly know people we consider to be good. One of the consequences of this is that we tend to view the goodness of God as a mere extension of human goodness and define it accordingly. But note the following:

- The goodness of God is unique - only God is good (Mark 10:18), and man is incapable of doing good apart from the grace of God (Romans 3:12).
- God does good because He is good (Psalm 119:68); He is not to be measured against some abstract standard of goodness (let alone a flawed human one), but defines goodness by His own character and acts in accordance with it. This aspect of God's goodness - His moral perfection - is not the one most frequently addressed in Scripture when speaking of God as a good God, however. The quality most often associated with moral perfection is holiness, as we noted two weeks ago.
- The goodness of God in Scripture is most often used to describe His compassion, kindness, and grace.
  - When God caused His goodness to pass before Moses and proclaimed His name (Exodus 33:19), He described Himself as "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin" (Exodus 34:6).
  - God's goodness, however, is not that of an indulgent Santa Claus figure. The very next verse says, "Yet he does not leave the wicked unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:7). How could a God who refuses to punish evil, but rewards the righteous and the wicked equally, possibly be called *good*?
  - The goodness of God is revealed in the patience He demonstrates toward those who reject Him. He is slow to anger (Psalm 103:8; Romans 9:22) and longsuffering, desiring repentance (II Peter 3:9)
  - In Psalm 145, the goodness of God is associated with His common grace - "the Lord is good to all" (see also Acts 14:17).
  - In Psalm 107, the proof that the Lord is good is that "his mercy endures forever," and that mercy is manifested in His deliverance of His people (this perhaps is the most frequent implication of the goodness of God in Scripture).
  - Psalm 86:5 speaks of God's goodness as manifested in His forgiveness, while in Romans 11:22 the goodness of God is associated with His grace in incorporating the

Gentiles into His plan of salvation. Furthermore, the goodness of God is seen as leading sinners to repentance (Romans 2:4) despite the fact that many spurn that goodness and choose to go their own way.

- God's goodness is seen in the Incarnation, when the angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14, KJV). Above all else, the goodness of God is seen in the saving work of His Son (Titus 2:11).

## OBJECTIONS TO THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Needless to say, many question the goodness of God. For some, the source of doubt is the sovereign allocation of His favor (cf. Matthew 20:15, where the goodness of the owner of the vineyard becomes a cause for complaint among his workers). Yet Scripture does not present the goodness and severity of God as contradictory, but as two entirely compatible aspects of God's character (Romans 11:22).

The most common objection to the doctrine of the goodness of God, however, is the presence of evil in the world. We have often encountered this issue in our study of the attributes of God; perhaps this is the best time to address it head-on. The problem of evil is often phrased thusly: "The existence of evil in the world makes the omnipotent and good God of Christianity absurd. If He is able to remedy the world's ills but chooses not to do so, He is not good; if He wants to do so but is unable, He is not omnipotent. Therefore the God of the Bible does not exist." Your students should note that the problem of evil consists of three ideas, all taught in Scripture - the reality of evil, the omnipotence of God, and the goodness of God. Non-Christian thought deals with the problem by denying one of its three components - pantheists (e.g., Hindus and Buddhists) and dualists (Eastern mystics) deny the reality of evil; polytheists and deists deny the omnipotence of God (as do modern Openness of God theologians, a heresy spawned largely by seeking to grapple with the problem of evil); Muslims deny the love of God, asserting in no uncertain terms that Allah is the cause of all things good and evil.

The Christian can do none of these things, though Christians have often come up with "sanctified" versions of the preceding arguments, whether the notion that "horrible things happen because God uses them for good purposes, so they are really marks of His love for mankind," or "God has given man free will, so He can't do anything about the foolish choices man makes, or be blamed for their consequences" (yes, Arminianism tends to move in this direction), or "God's purpose in the world is to glorify Himself, and this requires the suffering of the wicked" (Calvinists more often lean this way). Instead, the Christian must recognize that the underlying question behind the problem of evil - why God allowed evil to enter the world at all, whether by creating Satan, allowing Satan to rebel against Him, or permitting the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden - is one that Scripture does not answer. We must therefore be content to affirm what the Bible affirms without demanding to understand how it all fits together.

Scripture does, however, give practical guidance for dealing with instances of tragedy or suffering in our own lives. The passage in the Bible that most directly addresses the matter of the problem of evil is Luke 13:1-9, where Jesus is approached by people who are unable to comprehend incidents of natural disaster (the Tower of Siloam collapsing and killing a number of people) and



human cruelty and injustice (the Galilean pilgrims massacred by order of Pilate outside the Temple). They took the typical Jewish view, also found in the book of Job - that prosperity is a sign of God's blessing and suffering is a mark of God's disfavor - and therefore concluded that those who had died were great sinners especially deserving of God's judgment. This, of course, let the questioners off the hook - they were still breathing, so they must be righteous people. People today, however, rather than seeking to justify themselves, instead tend to use incidents of natural disaster and human cruelty to accuse and doubt God. Jesus' response, and the parable He tells to illustrate it, provide helpful answers to both ancient and modern doubters. We should note the following:

- We know that God is both omnipotent and good from His revelation of Himself in Scripture. We don't arrive at this conclusion by looking at the world around us or evaluating our own experience.
- We should not expect to be able to explain the existence of evil. Scripture doesn't tell us why God allowed Satan's rebellion or why He created fallible human beings. But it indicates clearly that evil exists, and that man, not God, is responsible for it.
- Jesus illustrates a proper approach to the problem in Luke 13. Human cruelty and natural disasters should not be viewed as evidence that God does not exist, or that the victims are wicked while the survivors are righteous. While the Jews of Jesus' day tended to defend their own righteousness while assuming the wickedness of the dead, people today tend to defend their own righteousness while assuming the wickedness (or nonexistence) of God. Instead, Jesus makes it clear that all deserve God's judgment - the dead and the survivors alike. If God gave us all what we deserve, no one would be left standing. Thus Jesus pictures the comparative scarcity of incidents such as those described in the passage as evidence of God's mercy. By judging the few, God shows mercy to the many by urging them on to repentance (see II Peter 3:3-9). Thus the Jews of the first century and the unbelievers of the twenty-first century have in common their conviction of their own righteousness - a conviction that Jesus challenges in a way that enables us all to put the evil in the world in its proper context.
- The Bible's ultimate answer to the problem of evil is the Cross. When God sent His Son to die for the sins of His people, He demonstrated the reality of evil because of the cost required to deal with it, His omnipotence in that the death of Christ was the fulfillment of a plan devised in eternity past, and His goodness in being willing to pay the penalty for man's sin Himself. One cannot use the problem of evil to accuse or deny God when he fixes his eyes on the Cross.

