

Chapter 11

The Character of God: “Incommunicable” Attributes

How is God different from us?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

A. Introduction to the Study of God’s Character

1. Classifying God’s Attributes. When we come to talk about the character of God, we realize that we cannot say everything the Bible teaches us about God’s character at once. We need some way to decide which aspect of God’s character to discuss first, which aspect to discuss second, and so forth. In other words, we need some way to categorize the attributes of God. This question is not as unimportant as it may seem. There is the possibility that we would adopt a misleading order of attributes or that we would emphasize some attributes so much that others would not be presented properly.

Several different methods of classifying God’s attributes have been used. In this chapter we will adopt probably the most commonly used classification: the *incommunicable attributes* of God (that is, those attributes that God does not share or “communicate” to others) and the *communicable attributes* of God (those God shares or “communicates” with us).

Examples of the incommunicable attributes would be God’s eternity (God has existed for all eternity, but we have not), unchangeableness (God does not change, but we do), or omnipresence (God is everywhere present, but we are present only in one place at one time). Examples of the communicable attributes would be love (God is love, and we are able to love as well), knowledge (God has knowledge, and we are able to have knowledge as well), mercy (God is merciful, and we are able to be merciful too), or justice (God is just and we, too, are able to be just). This classification of God’s attributes into two major categories is helpful, and most people have an initial sense of which specific attributes should be called incommunicable and which should be called communicable. Thus it makes sense to say that God’s love is communicable but his omnipresence is not.

However, upon further reflection we realize that this distinction, although helpful, is not perfect. That is because there is no attribute of God that is *completely* communicable, and there is no attribute of God that is *completely* incommunicable! This will be evident if we think for a moment about some things we already know about God.

For example, God’s *wisdom* would usually be called a communicable attribute, because we also can be wise. But we will never be infinitely wise as God is. His wisdom is *to some extent* shared with us, but it is never *fully* shared with us. Similarly, we can share God’s *knowledge* in part, yet we shall never share it fully, for God’s thoughts are higher than ours “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (Isa. 55:9). We can imitate God’s love and share in that attribute to some degree, but we will never be infinitely loving as God is. So it is with all the attributes that are normally called “communicable attributes”: God does indeed share them with us *to some degree* but none of these attributes is completely communicable. It is better to say that those attributes we call “communicable” are those that are *more shared* with us.

Those attributes we call “incommunicable” are better defined by saying that they are attributes of God that are *less shared* by us. Not one of the incommunicable attributes of God is completely without some likeness in the character of human beings. For example, God is unchangeable, while we change. But we do not change completely, for there are some aspects of our characters that remain largely unchanged: our individual identities, many of our personality traits, and some of our long-term purposes remain substantially unchanged over many years (and will remain largely unchanged once we are set free from sin and begin to live in God’s presence forever).

Similarly, God is eternal, and we are subject to the limitations of time. However, we see *some* reflection of God's eternity in the fact that we will live with him forever and enjoy eternal life, as well as in the fact that we have the ability to remember the past and to have a strong sense of awareness of the future (unlike much of God's creation; cf. Eccl. 3:11). God's attributes of independence and omnipresence are perhaps those that are least easy to see reflected in our own natures, but even these can be seen to be faintly reflected in us when we compare ourselves with much of the rest of God's creation: as we grow to adulthood we attain some degree of independence from others for our existence; and, though we cannot be at more than one place at one time, we have the ability to act in ways that have effects in many different places at once (this again sets us apart from most of the rest of creation).

We will use the two categories of "incommunicable" and "communicable" attributes then, while realizing that they are not entirely precise classifications, and that there is in reality much overlap between the categories.

2. The Names of God in Scripture. In the Bible a person's name is a description of his or her character. Likewise, the names of God in Scripture are various descriptions of his character. In a broad sense, then, God's "name" is equal to all that the Bible and creation tell us about God. When we pray, "Hallowed be your *name*" as part of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9), we are praying that people would speak about God in a way that is honoring to him and that accurately reflects his character. This honoring of God's name can be done with actions as well as words, for our actions reflect the character of the Creator whom we serve (Matt. 5:16). To honor God's name is therefore to honor him. The command, "You shall not take the *name* of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7) is a command that we not dishonor God's reputation either by words that speak of him in a foolish or misleading way, or by actions that do not reflect his true character.

Now the Bible does give many individual names to God, all of which reflect some true aspect of his character. Many of these names are taken from human experience or emotions in order to describe parts of God's character, while many other names are taken from the rest of the natural creation. In a sense, all of these expressions of God's character in terms of things found in the universe are "names" of God because they tell us something true about him.

Herman Bavinck, in *The Doctrine of God* gives a long list of such descriptions of God taken from creation: God is compared to a lion (Isa. 31:4), an eagle (Deut. 32:11), a lamb (Isa. 53:7), a hen (Matt. 23:37), the sun (Ps. 84:11), the morning star (Rev. 22:16), a light (Ps. 27:1), a torch (Rev. 21:23), a fire (Heb. 12:29), a fountain (Ps. 36:9), a rock (Deut. 32:4), a hiding place (Ps. 119:114), a tower (Prov. 18:10), a shadow (Ps. 91:1), a shield (Ps. 84:11), a temple (Rev. 21:22), and so forth.

Taken from human experience, Bavinck finds an even more extensive list, which is reproduced here only in part: God is called bridegroom (Isa. 61:10), husband (Isa. 54:5), father (Deut. 32:6), judge and king (Isa. 33:22), man of war (Ex. 15:3), builder and maker (Heb. 11:10), shepherd (Ps. 23:1), physician (Ex. 15:26), and so forth. Furthermore, God is spoken of in terms of human actions such as knowing (Gen. 18:21), remembering (Gen. 8:1; Ex. 2:24), seeing (Gen. 1:10), hearing (Ex. 2:24), smelling (Gen. 8:21), tasting (Ps. 11:5), sitting (Ps. 9:7), rising (Ps. 68:1), walking (Lev. 26:12), wiping away tears (Isa. 25:8), and so forth. Human emotions are attributed to God, such as joy (Isa. 62:5), grief (Ps. 78:40; Isa. 63:10), anger (Jer. 7:18–19), love (John 3:16), hatred (Deut. 16:22), wrath (Ps. 2:5), and so forth.

Even though God does not have a physical body, Scripture uses various parts of the human body to describe God's activities in a metaphorical way. Scripture can speak of God's face or countenance (Ex. 33:20, 23; Isa. 63:9; Ps. 16:11; Rev. 22:4), eyes (Ps. 11:4; Heb. 4:13), eyelids (Ps. 11:4), ears (Ps. 55:1; Isa. 59:1), nose (Deut. 33:10), mouth (Deut. 8:3), lips (Job 11:5), tongue (Isa. 30:27), neck (Jer. 18:17), arms (Ex. 15:16), hand (Num. 11:23), finger (Ex. 8:19), heart (Gen. 6:6), foot (Isa. 66:1), and so forth. Even terms describing personal characteristics such as good, merciful, gracious, righteous, holy, just, and many more, are terms whose meaning is familiar to us through an experience of these qualities in other human beings. And even those terms that seem least related to creation, such as eternity or unchangeableness, are understood by us not intuitively but by negating concepts that we know from our experience (eternity is not being limited by time and unchangeableness is not changing).

The point of collecting all these passages is to show, first, that in one sense or another *all of creation reveals something about God to us* and that the higher creation, especially man who is made in God's image, reveals him more fully.

The second reason for mentioning this long list is to show that all that we know about God from Scripture comes to us in terms that we understand because they describe events or things common to human experience. Using a more technical term, we can say that *all that Scripture says about God uses anthropomorphic language—that is, language that speaks of God in human terms*. Sometimes people have been troubled by the fact that there is anthropomorphic language in Scripture. But this should not be troubling to us, for, if God is going to teach us about things we do not know by direct experience (such as his attributes), he has to teach us in terms of what we do know. This is why all that Scripture says about God is “anthropomorphic” in a broad sense (speaking of God either in human terms or in terms of the creation we know). This fact does not mean that Scripture gives us wrong or misleading ideas about God, for this is the way that God has chosen to reveal himself to us, and to reveal himself truly and accurately. Nonetheless, it should caution us not to take any one of these descriptions by itself and isolate it from its immediate context or from the rest of what Scripture says about God.⁴ If we did that, we would run the risk of misunderstanding or of having an imbalanced or inadequate picture of who God is. Each description of one of God’s attributes must be understood in the light of everything else that Scripture tells us about God. If we fail to remember this, we will inevitably understand God’s character wrongly.

For example, we have an *idea* of love from human experience. That helps us to understand what Scripture means when it says that God is love, but our understanding of the meaning of “love” when applied to God is not identical with our experience of love in human relationships. So we must learn from observing how God acts in all of Scripture and from the other attributes of God that are given in Scripture, as well as from our own real-life experiences of God’s love, if we are to refine our idea of God’s love in an appropriate way and avoid misunderstanding. Thus, anthropomorphic language about God is *true* when it occurs in Scripture, but it can be understood rightly only by continual reading of Scripture throughout our lives in order that we may understand this language in the context of all of Scripture.

There is yet a third reason for pointing out the great diversity of descriptions about God taken from human experience and from the natural world. This language should remind us that *God made the universe so that it would show forth the excellence of his character* that is, that it would show forth his glory. God is worthy to receive glory because he created all things (Rev. 4:11); therefore, all things should honor him.