## GOODNESS AS A COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

If, as we saw at the beginning of the lesson, only God is good and no man does good, how can we speak of goodness as a communicable attribute? Note the following:

- The goodness of God is inherent in who He is, but the goodness of man (and anything else that God created) is derivative. We see this in the creation account in Genesis 1, where everything God made is declared to be good because God, the one who is perfectly good, made it (Genesis 1:31).
- Goodness is thus presented as a Christian virtue, in the form of kindness, compassion, forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32), and patience (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12; Galatians 5:22).



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XI

### Truth

We have already seen in our introductory lesson that the fact that God is truth is essential to His knowability. If God were not truth and did not speak the truth about Himself and the world, we could not know Him or ourselves. Today we will consider in more detail the implications of this attribute of God.

#### TRUTH AS AN ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

God is presented to us in Scripture as the God of truth (Psalm 31:5; Isaiah 65:16). What are the implications of this simple statement?

- Truth is defined by God's character; it is not something outside of Himself to which He must conform. This is why Jesus doesn't simply state that He speaks the truth, but instead affirms that He *is* the truth (John 14:6). J.I. Packer, in *Knowing God*, puts it this way:

Truth in the Bible is a quality of persons primarily, and of propositions only secondarily: it means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness, the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic, and undecieved. God is such a person: truth, in this sense, is His nature, and He has not got it in Him to be anything else.

- The natural consequence of this is that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18; Numbers 23:19; I Samuel 15:29), nor can He deny Himself (II Timothy 2:13).
- If God is truth and anything contrary to His nature is a lie, we must recognize that logic, like truth, has its foundation in who God is. Reason is not a human construct or, as some might have it, a peculiar manner of thinking associated with Western culture with its Greek philosophical roots. The law of non-contradiction ( $A \neq \sim A$ ), which is the basis of any logical reasoning, is inherent in the character of God.
- If God is truth, His Word is truth (Psalm 119:160; John 17:17). The inerrancy of Scripture derives directly from the character of God. If the Bible is God's Word, it must be fully true. Any admixture of error whatsoever separates it from God and undermines its authority in our lives. The truth of God's Word refers to its factual content, its doctrinal teachings (II Timothy 3:16), its moral commands (Psalm 119:151), and its promises (II Corinthians 1:20).
- If God's Word is truth, language, like logic, has its origin in God and is part of what it means for man to be made in God's image. Language is not evolved over millions of years from animal grunts and bird whistles, but is something designed by God so that He can communicate truth to His creatures.
- The quality of God as truth is revealed preeminently through His Son (John 14:6). Truth comes through Him (John 1:17), and this truth frees those who seek it (John 8:30-32). All who truly desire truth will find it in Him (John 18:37) and will be sanctified and cleansed by it (John 17:17).

## TRUTH AS A COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

The God of truth desires His creatures to seek and speak the truth. What implications ought we to draw from the fact that truth is a *communicable* attribute of God? Note the following:

- God made man to know truth. He communicated with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But man's rebellion against God has led as well to a corrupt view of the divinely-bestowed gift of communication. When man denies that God has spoken the truth, soon the capacity of man to speak the truth is denied as well. Philosophers influenced by evolutionary theory have come to question, in some cases, the very possibility of genuine communication. How can we know that what is in our minds is accurately transferred to the minds of others when we speak or write? If communication is the product of time and chance, we can't. As a result analytical philosophers have devoted much time to attempting to determine what forms of language actually assert anything at all and which are merely expressions of emotion.
- Man cannot know truth apart from divine revelation. Attempts to develop a workable epistemology on an entirely humanistic base have utterly failed.
  - Unaided human reason does not suffice. Rene Descartes sought to ground human knowledge in a sort of geometric proof, using as his "Given" the only thing he determined he could not possibly doubt: his own existence ("I think, therefore I am"). He was never able to connect what went on in his own head (the *noumenal* - the realm of mind, God, the soul, and all things spiritual) with what went on outside of himself (the *phenomenal* - the realm of the senses, dominated by science), so concluded that these two realms (the so-called Cartesian Dualism distinguishing thinking substance from extended substance) never met and had nothing to do with one another.
  - Human experience did no better. John Locke argued that human knowledge derives from sense experience built upon a *tabula rasa*, the blank slate that describes the condition of the mind at birth. Sense experience, of course, can never lead to certain knowledge because the possibility always exists that some future experience might contradict the conclusions drawn from what has been learned so far. We should note that this approach provided the foundation of modern science as presented in the scientific method made famous by Francis Bacon.
  - Immanuel Kant tried to understand human knowledge as a combination of the mind and the senses, arguing that the raw data imported by the senses did not fall upon a blank slate, but upon a pre-formed grid by which sensory input was organized. The mind thus operates on and alters anything detected by the senses. The consequence of this, of course, is that what we call knowledge can never correspond to what is really outside of ourselves, i.e., another failure, this time one so serious that most philosophers since Kant have completely given up on the possibility of absolute knowledge.
  - Only revelation provides an adequate foundation for knowledge. God, who is omniscient, can give to us *true* truth without the need for us to have *exhaustive* truth. We know something, not because our experience demonstrates it to be so or because our reason figures it out, but because God says so. This is the only way we can really know anything at all, as the failures of humanistic philosophy have abundantly demonstrated.

- Because we are made in the image of God, we have a basis for *generally* trusting our minds and our senses. If we could not, neither communication nor science would be possible. But because we are also sinners, we may never trust our minds or our senses *absolutely* - the results must always be checked against divine revelation.
- God made man to believe the truth. Those under the influence of Satan believe a lie, but God's children believe the truth as God has revealed it (II Thessalonians 2:9-12).
- God made man to live the truth. If God's commands are true, integrity among human beings requires that those commands be followed. Not surprisingly, the rejection of God as the fountain of all truth leads, not only to epistemological relativism, but to moral relativism as well. When people fill their minds with lies rather than the truth of God, they not only behave in a way that renders them guilty before the Almighty, but also destroy their own souls in the process. As Packer notes, "Conscience atrophies, the sense of shame dries up, one's capacity for truthfulness, loyalty, and honesty is eaten away, one's character disintegrates. One not only becomes desperately miserable; one is steadily becoming dehumanized." One who lives by God's truth knows freedom and experiences true humanity; one who rejects it in the name of freedom finds only bondage and bestiality.
- God made man to speak the truth (Exodus 20:16). If God does not lie, we should not do so either. All human deception is contrary to the character of God (Matthew 5:37). In my four decades of teaching Christian Ethics to high school students, I was appalled at the number of Christian ethicists who have sought to justify lying in certain circumstances.
- The Christian who knows that God is truth lives with confidence on the basis of God's promises. If God is true, the Christian cares little for what man may say or do; neither one affects his eternal destiny, nor should it undermine his peace and contentment in this life.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XII

### Love

Today we will consider the last of the Absolute Communicable Attributes of God, and the one with which God is most commonly associated, both in the minds of those who truly know the Father and in the minds of those who, living by wishful thinking, devise a god of their own imaginings. In other words, we will today consider the love of God. I have chosen to consider this characteristic of God's nature last among the Absolute Communicable Attributes because it may also be considered a Relative Attribute - a description of how God relates to His creatures. It thus serves as a suitable transition to the last phase of our study.

#### WHAT IS LOVE?

*Love* is a much-used word in our culture, and because of that its meaning is often misunderstood. Whether one speaks of love for pizza, love for baseball, or the puppy love of a teenage crush, the contemporary use of the word does little to help us understand the love of God. One of the problems, of course, is that in English we use one word to describe an amazing variety of attitudes, actions, and relationships.

The Greeks were a bit more precise; your students are probably familiar with the fact that three different Greek words are translated by the English word *love*. One, *eros* (the root of our word *erotic*), refers to romantic or sexual love and does not appear in the Bible. Another, *phileo*, refers to the love of friendship and mutual regard (e.g., Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love); this appears with some frequency in Scripture, and is in fact an important aspect of Jesus' conversation with Peter in John 21:15-19, but is not used to describe the love of God. The third term, *agape*, was rarely used in secular Greek, but was filled with meaning by the writers of the New Testament. This kind of love is unconditional, not dependent in any way on the attractiveness or worthiness of the object, and is the true description, not only of the love of God, but also of the love that His children are intended to display.

Caution is needed here, however; we must be careful not to draw too sharp a distinction between *agape* and the other kinds of love known to the people of the New Testament era. The love of God is unconditional, unlike friendship or romantic love, but God nonetheless uses the language of marital love to describe His relationship with His people (Israel as the wife of God, the Church as the Bride of Christ), and Jesus calls His disciples His friends (John 15:13-15), and as joint-heirs we are His brothers (Romans 8:17). Thus elements of all the common Greek words for love are present in Scripture's representation of the love of God. We may not, as some have sought to do, picture the love of God as totally devoid of emotion; such a picture only results when we compare the passions of God to our own. While our emotions are changeable and dependent on the object of those affections, God's are chosen, changeless, and always appropriate to the moment and to His character.

#### LOVE AS AN ABSOLUTE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

When we think of the love of God, we almost always think of it in terms of the love He shows to us, i.e., as a Relative Attribute. This is understandable, since the vast majority of references

to the love of God in Scripture address this aspect of the matter. However, Scripture also leads us to understand that love is not simply a description of what God *does*, but is also one of His innate qualities - love is what God *is*. Note the following:

- We are told that God is love in I John 4:8,16. This indicates that love is central to who God is in Himself rather than simply being the way He relates to His creatures.
- Far too many use these assertions by John in inappropriate ways. This usually happens when someone insists on defining love in his own terms and imputing that definition to the character of God. The result is usually an attempt to deny other clear teachings of Scripture about God because they are perceived to be incompatible with what the reader chooses to define as love (ruling out any possibility of wrath, judgment, or distinctions of any kind among people). We must remember, however, that the same God who is said to be love is also described as light (I John 1:5 - a reference to His holiness) and as a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29); any definition of love that rules out these equally-true statements is not the love of God as presented in the Bible.
- Love existed within the Trinity before God created man. The Father loves the Son (Matthew 3:17; John 17:23-24) and the Son loves the Father (John 14:31). Love requires an object, and the love among the members of the Trinity, existing before the foundation of the world, makes it possible to say truly that “God is love.”

#### LOVE AS A COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

Because we are made in the image of God, our nature is to love. That love was directed toward God by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as well as toward one another. Sin, of course, perverted that love so that sinners, still needing to love, primarily love themselves and the idols they have set up, while using others rather than loving them. Nonetheless, human beings are commanded to love.

- The two greatest commandments involve love for God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). These summarize the entire law given by God. Note that the Decalogue is arranged according to this fundamental pattern, with the early commandments describing what it means to love God and the latter ones speaking of how one ought to love his neighbor.
- Love is the greatest and most enduring of the graces (I Corinthians 13:13), and without it spiritual gifts are worthless.
- Love is the first grape in the bunch referred to as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). We must recognize that, as sinners, the capacity to demonstrate *agape* is beyond us because of our innate selfishness, but the Spirit transforms sinful hearts. Accordingly, love is only possible through the work of the Spirit in the hearts of sinners.
- Love is a powerful testimony of the church to the world (John 13:34-35), but Christians must be careful that they do not allow their love to be drawn in the wrong direction (I John 2:15-17).
- Our love is to be unconditional in the same way that God’s love is. We are to love our enemies as God does (Matthew 5:43-48). The Parable of the Good Samaritan indicates that love for neighbor extends beyond mere human affinities to those we would naturally despise (Luke 10:25-37).



## LOVE AS A RELATIVE ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

This is the way in which we most commonly think of the love of God - not as He possesses it in Himself, but as He showers it upon us. Note the following about the love of God as a Relative Attribute:

- That the love of God is truly *agape* is seen in the fact that those upon whom He bestows His love have in themselves nothing to attract it and have done nothing to merit it. Simply put, God loves undeserving sinners, rebels who have scorned Him and rejected His mercies (Deuteronomy 7:7-8; John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 9:19; Ephesians 2:4); He loves His enemies (Matthew 5:45). [Note that the question of common grace and the extent to which one may rightly say that “God loves the world” will be discussed in Lesson XV.]
- God chose the recipients of His love before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and that love will extend to the end of time (Jeremiah 31:3).
- The greatest manifestation of the love of God is seen in the Cross (Galatians 2:20; I John 4:9-10). The love manifested there is personal rather than vague and theoretical, efficacious, and permanent (John 10:28-29; 13:1).
- God’s love is the daily experience of those who belong to Him (Romans 5:5; Ephesians 3:19). God is not like the lover who picks the petals of the daisy to determine whether His love will be extended toward any given person or at any given time, nor is His love altered by the response of His chosen ones. Nothing can separate His people from His love (Romans 8:35-39).
- God’s love for His people leads to chastening (Hebrews 12:6-11), which is intended to produce righteousness and holiness, resulting in a spotless Bride (Ephesians 5:27).
- God’s love produces love for Him in the hearts of those who receive it (I John 4:19). We do not generate love for Him to which He then responds. Instead, His love transforms, leading the recipients to love Him whom they previously hated.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XIII

### Creator

We now enter into the final section of our study of the attributes of God, the Relative Attributes. These qualities of God's character are not essential to His deity, but are manifestations of His Absolute Attributes in the ways in which He *relates* to His creatures. We will begin today by examining the fact that God is the Creator.