Psalm 148 is an example of all creation being summoned to give praise to God:

Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars! ...

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars! ...

Kings of the earth and all peoples ...

Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven. (Ps. 148:3, 7–11, 13)

As we learn about God’s character from Scripture, it should open our eyes and enable us to interpret creation rightly. As a result, we will be able to see reflections of the excellence of God’s character everywhere in creation: “the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3).

It must be remembered that though all that Scripture tells us about God is true, it is not exhaustive. Scripture does not tell us everything about God’s character. Thus, we will never know God’s *full or complete* “name” in the sense that we will never understand God’s character exhaustively. We will never know all there is to know about God. For this reason theologians have sometimes said, “God has many names, yet God has no name.”

God has many names in that we know many true descriptions of his character from Scripture, but God has no name in that we will never be able to describe or understand all of his character.

3. Balanced Definitions of God's Incommunicable Attributes. The incommunicable attributes of God are perhaps the most easily misunderstood, probably because they represent aspects of God's character that are least familiar to our experience. In this chapter, therefore, each of the incommunicable attributes of God is defined with a two-part sentence. The first part defines the attribute under discussion, and the second part guards against misunderstanding the attribute by stating a balancing or opposite aspect that relates to that attribute. For example, God's unchangeableness is defined as follows: "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, *yet* God does act, and he acts differently in response to different situations." The second half of the sentence guards against the idea that unchangeableness means inability to act at all. Some people do understand unchangeableness in this way, but such an understanding is inconsistent with the biblical presentation of God's unchangeableness.

B. The Incommunicable Attributes of God

1. Independence. God's independence is defined as follows: *God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify him and bring him joy.* This attribute of God is sometimes called his self-existence or his *aseity* (from the Latin words *a se* which mean "from himself").

Scripture in several places teaches that God does not need any part of creation in order to exist or for any other reason. God is absolutely independent and self-sufficient. Paul proclaims to the men of Athens, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything* since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24–25). The implication is that God does not need anything from mankind.

God asks Job, "Who has given to me, that I should repay him? *Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine*" (Job 41:11). No one has ever contributed to God anything that did not first come from God who created all things. Similarly, we read God's word in Psalm 50, "every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for *the world and all that is in it is mine*" (Ps. 50:10–12).

People have sometimes thought that God created human beings because he was lonely and needed fellowship with other persons. If this were true, it would certainly mean that God is not completely independent of creation. It would mean that God would *need* to create persons in order to be completely happy or completely fulfilled in his personal existence.

Yet there are some specific indications in Jesus' words that show this idea to be inaccurate. In John 17:5, Jesus prays, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with *the glory which I had with you before the world was made.*" Here is an indication that there was a sharing of glory between the Father and the Son before creation. Then in John 17:24, Jesus speaks to the Father of "my glory which you have given me *in your love for me before the foundation of the world.*" There was love and communication between the Father and the Son before creation.

These passages indicate explicitly what we can learn elsewhere from the doctrine of the Trinity, namely, that among the persons of the Trinity there has been perfect love and fellowship and communication for all eternity. The fact that God is three persons yet one God means that there was no loneliness or lack of personal fellowship on God's part before creation. In fact, the love and interpersonal fellowship, and the sharing of glory, have always been and will always be far more perfect than any communion we as finite human beings will ever have with God. And as the second verse quoted above speaks of the glory the Father gave to the Son, we should also realize that there is a giving of glory by the members of the Trinity to one another that far surpasses any bestowal of glory that could ever be given to God by all creation.

With regard to God's existence, this doctrine also reminds us that only God exists by virtue of his very nature, and that he was never created and never came into being. He always was. This is seen from the fact that all things that exist were made by him ("For you created *all things* and by your will they existed and were created" [Rev. 4:11]; this is also affirmed in John 1:3; Rom. 11:35–36; 1 Cor. 8:6). Moses tells us that God existed before there was any creation: "*Before* the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the

earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting *you are God*” (Ps. 90:2). God’s independence is also seen in his self-designation in Exodus 3:14: “God said to Moses, “*I AM WHO I AM.*” ’ It is also possible to translate this statement “I will be what I will be,” but in both cases the implication is that God’s existence and character are determined by himself alone and are not dependent on anyone or anything else. This means that God’s being has always been and will always be exactly what it is. God is not dependent upon any part of creation for his existence or his nature. Without creation, God would still be infinitely loving, infinitely just, eternal, omniscient, trinitarian, and so forth.

God’s being is also something totally unique. It is not just that God *does not* need the creation for anything; God *could not* need the creation for anything. The difference between the creature and the Creator is an immensely vast difference, for God exists in a fundamentally different order of being. It is not just that we exist and God has always existed; it is also that God *necessarily* exists in an infinitely better, stronger, more excellent way. The difference between God’s being and ours is more than the difference between the sun and a candle, more than the difference between the ocean and a raindrop, more than the difference between the arctic ice cap and a snowflake, more than the difference between the universe and the room we are sitting in: God’s being is *qualitatively different*. No limitation or imperfection in creation should be projected onto our thought of God. He is the Creator; all else is creaturely. All else can pass away in an instant; he *necessarily exists* forever.

The balancing consideration with respect to this doctrine is the fact that *we and the rest of creation can glorify God and bring him joy*. This must be stated in order to guard against any idea that God’s independence makes us meaningless. Someone might wonder, if God does not need us for anything, then are we important at all? Is there any significance to our existence or to the existence of the rest of creation? In response it must be said that we are in fact very meaningful because God has created us and he has determined that we would be *meaningful to him*. That is the final definition of genuine significance.

God speaks of his sons and daughters from the ends of the earth as “every one who is called by my name, whom I created *for my glory* whom I formed and made” (Isa. 43:7). Although God did not have to create us, he chose to do so in a totally free choice. He decided that he would create us to glorify him (cf. Eph. 1:11–12; Rev. 4:11).

It is also true that we are able to bring real joy and delight to God. It is one of the most amazing facts in Scripture that God actually delights in his people and rejoices over them. Isaiah prophesies about the restoration of God’s people:

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be termed Forsaken
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My delight is in her,
and your land Married;
for *the LORD delights in you*
and your land shall be married ...
as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride
so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:3–5)

Similarly, Zephaniah prophesies that the LORD “will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; *he will exult over you with loud singing* as on a day of festival” (Zeph. 3:17–18). God does not need us for anything, yet it is the amazing fact of our existence that he chooses to delight in us and to allow us to bring joy to his heart. This is the basis for personal significance in the lives of all God’s people: to be significant to God is to be significant in the most ultimate sense. No greater personal significance can be imagined.

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

a. Evidence in Scripture: In Psalm 102 we find a contrast between things that we may think to be permanent such as the earth or the heavens, on the one hand, and God, on the other hand. The psalmist says:

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like raiment, and they pass away;
but *you are the same, and your years have no end.*
(Ps. 102:25–27)

God existed before the heavens and earth were made, and he will exist long after they have been destroyed. God causes the universe to change, but in contrast to this change he is “the same.”

Referring to his own qualities of patience, long-suffering, and mercy, God says, “For *I the LORD do not change*; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6). Here God uses a general statement of his unchangeableness to refer to some specific ways in which he does not change.

James reminds his readers that all good gifts come ultimately from God “*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*” (James 1:17). His argument is that since good gifts have always come from God, we can be confident that only good gifts will come from him in the future, because his character never changes in the slightest degree.

The definition given above specifies that God is unchanging—not in every way that we might imagine, but only in ways that Scripture itself affirms. The Scripture passages already cited refer either to God’s own being or to some attribute of his character. From these we can conclude that God is unchanging, at least with respect to his “*being*,” and with respect to his “*perfections*” (that is, his attributes or the various aspects of his character).

The great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck notes that the fact that God is unchanging in his being is of the utmost importance for maintaining the Creator/creature distinction, and for our worship of God:

The doctrine of God’s immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds this rest in God, in him alone, for only he is pure being and no becoming. Hence, in Scripture God is often called the Rock
...

The definition given above also affirms God’s unchangeableness or immutability with respect to his *purposes*. “The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations” (Ps. 33:11). This general statement about God’s counsel is supported by several specific verses that talk about individual plans or purposes of God that he has had for all eternity (Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Eph. 1:4, 11; 3:9, 11; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Once God has determined that he will assuredly bring something about, his purpose is unchanging, and it will be achieved. In fact, God claims through Isaiah that no one else is like him in this regard:

I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, “My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose” ...
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:9–11)

Furthermore, God is unchanging in his *promises*. Once he has promised something, he will not be unfaithful to that promise: “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?” (Num. 23:19; cf. 1 Sam. 15:29).

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

These instances should all be understood as true expressions of God's *present* attitude or intention *with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment*. If the situation changes, then of course God's attitude or expression of intention will also change. This is just saying that *God responds differently to different situations*. The example of Jonah preaching to Nineveh is helpful here. God sees the wickedness of Nineveh and sends Jonah to proclaim, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The possibility that God would withhold judgment if the people repented is not explicitly mentioned in Jonah's proclamation as recorded in Scripture, but it is of course *implicit* in that warning: the *purpose* for proclaiming a warning is to bring about repentance. Once the people repented, the situation was different, and God responded differently to that changed situation: "*When God saw what they did how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it*" (Jonah 3:10).

The situations with Hezekiah and with the intercession of Moses are similar: God had said that he would send judgment, and that was a true declaration, *provided that the situation remained the same*. But then the situation changed: someone started to pray earnestly (Moses in one case and Hezekiah in the other). Here prayer itself was part of the new situation and was in fact what changed the situation. God responded to that changed situation by answering the prayer and withholding judgment.

In the cases of God being sorry that he had made man, or that he had made Saul king, these too can be understood as *expressions of God's present displeasure* toward the sinfulness of man. In neither case is the language strong enough to require us to think that if God could start again and act differently, he would in fact not create man or not make Saul king. It can instead imply that God's previous action led to events that, in the short term, caused him sorrow, but that nonetheless in the long term would ultimately achieve his good purposes. This is somewhat analogous to a human father who allows his child to embark on a course he knows will bring much sorrow, both to the parent and to the child, but who allows it nonetheless, because he knows that greater long-term good will come from it.

c. The Question of God's Impassibility: Sometimes in a discussion of God's attributes theologians have spoken of another attribute, namely, the *impassibility* of God. This attribute, if true, would mean that God does not have passions or emotions, but is "impassible," not subject to passions. In fact, chapter 2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith says that God is "without . . . passions." This statement goes beyond what we have affirmed in our definition above about God's unchangeableness, and affirms *more* than that God does not change in his being, perfections, purposes, or promises—it also affirms that God does not even feel emotions or "passions."

The Scripture proof given by the Westminster Confession of Faith is Acts 14:15, which in the King James Version reports Barnabas and Paul as rejecting worship from the people at Lystra, protesting that they are not gods but "men of *like passions* with you." The implication of the KJV translation might be that someone who is truly God would not have "like passions" as men do, or it might simply show that the apostles were responding to the false view of passionless gods assumed by the men of Lystra (see vv. 10–11). But if the verse is rightly translated, it certainly does not prove that God has no passions or emotions at all, for the Greek term here (ὁμοιοπαθής, G3926) can simply mean having similar circumstances or experiences, or being of a similar nature to someone else. Of course, God does not have *sinful* passions or emotions. But the idea that God has no passions or emotions *at all* clearly conflicts with much of the rest of Scripture, and for that reason I have not affirmed God's impassibility in this book. Instead, quite the opposite is true, for God, who is the origin of our emotions and who created our emotions, certainly does feel emotions: God rejoices (Isa. 62:5). He is grieved (Ps. 78:40; Eph. 4:30). His wrath burns hot against his enemies (Ex. 32:10). He pities his children (Ps. 103:13).

He loves with everlasting love (Isa. 54:8; Ps. 103:17). He is a God whose passions we are to imitate for all eternity as we like our Creator hate sin and delight in righteousness.

d. The Challenge From Process Theology: God's unchangeableness has been denied frequently in recent years by the advocates of *process theology* a theological position that says that process and change are essential aspects of genuine existence, and that therefore God must be changing over time also, just like everything else that exists. In fact, Charles Hartshorne, the father of process theology, would say that God is continually adding to himself all the experiences that happen anywhere in the universe, and thus God is continually changing. The real appeal of process theology comes from the fact that all people have a deep longing to mean something, to feel significant in the universe. Process theologians dislike the doctrine of God's immutability because they think it implies that nothing we do can really matter to God. If God is really unchangeable, process theologians will say, then nothing we do—in fact, nothing that happens in the universe—has any real effect on God, because God can never change. So what difference do we make? How can we have any ultimate meaning? In response to this question process theologians reject the doctrine of God's immutability and tell us that our actions are so significant that they have an influence on the very being of God himself! As we act, and as the universe changes, God is *truly* affected by these actions and the being of God changes—God *becomes* something other than what he was.

Advocates of process theology often mistakenly accuse evangelical Christians (or the biblical writers themselves) of believing in a God who does not act in the world, or who cannot respond differently to different situations (errors we have discussed above). With regard to the idea that we must be able to influence the very being of God in order to be significant, we must respond that this is an *incorrect assumption* imported into the discussion, and that it is not consistent with Scripture. Scripture is clear that our ultimate significance comes not from being able to change the being of God, but from the fact that God has created us for his glory and that *he* counts us as significant. God alone gives the ultimate definition of what is significant and what is not significant in the universe, and if he counts us significant, then we are!

The other fundamental error in process theology is in assuming that God must be changeable like the universe he created. This is what Scripture explicitly denies: “You, Lord, did found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all grow old like a garment ... *they will be changed. But you are the same and your years will never end*” (Heb. 1:10–12, quoting Ps. 102:25–27).

e. God Is Both Infinite and Personal: Our discussion of process theology illustrates a common difference between biblical Christianity and all other systems of theology. In the teaching of the Bible, God is both *infinite* and *personal*: he is infinite in that he is not subject to any of the limitations of humanity, or of creation in general. He is far greater than everything he has made, far greater than anything else that exists. But he is also personal: he interacts with us as a person, and we can relate to him as persons. We can pray to him, worship him, obey him, and love him, and he can speak to us, rejoice in us, and love us.

Apart from the true religion found in the Bible, no system of religion has a God who is both infinite and personal. For example, the gods of ancient Greek and Roman mythology were *personal* (they interacted frequently with people), but they were not infinite: they had weaknesses and frequent moral failures, even petty rivalries. On the other hand, deism portrays a God who is *infinite* but far too removed from the world to be personally involved in it. Similarly, pantheism holds that God is infinite (since the whole universe is thought to be God), but such a God can certainly not be personal or relate to us as persons.

The error of process theology fits this general pattern. Its advocates are convinced that a God who is unchanging in his being is so different from the rest of creation—so infinite, so unlimited by the change that characterizes all of our existence—that he *cannot* also be personal in a way that we make a difference to him. So in order to gain a God who is personal, they think they have to give up a God who is infinite for a God who is continually in process of change. This kind of reasoning is typical of many (perhaps all) objections to the kind of God presented in the Bible. People say that if God is infinite, he cannot be personal, or they say that if God is personal, he cannot be infinite. The Bible teaches that God is both infinite and personal. We must affirm both that God is infinite (or unlimited) with respect to change that occurs in the universe (nothing will change God's

being, perfections, purposes, or promises), that God is *also* personal, and that he relates to us personally and counts us valuable.

f. The Importance of God's Unchangeableness: At first it may not seem very important to us to affirm God's unchangeableness. The idea is so abstract that we may not immediately realize its significance. But if we stop for a moment to imagine what it would be like if God *could* change, the importance of this doctrine becomes more clear. For example, if God *could* change (in his being, perfections, purposes, or promises), then any change would be either for the better or for the worse. But if God changed for the better, then he was not the best possible being when we first trusted him. And how could we be sure that he is the best possible being now? But if God could change for the worse (in his very *being*), then what kind of God might he become? Might he become, for instance, a little bit evil rather than wholly good? And if he could become a little bit evil, then how do we know he could not change to become largely evil—or *wholly* evil? And there would be not one thing we could do about it, for he is so much more powerful than we are. Thus, the idea that God could change leads to the horrible possibility that thousands of years from now we might come to live forever in a universe dominated by a wholly evil, omnipotent God. It is hard to imagine any thought more terrifying. How could we ever trust such a God who could change? How could we ever commit our lives to him?

Moreover, if God could change with regard to his *purposes* then even though when the Bible was written he promised that Jesus would come back to rule over a new heaven and new earth, he has perhaps abandoned that plan now, and thus our hope in Jesus' return is in vain. Or, if God could change in regard to his *promises* then how could we trust him completely for eternal life? Or for anything else the Bible says? Maybe when the Bible was written he promised forgiveness of sins and eternal life to those who trust in Christ, but (if God can change) perhaps he has changed his mind on those promises now—how could we be sure? Or perhaps his omnipotence will change someday, so that even though he wants to keep his promises, he will no longer be able to do so.

A little reflection like this shows how absolutely important the doctrine of God's unchangeableness is. If God is not unchanging, then the whole basis of our faith begins to fall apart, and our understanding of the universe begins to unravel. This is because our faith and hope and knowledge all ultimately depend on a *person* who is *infinitely worthy of trust*—because he is *absolutely* and *eternally* unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises.

3. Eternity. God's eternity may be defined as follows: *God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time.*

Sometimes this doctrine is called the doctrine of God's infinity with respect to time. To be "infinite" is to be unlimited, and this doctrine teaches that time does not limit God.

This doctrine is also related to God's unchangeableness. If it is true that God does not change, then we must say that *time* does not change God: it has no effect on his being, perfections, purposes, or promises. But that means that time has no effect on God's knowledge, for instance. God never learns new things or forgets things, for that would mean a change in his perfect knowledge. This implies also that the passing of time does not add to or detract from God's knowledge: he knows all things past, present, and future, and knows them all equally vividly.

a. God Is Timeless in His Own Being: The fact that God has no beginning or end is seen in Psalm 90:2: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, *from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*" Similarly, in Job 36:26, Elihu says of God, "the number of his years is unsearchable."

God's eternity is also suggested by passages that talk about the fact that God always is or always exists. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8; cf. 4:8).

It is also indicated in Jesus' bold use of a present tense verb that implies continuing present existence when he replied to his Jewish adversaries, "Before Abraham was, *I am*" (John 8:58). This statement is itself an explicit claiming of the name of God, "*I AM WHO I AM*," from Exodus 3:14, a name that also suggests a continual present existence: God is the eternal "*I AM*," the one who eternally exists.