The Nicene Creed begins with the statement: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." Such has been the affirmation of believers from the earliest stages of human history. In the Western world, the fact that God is the creator of all things may be the attribute that has been most universally believed; even the Deists, who denied almost every other teaching of Scripture, affirmed that God was the creator. In fact, not until the nineteenth century and the advent of Darwinism have serious doubts been raised about this fundamental teaching of Scripture (though, somewhat ironically, Darwin considered himself what today would be called a theistic evolutionist, unwilling to speculate about the origin of life but assuming that God had created it in its most primitive form).

### CREATOR AS A RELATIVE ATTRIBUTE

In James Weldon Johnson's poem *The Creation*, the poet puts these words in the mouth of God: "I'm lonely - I'll make me a world." While Johnson's poem is a vivid and colorful affirmation of the creative work of God, he could not have been more wrong in his ascription of God's motive. Creator is classified as a Relative Attribute of God for the simple reason that God did not *need* to create. He is complete in Himself, sufficient in Himself, and satisfied in Himself, and the doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates that He could in no way have been described as *lonely* prior to His creation of the world and of man. Why, then, did He do it? We can never expect to answer that question fully, yet we know that God does all things for His glory, thus we may justifiably conclude that His glory is more fully manifested as it is revealed and demonstrated in relationship to those things He has made.

As we consider the Relative Attributes of God, we will often stop to ask ourselves the question of how these attributes reveal the Absolute Attributes we have already studied. What about the creative work of God? Surely this reveals His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence; the universe reveals His immutability and eternity; and certainly His dealings with man in the Creation display His wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and love.

### GOD AS THE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

Scripture everywhere affirms that God is the creator of all things, from the opening words of the book of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation (Genesis 1:1ff; Psalm 104:24; Amos 4:13; Matthew 19:4; Mark 13:19; Romans 1:25; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11; 10:1-7 among many others). Note the following:

- God created out of nothing; He spoke, and the worlds came into being (in addition to Genesis 1, see Psalm 33:6; 148:2-5). All other worldviews in the Ancient Near East affirmed

creation as the work of God, but viewed it in terms of a struggle with primeval chaos, and usually in the context of polytheistic conflict. In these ancient mythologies, the parts of the cosmos are associated with various gods in the polytheistic systems of the various civilizations. Furthermore, earth is created as a result of conflicts among the gods, in particular a conflict between ancient deities representing primitive chaos and newer gods warring to bring order out of that chaos. Man appears only as an afterthought, created by the gods when they get tired of doing all the work themselves to produce the things they need to survive. Man thus comes into being as a servant of the gods, who require beings to meet their needs. Note how the biblical creation account addresses each aspect of this popular understanding of the cosmos, correcting each by presenting a single omnipotent God who created all things, who imposed order on a primitive chaos of His own making, who designed the cosmos to be inhabited by man and designed man for the cosmos, and who seeks a relationship with man rather than needing him to be His servant.

- God alone is the Creator (Isaiah 40:25-26). As noted above, this distinguished the God of Israel from the false gods of the surrounding nations.
- Though the ancient creeds associate the work of creation with God the Father, Scripture teaches that all three persons of the Trinity were involved, with the Father initiating, the Son being the agent through whom the will of the Father was carried out (John 1:2-3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:3), and the Spirit overseeing the creative activity (Genesis 1:2).

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GOD AS CREATOR

Too many Christians today, wanting desperately to find acceptance in the world, set aside the doctrine of divine creation as unessential to the Christian faith. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Note the following:

- The very existence of the universe and the nature of man are inexplicable apart from the creative activity of God. The spontaneous generation of the universe out of nothing is scientifically untenable and philosophically absurd, an impersonal origin of Being (e.g., steady-state universe or Big Bang) is unable to explain diversity, let alone life or human personality, while a polytheistic origin of the universe cannot explain its consistency or regularity.
- God's creative activity is portrayed as a form of divine revelation through which men are held accountable for their rejection of Him (Romans 1:18-20).
- The Creation account (Genesis 1-2) provides the foundation for many important ideas that inform our understanding of God and the world around us:
  - God is eternal, existing before the universe He made (1:1).
  - God made time, and thus is not subject to it (1:3).
  - All God made was good (1:3, etc.). If it is not good now, it is not because of the way God made it.
  - God specifically prepared the earth to be inhabited by living creatures, especially man, the pinnacle of His creation.
  - God designed the earth to have seasons (1:14).
  - God's creation was geocentric in the sense that the earth was the focus of all He made (1:17).

- God made all living things “according to their kinds” and intended them to multiply correspondingly (1:11, 21, 24, 25).
- God intended the plants to be food for man and animals (1:29-30). Note that the use of animals for food only appears after the Flood (Genesis 9:2-3).
- The work of creation was completed at the end of the creative week; it is not an ongoing process (2:1).
- Creation teaches us that man was made in the image of God:
  - Man was a special, direct creation of God (2:7), made in God’s image (1:26), unlike God according to creatureliness but like God in personality - intellect, emotions, will, love, communication, but also righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24).
  - God gave man dominion over the rest of the created universe (1:26). This implies not only agriculture (2:5,15), but also science and technology.
  - Man was created with distinct gender identities (1:27).
  - Like the animals, man was intended to reproduce (1:28).
  - Man was intended to labor (2:15). Work is not a result of the Fall, but part of God’s created purpose for man.
  - Man possesses the power of responsible choice (2:16-17), but is accountable to God for how he uses it. He is thus a free moral agent, but not an autonomous one.
  - Death was not initially a part of the human experience (2:17), but was a consequence of human sin. We are intended to be eternal creatures.
  - Man was created as a social being (2:18), intended for fellowship and relationships.
- Thus if creation is discarded, we lose not only the uniqueness of man, but also the Bible’s teaching about original sin and its consequences (Romans 5:12-14), along with the Gospel of God’s grace that is based on the reality of man’s sin (Romans 5:15-21). The rejection of God as Creator thus undermines the most central teachings of Scripture. One ought not to think that the historicity of Adam and Eve can be readily discarded, for with its loss we also lose the special creation of man in the image of God and the historicity of the Fall.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XIV

### Sustainer

While Deism arose in the Enlightenment to challenge every central doctrine of Christianity except for Creation, the Deists, somewhat inconsistently, could not bring themselves to cast aside entirely the participation of God in the marvelous clockwork universe He had made. In fact, perhaps the favorite name for God used in Deist circles was Providence. What they spoke with their mouths, however, they denied with their ideas, affirming that “man is the measure of all things” and was now in charge of the universe that God had made.