The fact that God never began to exist can also be concluded from the fact that God created all things, and that he himself is an immaterial spirit. Before God made the universe, there was no matter, but then he created

all things (Gen. 1:1; John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together: if there is no matter, there can be no space or time either. Thus, before God created the universe, there was no “time,” at least not in the sense of a succession of moments one after another. Therefore, when God created the universe, he also created time. When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another. But before there was a universe, and before there was time, God always existed, without beginning, and without being influenced by time. And time, therefore, does not have existence in itself, but, like the rest of creation, depends on God’s eternal being and power to keep it existing.

The foregoing Scripture passages and the fact that God always existed before there was any time combine to indicate to us that God’s own being does not have a succession of moments or any progress from one state of existence to another. To God himself, all of his existence is always somehow “present,” though admittedly that idea is difficult for us to understand, for it is a kind of existence different from that which we experience.

b. God Sees All Time Equally Vividly: It is somewhat easier for us to understand that God sees all time equally vividly. We read in Psalm 90:4, “For a *thousand years* in your sight are but as *yesterday* when it is past, or as a *watch* in the night.” It is sometimes difficult for us to remember events that occurred several weeks ago, or several months ago, or several years ago. We remember recent events more vividly, and the clarity of our memory fades with the passing of time. Even if it were possible for us to live “a thousand years,” we would remember very few events from hundreds of years earlier, and the clarity of that memory would be very low. But here Scripture tells us that God views a thousand years “as yesterday.” He can remember all the detailed events of a thousand years at least as clearly as we can remember the events of “yesterday.” In fact, to him a thousand years is “as a watch in the night,” a three- or four-hour period during which a guard would stand watch. Such a short period of time would pass quickly and all the events would be easily recalled. Yet this is how a thousand years seems to God.

When we realize that the phrase “a thousand years” does not imply that God forgets things after 1,100 or 1,200 years, but rather expresses as long a time as one might imagine, it becomes evident that *all of past history* is viewed by God with great clarity and vividness: all of time since the creation is to God as if it just happened. And it will always remain just that clear in his consciousness, throughout millions of years of eternity future.

In the New Testament, Peter tells us, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). The second half of this statement had already been made in Psalm 90, but the first half introduces an additional consideration, “One day is as a thousand years”; that is, any one day from God’s perspective seems to last for “a thousand years”: it is as if that day never ends, but is always being experienced. Again, since “a thousand years” is a figurative expression for “as long a time as we can imagine,” or “all history,” we can say from this verse that any one day seems to God to be present to his consciousness forever.

Taking these two considerations together, we can say the following: in God’s perspective, any extremely long period of time is as if it just happened. And any very short period of time (such as one day) seems to God to last forever: it never ceases to be “present” in his consciousness. Thus, God sees and knows all events past, present, and future with equal vividness. This should never cause us to think that God does not see events *in time* and act *in time* (see below), but just the opposite: God is the eternal Lord and Sovereign over history, and he sees it more clearly and acts in it more decisively than any other. But, once we have said that, we still must affirm that these verses speak of God’s relationship to time in a way that we do not and cannot experience: God’s experience of time is not just a patient endurance through eons of endless duration, but he has a *qualitatively different* experience of time than we do. This is consistent with the idea that in his own being, God is timeless; he does not experience a succession of moments. This has been the dominant view of Christian orthodoxy throughout the history of the church, though it has been frequently challenged, and even today many theologians deny it.

We can picture God’s relationship to time as in figure 11.1. This diagram is meant to show that God created time and is Lord over time. Therefore he can see all events in time equally vividly, yet he also can see events in time and act in time.

Figure 11.1: The Relationship of God to Time

The diagram also anticipates the following discussion, since it indicates that God knows events in the future, even the infinitely long eternal future. With regard to the future, God frequently claims through the Old Testament prophets that *he alone is the one who knows and can declare future events*. “Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me” (Isa. 45:21). Similarly, we read:

For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and *there is none like me*
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done
saying, “My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose.” (Isa. 46:9–10)

Thus God somehow stands above time and is able to see it all as present in his consciousness. Although the analogy is not perfect, we might think of the moment we finish reading a long novel. Before putting it back on the shelf we might flip quickly through the pages once more, calling to mind the many events that had occurred in that novel. For a brief moment, things that transpired over a long period of time all seem to be “present” to our minds. Perhaps this is faintly analogous to God’s experience of seeing all of history as equally present in his consciousness.

c. God Sees Events in Time and Acts in Time: Yet once all this has been said it is necessary to guard against misunderstanding by completing the definition of God’s eternity: “*yet God sees events in time and acts in time.*” Paul writes, “*when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son* born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4–5). God observed clearly and knew exactly what was happening with events in his creation as they occurred over time. We might say that God watched the progress of time as various events occurred within his creation. Then at the right time, “when the time had fully come,” God sent forth his Son into the world.

It is evident throughout Scripture that God acts within time and acts differently at different points in time. For example, Paul tells the men of Athens, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but *now* he commands all men everywhere to repent, because *he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world* in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed ...” (Acts 17:30–31). This statement includes a description of a previous way in which God acted, God’s present way of acting, and a future activity that he will carry out, all in time.

Indeed, the repeated emphasis on God’s ability to predict the future in the Old Testament prophets requires us to realize that God predicts his actions at one point in time and then carries out his actions at a later point in time. And on a larger scale, the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation is God’s own record of the way he has acted over time to bring redemption to his people.

We must therefore affirm both that God has no succession of moments in his own being and sees all history equally vividly, and that in his creation he sees the progress of events over time and acts differently at different points in time; in short, he is the Lord who created time and who rules over it and uses it for his own purposes. God can act in time *because* he is Lord of time. He uses it to display his glory. In fact, it is often God’s good pleasure to fulfill his promises and carry out his works of redemption over a period of time so that we might more readily see and appreciate his great wisdom, his patience, his faithfulness, his lordship over all events, and even his unchangeableness and eternity.

d. We Will Always Exist in Time: Will we ever share in God’s eternity? Specifically, in the new heaven and new earth which are yet to come, will time still exist? Some have thought that it would not. In fact, there is a hymn that begins, “When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more ...” And we read in Scripture, “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb ... and there shall be no night there” (Rev. 21:23, 25; cf. 22:5).

Nevertheless, it is not true to say that heaven will be “timeless,” or without the presence of time or the passage of time. Rather, as long as we are finite creatures we will necessarily experience events one after another. Even the passage that talks about no night being in heaven also mentions the fact that the kings of the earth will bring into the heavenly city “the glory and the honor of the nations” (Rev. 21:26). We are told concerning the light of the heavenly city, “By its light shall the nations walk” (Rev. 21:24). These activities of bringing things into the heavenly city and walking by the light of the heavenly city imply that events are done one after another. Something is outside the heavenly city, and then at a later point in time this thing is part of the glory and honor of the nations that are brought into the heavenly city. To cast one’s crown before the throne of God (Rev. 4:10) requires that at one moment the person has a crown and that at a later moment that crown is cast before the throne. To sing a new song of praise before God in heaven requires that one word be sung after another. In fact, the “tree of life” in the heavenly city is said to be “*yielding its fruit each month*” (Rev. 22:2), which implies a regular passage of time and the occurrence of events in time.

Therefore, there will still be a succession of moments one after another and things happening one after another in heaven. We will experience eternal life not in an exact duplication of God’s attribute of eternity, but rather in a duration of time that will never end: we, as God’s people will experience fullness of joy in God’s presence for all eternity—not in the sense that we will no longer experience time, but in the sense that our lives with him will go on forever: “And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, *and they shall reign for ever and ever*” (Rev. 22:5).

4. Omnipresence. Just as God is unlimited or infinite with respect to time, so God is unlimited with respect to space. This characteristic of God’s nature is called God’s omnipresence (the Latin prefix *omni-* means “all”). God’s omnipresence may be defined as follows: *God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.*

The fact that God is Lord of space and cannot be limited by space is evident first from the fact that he created it, for the creation of the material world (Gen. 1:1) implies the creation of space as well. Moses reminded the people of God’s lordship over space: “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it” (Deut. 10:14).

a. God Is Present Everywhere: Yet there are also specific passages that speak of God’s presence in every part of space. We read in Jeremiah, “Am I a God at hand, says the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the LORD. *Do I not fill heaven and earth?* says the LORD” (Jer. 23:23–24). God is here rebuking the prophets who think their words or thoughts are hidden from God. He is everywhere and fills heaven and earth.

God’s omnipresence is beautifully expressed by David:

Whither shall I go from your Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me. (Ps. 139:7–10)

There is nowhere in the entire universe, on land or sea, in heaven or in hell, where one can flee from God’s presence.

We should note also that there is no indication that simply a *part* of God is in one place and a part of him in another. It is *God himself* who is present wherever David might go. We cannot say that some of God or just part of God is present, for that would be to think of his being in spatial terms, as if he were limited somehow by space. It seems more appropriate to say that God is present *with his whole being* in every part of space (cf. also Acts 17:28 where Paul affirms the correctness of the words, “In him we live and move and have our being,” and Col. 1:17, which says of Christ, “in him all things hold together”).

b. God Does Not Have Spatial Dimensions: While it seems necessary for us to say that God's whole being is present in every part of space, or at every point in space, it is also necessary to say that *God cannot be contained by any space* no matter how large. Solomon says in his prayer to God, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, *heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you*; how much less this house which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain God; indeed, he cannot be contained by the largest space imaginable (cf. Isa. 66:1–2; Acts 7:48). While the thought that God is everywhere present with his whole being ought to encourage us greatly in prayer no matter where we are, the fact that no one place can be said to contain God should also discourage us from thinking that there is some special place of worship that gives people special access to God: he cannot be contained in any one place.

We should guard against thinking that God extends infinitely far in all directions so that he himself exists in a sort of infinite, unending space. Nor should we think that God is somehow a "bigger space" or bigger area surrounding the space of the universe as we know it. All of these ideas continue to think of God's being in spatial terms, as if he were simply an extremely large being. Instead, we should try to avoid thinking of God in terms of size or spatial dimensions. God is a being who exists *without* size or dimensions in space. In fact, before God created the universe, there was no matter or material so there was no space either. Yet God still existed. Where was God? He was not in a place that we could call a "where," for there was no "where" or space. But God still was! This fact makes us realize that God relates to space in a far different way than we do or than any created thing does. He exists as a kind of being that is far different and far greater than we can imagine.

We must also be careful not to think that God himself is equivalent to any part of creation or to all of it. A pantheist believes that everything is God, or that God is everything that exists. The biblical perspective is rather that God is *present* everywhere in his creation, but that he is also distinct from his creation. How can this be? The analogy of a sponge filled with water is not perfect, but it is helpful. Water is present everywhere in the sponge, but the water is still completely distinct from the sponge. Now this analogy breaks down at very small points within the sponge, where we could say that there is sponge at one point and not water, or water and not sponge. Yet this is because the analogy is dealing with two materials that have spatial characteristics and dimensions, while God does not.

c. God Can Be Present to Punish, to Sustain, or to Bless: The idea of God's omnipresence has sometimes troubled people who wonder how God can be present, for example, in hell. In fact, isn't hell the opposite of God's presence, or the absence of God? This difficulty can be resolved by realizing that *God is present in different ways in different places* or that God acts differently in different places in his creation. Sometimes God is *present to punish*. A terrifying passage in Amos vividly portrays this presence of God in judgment:

Not one of them shall flee away,
not one of them shall escape.
Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.
Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them.
And though they go into captivity before their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall slay them;
and I will set my eyes upon them for evil and not for good. (Amos 9:1–4)

At other times God is present neither to punish nor to bless, but merely *present to sustain* or to keep the universe existing and functioning in the way he intended it to function. In this sense the divine nature of Christ

is everywhere present: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). The author of Hebrews says of God the Son that he is (continually) “upholding the universe by his word of power” (Heb. 1:3).

Yet at other times or in other places God is *present to bless*. David says, “*in your presence* there is fulness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11). Here David is speaking not of God’s presence to punish or merely to sustain, but of God’s presence to bless.

In fact, most of the time that the Bible talks about God’s presence, it is referring to God’s presence to bless. For example, it is in this way that we should understand God’s presence above the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament. We read of “the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is *enthroned on the cherubim*” (1 Sam. 4:4; cf. Ex. 25:22), a reference to the fact that God made his presence known and acted in a special way to bring blessing and protection to his people at the location he had designated as his throne, namely, the place above the two golden figures of heavenly beings (“cherubim”) that were over the top of the ark of the covenant. It is not that God was not present elsewhere, but rather that here he especially made his presence known and here he especially manifested his character and brought blessing to his people.

In the new covenant, there is no one place on earth that God has chosen as his particular dwelling place, for we can worship him anywhere (see John 4:20). But now and for all eternity God has chosen the place the Bible calls “heaven” to be the focus of the manifestation of his character and the presence of his blessing and glory. So when the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God, John in his vision hears a loud voice from God’s throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:3). We might find it misleading to say that God is “more present” in heaven than anywhere else, but it would not be misleading to say that God is present in a special way in heaven, present especially there to bless and to show forth his glory. We could also say that God manifests his presence more fully in heaven than elsewhere.

In this way also Paul’s statement about Christ can be understood: “In him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). In one sense of course we could say that God’s whole being is present at every point in space and therefore at every point in every person, not only in Christ. But there are two difficulties with speaking this way: (1) The Bible never speaks about God’s presence in unbelievers in a direct way, probably to avoid any connection between God and the responsibility or blame for evil deeds, and probably also to avoid any suggestion of God’s presence to bless, since it is only a presence to sustain. (2) Furthermore, this sense of “present to sustain” is not the sense Paul has in mind in Colossians 2:9. In fact, there Paul does not even seem to mean simply “present to bless” in the same sense in which God is present to bless in the lives of all believers. Rather, Paul seems to mean that in Christ God’s own nature is present to bless and to manifest his character in the fullest and most complete way possible.

Our difficulty in understanding how to express the way in which God is present in unbelievers, for example, leads us to realize that although the Bible *can* speak of God as being present everywhere, when the Bible says that God is “present” it *usually* means “present to bless.” That is, although there are a few references to God’s presence to sustain or presence to punish, the vast majority of biblical references to God’s presence are simply more brief ways of stating that he is *present to bless*. When we become more and more familiar with this biblical pattern of speech, it becomes more and more difficult to speak of God’s presence in any other way. And perhaps it is even misleading to do so unless a clear explanation of our meaning can be given.

Some examples of the usual biblical means of expression are as follows: 2 Corinthians 3:17: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”; Romans 8:9–10: “you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you ... if Christ is in you ... your spirits are alive”; John 14:23: “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him,” and so forth. All of these verses talk about God’s presence and assume that we understand that they mean God’s presence *to bless*.

In a parallel kind of expression, when the Bible talks about God being “far away” it usually means he is “not present to bless.” For example, Isaiah 59:2 says, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,” and Proverbs 15:29 declares: “The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.”

In summary, God is present in every part of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places. Furthermore, when the Bible speaks of God’s presence, it usually means his presence to bless, and it is only normal for our own speech to conform to this biblical usage.

Herman Bavinck, in *The Doctrine of God* quotes a beautiful paragraph illustrating the practical application of the doctrine of God’s omnipresence:

When you wish to do something evil, you retire from the public into your house where no enemy may see you; from those places of your house which are open and visible to the eyes of men you remove yourself into your room; even in your room you fear some witness from another quarter; you retire into your heart, there you meditate: he is more inward than your heart. Wherever, therefore, you shall have fled, there he is. From yourself, whither will you flee? Will you not follow yourself wherever you shall flee? But since there is One more inward even than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from God angry but to God reconciled. There is no place at all whither you may flee. Will you flee from him? Flee unto him.

5. Unity. The unity of God may be defined as follows: *God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times.* This attribute of God has also been called *God's simplicity* using *simple* in the less common sense of “not complex” or “not composed of parts.” But since the word *simple* today has the more common sense of “easy to understand” and “unintelligent or foolish,” it is more helpful now to speak of God's “unity” rather than his “simplicity.”

When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than all the rest. There is an assumption that every attribute is completely true of God and is true of all of God's character. For example, John can say that “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and then a little later say also that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light. Rather it is *God himself* who is light, and it is *God himself* who is also love.

The same is true of other descriptions of God's character, such as that in Exodus 34:6–7:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

We would not want to say that these attributes are only characteristic of some part of God, but rather that they are characteristic of God himself and therefore characteristic of all of God.

These considerations indicate that we should not think of God as some kind of collection of various attributes added together as in figure 11.2.

Figure 11.2: God's Being Is Not a Collection of Attributes Added Together

Nor should we think of the attributes of God as something external from God's real being or real self, something added on to who God really is, after the analogy of figure 11.3.

Figure 11.3: God's Attributes Are Not Additions to His Real Being

Rather, we must remember that God's *whole being* includes all of his attributes: he is *entirely* loving, *entirely* merciful, *entirely* just, and so forth. Every attribute of God that we find in Scripture is true of *all* of God's being, and we therefore can say that *every attribute of God also qualifies every other attribute.*

Figure 11.4 may be helpful in understanding this doctrine of God's unity. In the diagram, let us assume that the horizontal lines represent the attribute of love, and that the vertical lines represent the aspect of God's justice.

Figure 11.4: God's Love and Justice

Furthermore, let us understand the diagonal lines going from upper left to lower right as representing God's holiness and the diagonal lines going from upper right to lower left as representing God's wisdom, as in figure 11.5.

Figure 11.5: God's Love, Justice, Holiness, and Wisdom

We could of course go on with different sorts of lines for each of the different attributes of God. But it should be clear that each attribute is simply a way of describing one aspect of God's total character or being. God himself is a *unity* a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in *all* of these attributes.

Why then does Scripture speak of these different attributes of God? It is probably because we are unable to grasp all of God's character at one time, and we need to learn of it from different perspectives over a period of time. Yet these perspectives should never be set in opposition to one another, for they are just different ways of looking at the totality of God's character.

In terms of practical application, this means that we should never think, for example, that God is a loving God at one point in history and a just or wrathful God at another point in history. He is the same God always, and everything he says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes. It is not accurate to say, as some have said, that God is a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New Testament. God is and always has been infinitely just and infinitely loving as well, and everything he does in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is completely consistent with both of those attributes.

Now it is true that some actions of God show certain of his attributes more prominently. Creation demonstrates his power and wisdom, the atonement demonstrates his love and justice, and the radiance of heaven demonstrates his glory and beauty. But all of these in some way or other *also* demonstrate his knowledge and holiness and mercy and truthfulness and patience and sovereignty, and so forth. It would be difficult indeed to find some attribute of God that is not reflected at least to some degree in any one of his acts of redemption. This is due to the fact mentioned above: God is a unity and everything he does is an act of the whole person of God.