#### WHAT IS PROVIDENCE?

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.” Scripture everywhere asserts the providence of God (e.g., Genesis 41:32; Nehemiah 9:6-7; Job 12:7-10; Psalm 104:27-32; Daniel 2:21; 4:25,34-35; Matthew 5:45; 6:26,30; Acts 17:26-28; Ephesians 1:11; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). God is not the God of the Deists who wound up His intricately-fashioned World Machine and then let it go without deeming further involvement necessary. He is sovereign over every aspect of His creation, both inanimate and animate, past, present, and future. God’s Providence reveals His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, immutability, eternity, wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and love - in other words, all of His Absolute Attributes. Were this not so, God’s sovereign providential oversight and care over His creation would be even more terrifying than it already is, not only to the unbeliever, but to the believer as well.

#### PROVIDENCE AND THE DECREES OF GOD

The affirmation of the providence of God again brings us to the problem of evil, which we have discussed previously. In short, if God is in charge, why is the world in such a disastrous condition? This, of course, is a legitimate question, albeit one we have addressed on a number of previous occasions in this course. For our purposes at the moment, however, we need to note that the sovereignty of God over all things and His providential oversight of the affairs of human life and human history should be broken down into three categories, all of which clarify the nature of the divine decrees upon which the providential acts of God are based.

- The first is the direct decrees of God, which are those works that are carried out by God in the very act of purposing them. Creation is an obvious example, along with miracles (see below). But we should also note that the direct decrees of God are often carried out by means of secondary causes. If God is indeed “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3) so that “in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17), the very concept of the “laws of nature” is unbiblical, stemming from a Deist mentality. What we call the laws of nature are nothing but demonstrations of God’s faithful superintendence of His creation. Apart from God’s sustaining power, the universe could not exist for a single instant (e.g., the very nature of the atomic nucleus, where particles that ought to repel one another “hold together” by a force that scientists can name, but not explain).
- The operation of secondary causes within the providential decrees of God extends also to those things He permits, but does not cause directly. This is a difficult area, and some

attempts to deal with it have led to unbiblical conclusions, whether making God a helpless bystander in the face of evil or affirming God as its direct cause. Scripture, however, indicates that, while God decrees that evil may exist and occur (Genesis 45:7-8; 50:2; Job 1:9-12; Acts 2:23; Romans 9:22-23) and uses it for His purposes, God may never be said to be the author of sin (James 1:13-16; I John 1:5), though He clearly is the author of calamity (Jeremiah 49:8).

- The third category involving the decrees of God relates only tangentially to His providence; this involves His preceptive decrees. Here the will of God is expressed, not in terms of what He will do or has done, but in terms of what He desires His creatures to do. God's precepts indicate His will for human behavior, and include the commands that are found throughout the Word of God. God's providence is involved here as human beings obey or do not obey these precepts; both responses are part of God's providence.

## PROVIDENCE AND MIRACLES

The mistake here is that many people tend to *restrict* God's works of providence to what we call miracles. The term itself is somewhat misleading, since it implies that what is not miraculous is not a work of God. Note the following:

- Miracles are no more works of God than the operations of the law of gravity. God causes a dropped object to fall every bit as much as He caused the walls of Jericho to fall. The difference lies in the categories discussed above; falling objects are brought about by God through secondary causes, while the walls of Jericho fell by direct divine decree apart from secondary causes of any kind.
- Note that those who seek to "explain away" miracles by speculating about possible "natural" causes in no way undermine the involvement of God, since some of the miracles found in Scripture clearly involved secondary causes (e.g., the healing poultice God ordered Isaiah to prepare for Hezekiah in II Kings 20:7), while others involved miraculous timing of otherwise "natural" events (e.g., the storms in I Samuel 7:8-12 and I Kings 18:44-45).
- The term used in the Scriptures for what we call miracles is "signs" (John 20:30-31), a much more appropriate word. The actions of God performed apart from His normal providences were largely restricted to certain periods in biblical history (the Exodus and Conquest, the era of Elijah and Elisha, and the earthly ministry of Jesus and His apostles, though other examples are found in Scripture), and were intended to fulfill a special teaching function. Such signs are neither to be sought nor expected in the normal course of human events (Matthew 12:39-40). Miracles would not be miracles if they were commonplace.
- David Hume's famous argument against the possibility of miracles - that accounts of violations of the laws of nature are much more likely to be the results of fraud or delusion than actual miracles - presupposed naturalism, thus contains its own conclusion in its fundamental assumptions.

## PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

One of the questions often raised about the providence of God among Christians is its relationship to human responsibility. If God, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism indicates, "hath for his own glory foreordained whatsoever comes to pass," what are we to make of man's



responsibility for his actions? Does Calvinism, as Arminians often charge, make of man no more than a puppet? Does belief in divine providence lead inevitably to fatalism?

The answer obviously is no, though far more time than we have available could clearly be devoted to this subject. While we can no more explain in logical terms how the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man can coexist than we can explain the Trinity, the humanity and deity of Christ, or the existence of evil in the world, we can and must affirm two basic biblical truths - that all things occur according to the sovereign will of God and that man is a responsible moral agent. If the first were not true, God would be subservient to the whims of autonomous man; if the second were not true, divine commandments would be without meaning. Nor can the solution be to affirm that God *knows* what He does not sovereignly *decree*. Not only does the term “foreknowledge” in Scripture refer to relationships and not merely facts (Romans 8:29), but what God knows can be no less certain than what He decrees; the only solution for the Arminian is to deny God’s omniscience along with His sovereignty in order to preserve human autonomy.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

The fact that God is in control of everything in His creation has many implications for understanding and living. Note the following:

- Human history has a purpose and direction determined by the providence of God. He did not wind up the machine and let it go, but has determined to carry out an immutable purpose - the salvation of a people for Himself through the work of His Son as implemented by the Holy Spirit and culminating in the redemption of all of Creation (Romans 8:18-25).
- God is in control of emotions as well as events, not only in directing the heart of the king (Proverbs 21:1), but also using the sinful emotions of man for His glory (Psalm 76:10; Revelation 17:17) and moving the hearts of His people (Psalm 119:36; Proverbs 16:3).
- In our lives, nothing happens outside the providential care of God (Psalm 37:23; Matthew 6:33). He watches over His people and brings into their experience only what He intends to use for their good (Psalm 31:15; Romans 8:28).
- God’s providence is enacted according to the moral laws He has established (Romans 1:24-32 with its repeated use of the phrase “gave them over”; Galatians 6:7-8). Much of Proverbs is occupied with practical affirmations of divine providence in everyday life as God brings about the consequences, both good and evil, of the wise and foolish choices made by man.
- Prayer matters. The providence of God does not undermine the power of prayer, but underscores it, since it is a means that He has chosen to use to bring His purposes to pass.
- The promises of God are certain. He will not fail to bring to pass what He has already decreed, including those decrees He has revealed through His Word.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XV

### Common Grace

As we continue this week to consider the Relative Attributes of God, we turn our attention to common grace. This aspect of the way God relates to His creatures is often misunderstood, yet is important for understanding much of what we observe around us in the world today.