Moreover, the doctrine of the unity of God should caution us against attempting to single out any one attribute of God as more important than all the others. At various times people have attempted to see God's holiness, or his love, or his self-existence, or his righteousness, or some other attribute as the most important attribute of his being. But all such attempts seem to misconceive of God as a combination of various parts, with some parts being somehow larger or more influential than others. Furthermore, it is hard to understand exactly what "most important" might mean. Does it mean that there are some actions of God that are not fully consistent with some of his other attributes? That there are some attributes that God somehow sets aside at times in order to act in ways slightly contrary to those attributes? Certainly we cannot maintain either of these views, for that would mean that God is inconsistent with his own character or that he changes and becomes something different from what he was previously. Rather, when we see all the attributes as merely various aspects of the total character of God, then such a question becomes quite unnecessary and we discover that there is no attribute that can be singled out as more important. It is *God himself in his whole being* who is supremely important, and it is God himself in his whole being whom we are to seek to know and to love.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. As you think of God's independence, unchangeableness, eternity, omnipresence, and unity, can you see some faint reflections of these five incommunicable attributes in yourself as God created you to be?

What would it mean to strive to become more like God in these areas? At what point would it be wrong to even want to be like God in each of these areas because it would be attempting to usurp his unique role as Creator and Lord?

2. Using each of these five incommunicable attributes, explain how we will be more like God in heaven than we are now, and also how we will for all eternity be unlike God in each of these five areas.
3. Explain how each aspect of the doctrine of God's independence makes you feel emotionally. Does this doctrine have a positive or negative effect on your spiritual life? Explain why.
4. Explain how the doctrine of God's immutability or unchangeableness helps to answer the following questions: Will we be able to do a good job of bringing up children in such an evil world as we have today? Is it possible to have the same close fellowship with God that people had during biblical times? What can we think or do to make Bible stories seem more real and less removed from our present life? Do you think that God is less willing to answer prayer today than he was in Bible times?
5. If you sin against God today, when would it start bringing sorrow to God's heart? When would it stop bringing sorrow to God's heart? Does this reflection help you understand why God's character requires that he punish sin? Why did God have to send his Son to bear the punishment for sin instead of simply forgetting about sin and welcoming sinners into heaven without having given the punishment for sin to anyone? Does God now think of your sins as forgiven or as unforgiven sins?
6. If you sing praise to God today, when will the sound of that praise cease being present in God's consciousness and bringing delight to his heart? Do songs of praise to God have any ultimate meaning? What about trusting in him hour by hour or obeying him throughout each day?
7. Is control over the use of your time a struggle in your own life? As we grow toward maturity in the Christian life and toward conformity to the image of Christ, will we become more like God in our mastery over time? In what ways?
8. Explain how each of the five incommunicable attributes of God discussed in this chapter can be a help in your own prayer life.

SPECIAL TERMS

anthropomorphic language
aseity
communicable attributes
eternity
immutability
incommunicable attributes
independence
infinite
infinity with respect to space
infinity with respect to time
names of God
omnipresence
self-existence
simplicity
unchangeableness
unity

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1223–29.)

Note: For this chapter on God's incommunicable attributes, it should be noted that some systematic theologies classify and discuss God's attributes in categories other than communicable and incommunicable, so an exact cross-reference to parallel sections is not always possible. A fuller list of the sections in systematic theology texts that discuss the attributes of God in general will be found in the bibliography at the end of chapter 13.

Sections in Evangelical Systematic Theologies

1. Anglican (Episcopalian)
1882–92 Litton, 58–67
2. Arminian (Wesleyan or Methodist)
1847 Finney, 49–65
1875–76 Pope, 1:248–55, 287–325
1892–94 Miley, 1:159–80, 214–22
1940 Wiley, 1:241–393
1960 Purkiser, 127–44
3. Baptist
1767 Gill, 25–31, 33–50, 119–22
1887 Boyce, 1:125–35, 183–90
1907 Strong, 243–303
1917 Mullins, 214–50
1983–85 Erickson, 1:263–78
1987–94 Lewis/Demarest, 1:175–248
4. Dispensational
1947 Chafer, 1:179–191, 212–24, 260–71
1949 Thiessen, 118–28
5. Lutheran
1917–24 Pieper, 1:427–47
1934 Mueller, 160–67
6. Reformed (or Presbyterian)
1559 Calvin, 1:96–120
1861 Heppe, 57–104
1871–73 Hodge, 1:366–93
1878 Dabney, *ST* 38–45, 144–54
1887–1921 Warfield, *SSW* 1:69–87; *ST* 109–14
1889 Shedd, 1:151–94, 334–92
1909 Bavinck, *DG* 113–72
1938 Berkhof, 47–63
1962 Buswell, 1:36–57
7. Renewal (or charismatic/Pentecostal)
1988–92 Williams, 55–59, 77–79

Sections in Representative Roman Catholic Systematic Theologies

1. Roman Catholic: Traditional
1955 Ott, 24–38
2. Roman Catholic: Post-Vatican II
1980 McBrien, 1:238–341

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Psalm 102:25–27:

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

HYMN

“IMMORTAL, INVISIBLE, GOD ONLY WISE”

In several lines of this hymn the various attributes of God are mentioned in such rapid succession that it is impossible for us to reflect on each one individually as we sing. That is not entirely a disadvantage of the hymn, however, for it makes us realize that when we finally see God in all his glory in heaven, the wonder of beholding him and all his perfections at once will overwhelm us far more completely than does this hymn, and we will find ourselves lost in praise.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render; O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth thee!

Author: Walter Chalmers Smith, 1867

Alternative hymn: “Have You Not Known, Have You Not Heard?”

Chapter 12

The Character of God: “Communicable” Attributes (Part 1)

How is God like us in his being, and in mental and moral attributes?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

In this chapter we consider the attributes of God that are “communicable,” or more shared with us than those mentioned in the previous chapter. It must be remembered that this division into “incommunicable” and “communicable” is not an absolute division and there is some room for difference of opinion concerning which attributes should fit into which categories. The list of attributes here put in the category “communicable” is a common one, but understanding the definition of each attribute is more important than being able to categorize them in exactly the way presented in this book.

Furthermore, any list of God’s attributes must be based on some understanding of how finely one wishes to make distinctions between various aspects of God’s character. Are God’s goodness and love two attributes or one? What about knowledge and wisdom, or spirituality and invisibility? In this chapter, each of these attributes is treated separately, and the result is a rather long list of various attributes. Yet in several cases it would not make much difference if someone were to treat these pairs as various aspects of the same attribute. If we remember that it is the entire and wholly integrated person of God about whom we are talking, it will be apparent that the division into various attributes is not a matter of great doctrinal significance but is something that must be based on one’s judgment concerning the most effective way to present the biblical material.

This chapter divides God’s “communicable” attributes into five major categories, with individual attributes listed under each category as follows:

- A. Attributes Describing God’s Being
 - 1. Spirituality
 - 2. Invisibility
- B. Mental Attributes
 - 3. Knowledge (or Omniscience)
 - 4. Wisdom
 - 5. Truthfulness (and Faithfulness)
- C. Moral Attributes
 - 6. Goodness
 - 7. Love
 - 8. Mercy (Grace, Patience)
 - 9. Holiness
 - 10. Peace (or Order)
 - 11. Righteousness (or Justice)
 - 12. Jealousy
 - 13. Wrath
- D. Attributes of Purpose
 - 14. Will
 - 15. Freedom
 - 16. Omnipotence (or Power, and Sovereignty)
- E. “Summary” Attributes
 - 17. Perfection
 - 18. Blessedness
 - 19. Beauty
 - 20. Glory

Because God's communicable attributes are to be imitated in our lives, each of these sections will include a short explanation of the way in which the attribute in question is to be imitated by us.

A. Attributes Describing God's Being

1. Spirituality. People have often wondered, what is God made of? Is he made of flesh and blood like ourselves? Certainly not. What then is the material that forms his being? Is God made of matter at all? Or is God pure energy? Or is he in some sense pure thought?

The answer of Scripture is that God is none of these. Rather, we read that "God is *spirit*" (John 4:24). This statement is spoken by Jesus in the context of a discussion with the woman at the well in Samaria. The discussion is about the *location* where people should worship God, and Jesus is telling her that true worship of God does not require that one be *present* either in Jerusalem or in Samaria (John 4:21), for true worship has to do not with physical location but with one's inner spiritual condition. This is because "God is spirit" and this apparently signifies that God is in no way limited to a spatial location.

Thus, we should *not* think of God as having *size* or *dimensions* even infinite ones (see the discussion on God's omnipresence in the previous chapter). We should not think of God's existence as spirit as meaning that God is infinitely large, for example, for it is not *part* of God but *all* of God that is in every point of space (see Ps. 139:7–10). Nor should we think that God's existence as spirit means that God is infinitely small, for no place in the universe can surround him or contain him (see 1 Kings 8:27). Thus, God's being cannot be rightly thought of in terms of space, however we may understand his existence as "spirit."