#### WHAT IS COMMON GRACE?

Grace, in general, is the free unmerited manifestation of the goodness of God toward those who deserve exactly the opposite. When we speak of common grace, we refer to ways in which this unmerited goodness is directed toward all of God's creatures, or all men in general, rather than specifically toward the elect. The reality of such grace can be seen in the fact that the sin-cursed world and sinful humanity continue to exist (II Peter 3:9). God's patience is a manifestation of His common grace. From the time of the Fall, God has restrained His hand of judgment, sparing Adam and Eve from the full consequences of the death He had promised as the result of their disobedience; He also showed patience in the days of Noah (I Peter 3:20).

#### MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMON GRACE

The major misunderstandings of common grace come from those who fail to distinguish it from saving grace. This appears in two opposite schools of theology. Arminians tend to confuse common grace and saving grace by assuming that all grace must have the potential to save. Hypercalvinists, on the other hand, argue against the very existence of common grace because they believe that God can show no form of mercy toward those He has formed for destruction. No contradiction exists, however, in asserting that God shows mercy to those who are under His wrath and whom He eventually judges. In fact, if God visits disfavor upon His people, whether in the form of punishing grumbling Israelites or disciplining believers, why should anyone view as incongruous the fact that He shows favor to His enemies? In fact, the whole point of Jesus' assertion of the reality of common grace in Matthew 5:45 is that, since God loves His enemies, so should we. But this love for His enemies should never be confused with the grace that brings salvation (see next week's study).

#### THE SOURCE OF COMMON GRACE

The grace of God in all its forms comes to man only through the mediation of Christ; we receive nothing from God that does not come to us through His Son (John 1:14). It is in this sense, then, and this sense *only*, that Christ may be said to have died for all the world. That Christ did not die to bring salvation to all is obvious, for then all would be saved. But to separate the grace of God that comes to all men from the mediation of Christ would be to fragment unnecessarily the work of the Trinity. While Reformed theologians have rightly pointed out that the "all" passages such as I John 2:2 and "whosoever" passages like John 3:16 that are used by supporters of a universal atonement mean "all without distinction" rather than "all without exception," we must not react against unbiblical teachings by going to the opposite extreme and denying the role played by Christ's death in mediating God's grace to the world.

## PRACTICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF COMMON GRACE

In addition to the patience mentioned above, common grace is revealed in the following ways:

- God cares for the creatures He has made (Psalm 36:5-9; 145:9), even establishing a covenant with them following the Flood (Genesis 9:8-11).
- God reveals Himself to the wicked as well as the righteous, though they reject His revelation of Himself in nature (Romans 1:20). The proponents of the concept of natural law during the Enlightenment were not completely mistaken when they argued that God had built certain moral precepts into the universe that were detectable by human reason (e.g., I Corinthians 11:14).
- The bounty of God's creation is poured out on the wicked as well as the righteous. The sun shines upon them, the rain waters their crops (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17), and they often prosper, even to the extent that their prosperity is a source of confusion and consternation to God's people (Psalm 73:1; see also the complaint of Salieri in the play and movie *Amadeus*, where the second-rate composer cries out to God because he, a faithful servant, has been given inferior gifts to those of the careless and godless prodigy Mozart).
- Believers in the world are intended to be instruments of common grace (Matthew 5:13-16). Christians are to be salt and light, not only as a means for the conversion of unbelievers, but also to preserve and bring light into that which is otherwise corrupt.
- The continued existence of the image of God in sinners means that many show laudable personal qualities despite the fact that these are corrupted by sinful motives and rebellion against God. The conscience, part of the divine image, continues to exist in the unregenerate (Romans 2:14-15). Men are not devils because of the common grace of God.
- God restrains the impact of sin on the world at large. He does this through His direct providential involvement as well as through the instrumentality of governments (Romans 13:3-4). Not only are individual sinners not as bad as they would be apart from God's common grace, but the condition of the world is far better than it would be if God did not mitigate the effects of the Curse. He visits destruction on evil regimes like the Assyrians (see the prophecy of Nahum against Nineveh), but also on tyrants like Hitler and the rulers of the Soviet Union in order to mitigate the consequences of sin on earth (note that the same might be said for godless societies that spurn Him through self-seeking as well as overt violence and destruction). Earth is not Hell because of the common grace of God.
- Human skills and accomplishments are manifestations of common grace. Science, technology, art, and literature are all ways in which God allows those who are in rebellion against Him to produce things of value and beauty; in fact, Genesis 4:19-22 tells us that technology and artistic achievement had their origins in the rebellious line of Cain rather than the godly line of Seth. All artistic skills are said to come from God (Exodus 31:1-11), though these, like all of God's good gifts, are corrupted by sin. Dominion may be affected by depravity, but it continues to belong to humanity as God's gracious gift.

## THE PURPOSE OF COMMON GRACE

God's common grace is given for a number of reasons:

- God gives common grace so that the unrepentant are without excuse (Romans 1:20). No one can stand before God in the Day of Judgment and claim ignorance or unfairness in the way he has been treated by God.
- God's grace is intended to lead sinners to repentance (Romans 2:4); all receive it, though not all repent (Romans 9:22).
- Common grace is given to the world for the benefit of God's people. God would have spared Sodom for the sake of ten righteous people (Genesis 18:32), He instructs us to pray that we might be kept from the evil in the world (John 17:15), to pray for rulers so that we might live peaceful and quiet lives (I Timothy 2:2), and He even shortens the horrors of the Last Days "for the sake of the elect" (Matthew 24:22).
- God gives common grace for the benefit of mankind (James 1:17). The advances in science, technology, and medicine produce good for the creatures God loves, though they be His enemies. The same may be said of the beauties of art and literature, which are recognized as of value and containing worthwhile insights (Acts 17:28), though too often they become expressions of idolatry.
- God gives common grace because His ultimate goal in history is the redemption of the entire created universe (Romans 8:19-22; Revelation 21:1). All God has made will receive His grace.