We also find that God forbids his people to think of *his very being* as similar to *anything* else in the physical creation. We read in the Ten Commandments:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or *any likeness of anything* that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; *for I the LORD your God am a jealous God* visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:4–6)

The creation language in this commandment ("heaven above, or ... earth beneath, or ... water under the earth") is a reminder that God's *being* his essential mode of existence, is different from everything that he has created. To think of his being in terms of anything else in the created universe is to misrepresent him, to limit him, to think of him as less than he really is. To make a graven (or "carved" or "sculptured") image of God as a golden calf, for example, may have been an attempt to portray God as a God who is strong and full of life (like a calf), but to say that God was like a calf was a horribly false statement about God's knowledge, wisdom, love, mercy, omnipresence, eternity, independence, holiness, righteousness, justice, and so forth. Indeed, while we must say that God has made all creation so that each part of it reflects something of his own character, we must also now affirm that to picture God as *existing* in a form or *mode of being* that is like anything else in creation is to think of God in a horribly misleading and dishonoring way.

This is why God's jealousy is given as the reason for the prohibition against making images of him: "for I the LORD your God am a jealous God ..." (Ex. 20:5). God is jealous to protect his own honor. He eagerly seeks for people to think of him as he is and to worship him for all his excellence, and he is angered when his glory is diminished or his character is falsely represented (cf. Deut. 4:23–24, where God's intense jealousy for his own honor is again given as the reason for a prohibition against making any images of him).

Thus, God does not have a physical body, nor is he made of any kind of matter like much of the rest of creation. Furthermore, God is not merely energy or thought or some other element of creation. He is also not like vapor or steam or air or space, all of which are created things: *God's being* is not like any of these. God's being is not even exactly like our own spirits, for these are created things that apparently are able to exist only in one place in one time.

Instead of all these ideas of God, we must say that God is *spirit*. Whatever this means, it is a kind of existence that is unlike anything else in creation. It is a kind of existence that is far superior to all our material existence. We might say that God is "pure being" or "the fullness or essence of being." Furthermore, this kind of existence is not less real or less desirable than our own existence. Rather, it is more real and more desirable

than the material and immaterial existence of all creation. Before there was any creation, God existed as spirit. His own being is so very real that it was able to cause everything else to come into existence!

At this point we can define God's spirituality: *God's spirituality means that God exists as a being that is not made of any matter, has no parts or dimensions, is unable to be perceived by our bodily senses, and is more excellent than any other kind of existence.*

We may ask why God's being is this way. Why is God spirit? All that we can say is that this is the greatest, most excellent way to be! This is a form of existence far superior to anything we know. It is amazing to meditate on this fact.

These considerations make us wonder if God's spirituality should perhaps be called an "incommunicable" attribute. To do so would indeed be appropriate in some ways, since God's being is so different from ours. Nevertheless, the fact remains that God has given us spirits in which we worship him (John 4:24; 1 Cor. 14:14; Phil. 3:3), in which we are united with the Lord's spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), with which the Holy Spirit joins to bear witness to our adoption in God's family (Rom. 8:16), and in which we pass into the Lord's presence when we die (Luke 23:46; Eccl. 12:7; Heb. 12:23; cf. Phil. 1:23–24). Therefore there is clearly some communication from God to us of a spiritual nature that is something like his own nature, though certainly not in all respects. For this reason it also seems appropriate to think of God's spirituality as a communicable attribute.

2. Invisibility. Related to God's spirituality is the fact that God is invisible. Yet we also must speak of the visible ways in which God manifests himself. God's invisibility can be defined as follows: *God's invisibility means that God's total essence, all of his spiritual being, will never be able to be seen by us, yet God still shows himself to us through visible, created things.*

Many passages speak of the fact that God is not able to be seen. "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18). Jesus says, "Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father" (John 6:46). Paul gives the following words of praise: "To the King of ages, immortal, *invisible* the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17). He speaks of God as one "who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, *whom no man has ever seen or can see*" (1 Tim. 6:16). John says, "No man has ever seen God" (1 John 4:12).

We must remember that these passages were all written after events in Scripture where people saw some outward manifestation of God. For example, very early in Scripture we read, "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11). Yet God told Moses, "You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20). Nevertheless, God caused his glory to pass by Moses while he hid Moses in a cleft of the rock, and then God let Moses see his back after he had passed by, but said, "my face shall not be seen" (Ex. 33:21–23). This sequence of verses and others like it in the Old Testament indicate that there was a sense in which God could not be seen at all, but that there was also some outward form or manifestation of God which at least in part was able to be seen by man.

It is right, therefore, to say that although God's *total essence* will never be able to be seen by us, nevertheless, God still shows something of himself to us through visible, created things. This happens in a variety of ways.

If we are to *think* of God, we must think of him somehow. God understands this and gives us hundreds of different analogies taken from our human lives or from the creative world. This huge diversity of analogies from all parts of creation reminds us that we should not focus overly much on any one of these analogies. Yet if we do not focus exclusively on any one of these analogies, all of them help to reveal God to us in a somewhat "visible" way (cf. Gen. 1:27; Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20).

The Old Testament also records a number of theophanies. A *theophany* is "an appearance of God." In these theophanies God took on various visible forms to show himself to people. God appeared to Abraham (Gen. 18:1–33), Jacob (Gen. 32:28–30), the people of Israel (as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night: Ex. 13:21–22), the elders of Israel (Ex. 24:9–11), Manoah and his wife (Judg. 13:21–22), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1), and others.

A much greater visible manifestation of God than these Old Testament theophanies was found in the person of Jesus Christ himself. He could say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). And John contrasts the fact that no one has ever seen God with the fact that God's only Son has made him known to us: "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18, author's translation). Furthermore, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), and is "the

bright radiance of the glory of God” and is “the exact representation of his nature” (Heb. 1:3 author’s translation). Thus, in the person of Jesus we have a unique visible manifestation of God in the New Testament that was not available to believers who saw theophanies in the Old Testament.

But how will we see God in heaven? We will never be able to see or know all of God, for “his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3; cf. John 6:46; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; 1 John 4:12, which were mentioned above). And we will not be able to see—at least with our physical eyes—the spiritual being of God. Nevertheless, Scripture says that we will see God himself. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for *they shall see God*” (Matt. 5:8). We will be able to see the human nature of Jesus, of course (Rev. 1:7). But it is not clear in exactly what sense we will be able to “see” the Father and the Holy Spirit, or the divine nature of God the Son (cf. Rev. 1:4; 4:2–3, 5; 5:6). Perhaps the nature of this “seeing” will not be known to us until we reach heaven.

Although what we see will not be an exhaustive vision of God, it will be a completely true and clear and real vision of God. We shall see “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12) and “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The most remarkable description of the open, close fellowship with God that we shall experience is seen in the fact that in the heavenly city “the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; *they shall see his face* and his name shall be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:3–4).

When we realize that God is the perfection of all that we long for or desire, that he is the summation of everything beautiful or desirable, then we realize that the greatest joy of the life to come will be that we “shall see his face.” This seeing of God “face to face” has been called the *beatific vision* meaning “the vision that makes us blessed or happy” (“beatific” is from two Latin words, *beatus* “blessed,” and *facere* “to make”). To look at God changes us and makes us like him: “We shall be like him, for *we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3:2; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). This vision of God will be the consummation of our knowing God and will give us full delight and joy for all eternity: “in your presence there is fulness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11).

B. Mental Attributes

3. Knowledge (Omniscience). God’s knowledge may be defined as follows: *God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act.*

Elihu says that God is the one “who is *perfect in knowledge*” (Job 37:16), and John says that God “*knows everything*” (1 John 3:20). The quality of knowing everything is called omniscience, and because God knows everything, he is said to be omniscient (that is, “all-knowing”).

The definition given above explains omniscience in more detail. It says first that God fully knows himself. This is an amazing fact since God’s own being is infinite or unlimited. Of course, only he who is infinite can fully know himself in every detail. This fact is implied by Paul when he says, “For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:10–11).

This idea is also suggested by John’s statement that “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). In this context “light” has a suggestion of both moral purity and full knowledge or awareness. If there is “no darkness at all” in God, but he is entirely “light,” then God is himself both entirely holy and also entirely filled with self-knowledge.

The definition also says that God knows “all things *actual*.” This means all things that exist and all things that happen. This applies to creation, for God is the one before whom “no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13; cf. 2 Chron. 16:9; Job 28:24; Matt. 10:29–30). God also knows the future, for he is the one who can say, “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done” (Isa. 46:9–10; cf. 42:8–9 and frequent passages in the Old Testament prophets). He knows the tiny details of every one of our lives, for Jesus tells us, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8), and, “Even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:30).

In Psalm 139 David reflects on the amazing detail of God’s knowledge of our lives. He knows our actions and thoughts: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar” (Ps. 139:1–2). He knows the words we will say before they are spoken: “Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Ps. 139:4). And he knows all the

days of our lives even before we are born: “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:16).

The definition of God’s knowledge given above also specifies that God knows “all things *possible*.” This is because there are some instances in Scripture where God gives information about events that might happen but that do not actually come to pass. For example, when David was fleeing from Saul he rescued the city of Keilah from the Philistines and then stayed for a time at Keilah. He decided to ask God whether Saul would come to Keilah to attack him and, if Saul came, whether the men of Keilah would surrender him into Saul’s hand. David said:

“Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant.” And the LORD said, “He will come down.” Then said David, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the LORD said, “They will surrender you.” Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. (1 Sam. 23:11–13)

Similarly, Jesus could state that Tyre and Sidon *would have* repented if Jesus’ own miracles had been done there in former days: “Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matt. 11:21). Similarly, he says, “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day” (Matt. 11:23; cf. 2 Kings 13:19, where Elisha tells what would have happened if King Joash had struck the ground five or six times with the arrows).