In the final assessment, however, common grace is not enough. It serves the purposes for which God intended it, but it does not and cannot save. All of God's good gifts are perverted by sinful man to the extent that the only hope is the grace of redemption, which will be the subject of our study next week.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XVI

### Redeemer - Saving Grace

Today we move on to the most significant aspect of the grace of God toward His creatures - the grace that brings salvation. Again, we speak of the free, unmerited manifestation of the goodness of God toward those who deserve exactly the opposite, but this time in a way that has eternal consequences. This truth is so fundamental to the message of the Bible that the very Gospel itself is called “the Gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

#### THE PRESUPPOSITIONS UNDERLYING GRACE

J.I. Packer, in *Knowing God*, observes that four basic biblical teachings underlie the concept of saving grace. One cannot understand the grace of God, let alone appreciate it, without grasping these fundamental truths:

- “The moral ill-desert of man” - If man is not viewed as hopelessly lost in sin, deserving of nothing but God’s wrath, then people will value grace very little because they assume that, aside from a few minor peccadilloes, they deserve God’s favor.
- “The retributive justice of God” - If God is not holy and just, visiting His wrath on those who rebel against Him, then grace becomes a general benevolence rather than an essential requisite for deliverance from the most fearsome and deserved of consequences.
- “The spiritual impotence of man” - Unless someone really believes that no one seeks God (Romans 3:11) and that no one is capable of pleasing Him or gaining His favor, grace will be viewed as unnecessary.
- “The sovereign freedom of God” - Unless we believe that God does not *need* to be gracious (grace, after all, is a Relative Attribute), we will have difficulty accepting the troubling pronouncements of Romans 9:14-22. He is not like the gods of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* who depend for their sustenance on the sacrifices provided by humans in their worship.

Only by bringing together these biblical teachings can we get a true picture of saving grace - mercy poured out on those who deserve nothing but judgment, are incapable of saving themselves, and need from God not only the cleansing that takes away sin, but even the change of heart necessary to seek that cleansing.

#### THE VOCABULARY OF GRACE

The Bible uses many images to portray the grace of God in salvation. Note the following:

- Expiation - This term refers to the work of Christ as a sacrifice for sin. The Old Testament sacrificial system demonstrated the need for the shedding of blood to take away sins, and thus emphasized the truth that sin merited death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). Christ appeared as the Lamb of God (John 1:29), our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7), and by divine initiative and incomparable grace took away sin (Hebrews 9:23, 26; 10:10, 12, 14; I Peter 1:19).
- Propitiation - This term refers to the removal of God’s wrath. Unlike the pagan deities who demanded that their worshipers act to remove their wrath (e.g., the sacrifice of Iphigenia by

Agamemnon to appease Artemis and allow the Greek sailors to embark on the Trojan War in Greek mythology), God graciously acted to remove His own wrath and satisfy the demands of His justice (Luke 18:13; Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 9:5; I John 2:2; 4:10 - note that, despite different words used in translation, these verses all contain the same Greek word).

- Reconciliation - This term speaks of the initiative taken by God to remove the alienation between His sinful and rebellious creatures and Himself. He restored a relationship broken by sin, one that we could never do enough to restore and that we, in fact, had no interest in restoring (Romans 5:8-11; II Corinthians 5:18-21; Ephesians 2:11-19; Colossians 1:19-22).
- Redemption - The basic idea here is “to buy something back.” In the Old Testament, the Israelites were to redeem firstborn children by the offering of a substitute (Exodus 13:13). More commonly, slaves could be redeemed by someone who purchased them out of slavery; a slave could even redeem himself (Leviticus 25:47-55). The Old Testament contains several beautiful pictures of the redemptive work of Christ, including the Passover, the incident where Boaz serves as the Kinsman-Redeemer for Ruth (Ruth 4), and the story in Hosea where Hosea buys his unfaithful wife out of the slave market and makes her his wife again (Hosea 1-3). The grace of God is thus described as a work of redemption, as Christ paid the price for the freedom from bondage of those for whom He died (Mark 10:45; Ephesians 1:7; I Timothy 2:6; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 9:12; I Peter 1:18-19).

## THE GRACE THAT BRINGS SALVATION

In Scripture, salvation is always spoken of as a work of grace (Ephesians 2:5, 8-9; Titus 2:11 cf. John 3:16; Romans 5:8). It could happen in no other way. As has often been said, the incredible part of Romans 9:13 is not that God could hate Esau, but that He could love Jacob. When we truly understand the depths of our depravity and the impossibility of anyone seeking God by his own initiative or pleasing God by his own actions, we will see why salvation must be a work of grace. Note the implications of this:

- Salvation must be by the free choice of God, for if the choice were ours, no one would be saved. God’s grace motivated Him to undertake the plan of salvation in the first place (Ephesians 1:7; 2:4-8).
- God’s sovereign choice in salvation must be based on His own good pleasure rather than on anything that characterizes the objects of that grace, since we have nothing in ourselves that could possibly commend us to Him (Romans 3:24). Reliance on foreknowledge of faith does not suffice, since foreknowledge in Scripture, when used in connection with salvation, implies a prior *relationship* rather than cognitive knowledge of some future choice, and thus is a virtual synonym for election (Romans 8:29; 11:2; I Peter 1:2, 20).
- God’s grace in salvation must be irresistible, for if it could be resisted, sinners would surely resist it with all their might. Grace *saves* (Titus 2:11); it does not merely make salvation *possible*. Note that this does not mean that God saves sinners against their will; the point is that He regenerates, changing the heart and will so that those who hated Him now desire Him, and thus come to Him in faith.
- The faith that saves is a gift, not something that is earned or that can in any way be considered a work resulting from human initiative (Romans 4:4-5; Ephesians 2:8-9; II



Timothy 1:9). The same may be said of repentance (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Romans 2:4; II Timothy 2:25).

## THE GRACE THAT EMPOWERS AND SUSTAINS

The grace of God goes far beyond the death of Christ on the Cross and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those chosen for salvation. Grace remains a daily necessity in the life of the Christian. Note the following:

- Christians live by grace; the good works done by Christians are possible only because of the ongoing manifestation of the grace of God in our lives (Ephesians 2:10). The privilege of prayer is an example of the continuing need for grace (Hebrews 4:16). Living by grace also includes the grace of suffering (II Corinthians 12:9; Philippians 1:29).
- Christians receive the gifts they use to minister to others by grace. The word for spiritual gifts in the New Testament is *charisma*, a gift of grace (*charis*). This is why spiritual gifts can never be a basis for pride or boasting, and why we ought to be thankful for and profit from the gifts given to others while we seek to use our undeserved gifts for the edification of others in the Body.
- Christians persevere by grace (Philippians 1:6; I Peter 1:5). Grace may be free, but it is not cheap, and Christians must respond to the grace of God with gratitude and obedience (Romans 12:1-2), which themselves are continuing evidences of the operation of the grace of God within.
- The end of God's work of saving grace is His own glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).

Thus when we say we are saved by grace, we encompass every aspect of what it means to be a Christian. God has graciously given His Son to pay for our sins, forgiven us in Him, brought us into His family as a result of the faith and repentance His grace has bestowed, keeps us in His love by His grace (certainly not because of our faithfulness), empowers us to live godly lives and gives us the privilege of ministering to others, and finally brings us home to glory to live in His presence forever - all by His glorious grace in His Son Jesus Christ.



## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD XVII

### Faithfulness

When we sing with the hymn-writer, “Great is Thy faithfulness!”, we pronounce in words of praise the last of the Relative Attributes we will consider in this course. This is an appropriate place to conclude our study, because when we speak of the faithfulness of God, we really speak of the application of all His attributes in the way He interacts with His creatures. If God is in Himself immutable, and therefore faithful to His nature (Isaiah 11:5; II Timothy 2:13), He is also faithful with regard to His treatment of all He has made (Deuteronomy 7:9). Christ’s name is Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11).

The faithfulness of God stands out in stark relief in a world where faithfulness is so rare (Proverbs 20:6). Whether we consider the politician who forgets his campaign promises as soon as he is elected, the married man or woman who ignores his or her vows when struggles or new temptations arise, the athlete who breaks his contract in search of more money, the vendor or workman who does not deliver what is promised when it is promised, or the daily procrastinator who is just plain undependable, we encounter unfaithfulness all around us. How comforting it is to know that, in this way too, God is not like man; He is utterly faithful and dependable.

#### FAITHFUL TO HIS CREATION

God’s faithfulness in the created universe is important for a number of reasons:

- If God were not faithful in the management of His creation, science would be impossible. Science depends on the regularity and predictability of the universe, and this would not exist apart from the sustaining power and providential care of the Creator. The seeming randomness of the behavior of subatomic particles makes what scientists choose to call “the laws of nature” even more inexplicable. How can order result from randomness? Only by the faithfulness of God.
- God is faithful in keeping His covenant with His creation (Genesis 8:22; 9:8-16). The so-called Noahic Covenant is not simply made with the human race, but with all Creation, promising the regularity of the seasons and affirming that God will never again send a flood to destroy the earth and its inhabitants.
- God will be faithful to His promise to cleanse and restore the Creation (Romans 8:19-22; Revelation 21:1); the created universe will not suffer forever under the curse of man’s sin.

#### FAITHFUL TO HIS IMAGE-BEARERS

This truth echoes much of what we already saw when looking at common grace.

- God is faithful in sending sunshine and rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), providing the necessities of life even for those who persist in rebellion against Him. How many in America today celebrate Thanksgiving with no acknowledgment, thought, or even recognition of the One to whom they ought to be thankful?
- The messages of judgment spoken through the mouths of the Old Testament prophets foretelling the doom of God’s enemies were carried out in demonstration of God’s

faithfulness. God is faithful in judging unbelief (II Peter 3:9-10), though He may seem to be slow in doing so in the context of human perceptions. God's faithfulness should thus be a source of fear as well as a source of gratitude to unbelievers.

## FAITHFUL TO HIS CHILDREN

God is faithful to those He has called to be His own peculiar people in many ways:

- Those He has saved, He keeps (John 10:28-29; I Corinthians 1:9; Philippians 1:6; I Thessalonians 5:24; II Timothy 1:12; 2:19). Assurance of salvation stems from God's faithfulness, not ours, and this gives confidence in the face of our sins and failures.
- God demonstrates His faithfulness through His mercy to His people (Psalm 36:5).
- Christ is faithful as a High Priest interceding for His people (Hebrews 2:17).
- God is faithful to forgive sins (I John 1:9).
- The faithfulness of God is seen in sustaining and comforting His people in times of affliction (Isaiah 50:10; Lamentations 3:22-23). The context of the words that give us the substance of the hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the time of Jeremiah.
- God also demonstrates His faithfulness to His people by chastening (Psalm 89:32-33; I Corinthians 11:28-32; Hebrews 12:5-13) and sending sanctifying and faith-building trials (Psalm 119:75).
- God preserves His people in times of temptation, always providing a way of escape so that we have neither cause nor excuse for sin (I Corinthians 10:13).

## FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISES

God's Word has authority and value because God will do what He has said and will not change His mind when He has committed Himself to something or someone.

- God is not unreliable like man (Numbers 23:19); His Word never changes (Psalm 119:138).
- He keeps promises even though the time of fulfillment may be long in coming (Genesis 15:13-16 cf. Exodus 12:41; Isaiah 7:14 cf. Matthew 1:20-23 along with many other Messianic prophecies). This is true even when the absence of evident fulfillment causes doubt and skepticism among unbelievers (II Peter 3:3-4).
- The Bible's picture of the Consummation, the end of all things, is a picture of the faithfulness of God. Christ triumphs, Satan and his minions are vanquished, the Church is glorified, and all is peace and harmony.

## RESPONSE TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

How should we respond to the faithfulness of God in our world and in our lives?

- If God is faithful, we should also be faithful in our dealings (Nehemiah 7:2; Psalm 31:23; Daniel 6:4) and in our stewardship of God's good gifts (I Corinthians 4:2). God seeks and honors such servants (Proverbs 28:20; Matthew 24:45; 25:21, 23; Luke 12:42; 16:10; Acts 16:15; I Timothy 1:12; 3:11; II Timothy 2:2).

- We ought to bear testimony to God's faithfulness (Psalm 40:10; 89:1; 92:1-2).
- God's faithfulness should elicit faith (John 20:27; I Peter 4:19). Those who suffer, as well as those who prosper, should trust the God whose Word is sure and whose care for His people never falters.
- God's faithfulness should motivate perseverance (Hebrews 10:23).
- God's faithfulness should keep us from worry (Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:6-7) and produce confidence, peace, and contentment (Philippians 4:12-13). If I tape a baseball game to watch later and a friend inadvertently tells me the final score, it removes the uncertainty, and therefore the excitement, of watching the game. But a life lived with doubts about the final outcome produces tension and stress that need not plague the child of God. Like the cheating reader of a mystery who turns to the last page while in the middle of the story, the Christian can turn to the end of the Book and be assured that WE WIN!



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