The fact that God knows all things possible can also be deduced from God’s full knowledge of himself. If God fully knows himself, he knows everything he is able to do, which includes all things that are possible. This fact is indeed amazing. God has made an incredibly complex and varied universe. But there are thousands upon thousands of other variations or kinds of things that God could have created but did not. God’s infinite knowledge includes detailed knowledge of what each of those other possible creations would have been like and what would have happened in each of them! “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it” (Ps. 139:6). “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9).

Our definition of God’s knowledge speaks of God knowing everything in one “simple act.” Here again the word *simple* is used in the sense “not divided into parts.” This means that God is always fully aware of everything. If he should wish to tell us the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the number of stars in the sky, he would not have to count them all quickly like some kind of giant computer, nor would he have to call the number to mind because it was something he had not thought about for a time. Rather, he always knows all things at once. All of these facts and all other things that he knows are always fully present in his consciousness. He does not have to reason to conclusions or ponder carefully before he answers, for he knows the end from the beginning, and he never learns and never forgets anything (cf. Ps. 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8; and the verses cited above on God’s perfect knowledge). Every bit of God’s knowledge is always fully present in his consciousness; it never grows dim or fades into his nonconscious memory. Finally, the definition talks about God’s knowledge as not only a simple act but also an “eternal act.” This means that God’s knowledge never changes or grows. If he were ever to learn something new, he would not have been omniscient beforehand. Thus, from all eternity God has known all things that would happen and all things that he would do.

Someone may object that God promises to forget our sins. For example, he says, “I will not remember your sins” (Isa. 43:25). Yet passages like this can certainly be understood to mean that God will never again let the knowledge of these sins play any part in the way he relates to us: he will “forget” them in his relationship to us. Another objection to the biblical teaching about God’s omniscience has been brought from Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; and 31:35, where God refers to the horrible practices of parents who burn to death their own children in the sacrificial fires of the pagan god Baal, and says, “which I did not command, *nor did it come into my mind*” (Jer. 7:31). Does this mean that before the time of Jeremiah God had never *thought* of the possibility that parents would sacrifice their own children? Certainly not, for that very practice had occurred a century earlier in the reigns of Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) and Hoshea (2 Kings 17:17), and God himself had forbidden the practice eight

hundred years earlier under Moses (Lev. 18:21). The verses in Jeremiah are probably better translated quite literally, “nor did it enter into my *heart*” (so KJV at Jer. 7:31, and the literal translation in the NASB mg.—the Hebrew word is לֵב, H4213, most frequently translated “heart”), giving the sense, “nor did I wish for it, desire it, think of it in a positive way.”

Another difficulty that arises in this connection is the question of the relationship between God’s knowledge of everything that will happen in the future and the reality and degree of freedom we have in our actions. If God knows everything that will happen, how can our choices be at all “free”? In fact, this difficulty has loomed so large that some theologians have concluded that God does not know all of the future. They have said that God does not know things that cannot (in their opinion) be known, such as the free acts of people that have not yet occurred (sometimes the phrase used is the “contingent acts of free moral agents,” where “contingent” means “possible but not certain”). But such a position is unsatisfactory because it essentially denies God’s knowledge of the future of human history at any point in time and thus is inconsistent with the passages cited above about God’s knowledge of the future and with dozens of other Old Testament prophetic passages where God predicts the future far in advance and in great detail.

How then are we to resolve this difficulty? Although this question will be treated in much more detail in chapter 16 on God’s providence, it may be helpful at this point to note the suggestion of Augustine, who said that God has given us “reasonable self-determination.” His statement does not involve the terms *free* or *freedom* for these terms are exceptionally difficult to define in any way that satisfactorily accounts for God’s complete knowledge of future events. But this statement does affirm what is important to us and what we sense to be true in our own experience, that our choices and decisions are “reasonable.” That is, we think about what to do, consciously decide what we will do, and then we follow the course of action that we have chosen.

Augustine’s statement also says that we have “self-determination.” This is simply affirming that our choices really do determine what will happen. It is not as if events occur *regardless* of what we decide or do, but rather that they occur *because of* what we decide and do. No attempt is made in this statement to define the sense in which we are “free” or “not free,” but that is not the really important issue: for us, it is important that we think, choose, and act, and that these thoughts, choices, and actions are real and actually have eternal significance. If God knows all our thoughts, words, and actions long before they occur, then there must be some sense in which our choices are not absolutely free. But further definition of this issue is better left until it can be treated more fully in chapter 16.

4. Wisdom. *God’s wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals.*

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

Scripture affirms God’s wisdom in general in several places. He is called “the only wise God” (Rom. 16:27). Job says that God “is wise in heart” (Job 9:4), and “With him are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding” (Job 12:13). God’s wisdom is seen specifically in creation. The psalmist exclaims, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Ps. 104:24). As God created the universe, it was perfectly suited to bring him glory, both in its day-by-day processes and in the goals for which he created it. Even now, while we still see the effects of sin and the curse on the natural world, we should be amazed at how harmonious and intricate God’s creation is.

God’s wisdom is also seen in his great plan of redemption. Christ is “the wisdom of God” to those who are called (1 Cor. 1:24, 30), even though the word of the cross is “foolishness” to those who reject it and think themselves to be wise in this world (1 Cor. 1:18–20). Yet even this is a reflection of God’s wise plan: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe . . . God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:21, 27, 29).

Paul knows that what we now think of as the “simple” gospel message, understandable even to the very young, reflects an amazing plan of God, which in its depths of wisdom surpasses anything man could ever have imagined. At the end of eleven chapters of reflection on the wisdom of God’s plan of redemption, Paul bursts

forth into spontaneous praise: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33).

When Paul preaches the gospel both to Jews and to Gentiles, and they become unified in the one body of Christ (Eph. 3:6), the incredible “mystery” that was “hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Eph. 3:9) is plain for all to see, namely, that in Christ such totally diverse people become united. When groups so different racially and culturally become members of the one body of Christ, then God’s purpose is fulfilled, “that through the church the manifold *wisdom of God* might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10).

Today this means that God’s wisdom is shown even to angels and demons (“principalities and powers”) when people from different racial and cultural backgrounds are united in Christ in the church. If the Christian church is faithful to God’s wise plan, it will be always in the forefront in breaking down racial and social barriers in societies around the world, and will thus be a visible manifestation of God’s amazingly wise plan to bring great unity out of great diversity and thereby to cause all creation to honor him.

God’s wisdom is also shown in our individual lives. “We know that God works all things together for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28, author’s translation). Here Paul affirms that God does work wisely in all the things that come into our lives, and that through all these things he advances us toward the goal of conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). It should be our great confidence and a source of peace day by day to know that God causes all things to move us toward the ultimate goal he has for our lives, namely, that we might be like Christ and thereby bring glory to him. Such confidence enabled Paul to accept his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7) as something that, though painful, God in his wisdom had chosen not to remove (2 Cor. 12:8–10).

Every day of our lives, we may quiet our discouragement with the comfort that comes from the knowledge of God’s infinite wisdom: if we are his children, we can know that he is working wisely in our lives, even today, to bring us into greater conformity into the image of Christ.

God’s wisdom is, of course, in part communicable to us. We can ask God confidently for wisdom when we need it, for he promises in his Word, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). This wisdom, or skill in living a life pleasing to God, comes primarily from reading and obeying his Word: “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7; cf. Deut. 4:6–8).

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10; cf. Prov. 1:7), because if we fear dishonoring God or displeasing him, and if we fear his fatherly discipline, then we will have the motivation that makes us want to follow his ways and live according to his wise commands. Furthermore, the possession of wisdom from God will result not in pride but in humility (Prov. 11:2; James 3:13), not in arrogance but in a gentle and peaceful spirit (James 3:14–18). The person who is wise according to God’s standards will continually walk in dependence on the Lord and with a desire to exalt him.

Yet we must also remember that God’s wisdom is not entirely communicable: we can never fully share God’s wisdom (Rom. 11:33). In practical terms, this means that there will frequently be times in this life when we will not be able to understand why God allowed something to happen. Then we have simply to trust him and go on obeying his wise commands for our lives: “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator” (1 Peter 4:19; cf. Deut. 29:29; Prov. 3:5–6). God is infinitely wise and we are not, and it pleases him when we have faith to trust his wisdom even when we do not understand what he is doing.

5. Truthfulness (and Faithfulness). *God’s truthfulness means that he is the true God, and that all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth.*

The term *veracity* which means “truthfulness” or “reliability,” has sometimes been used as a synonym for God’s truthfulness.

The first part of this definition indicates that the God revealed in Scripture is the true or real God and that all other so-called gods are idols. “The LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King ... The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens” (Jer. 10:10–11). Jesus says to his Father, “And this is eternal life, that they know you *the only true God* and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3; cf. 1 John 5:20).

We might ask what it means to be the true God as opposed to other beings who are not God. It must mean that God in his own being or character is the one who fully conforms to the idea of what God should be: namely, a being who is infinitely perfect in power, in wisdom, in goodness, in lordship over time and space, and so forth. But we may further ask, *whose* idea of God is this? What idea of God must one conform to in order to be the true God?

At this point our train of thought becomes somewhat circular, for we must not say that a being must conform to *our* idea of what God should be like in order to be the true God! We are mere creatures! We cannot define what the true God must be like! So we must say that it is *God himself* who has the only perfect idea of what the true God should be like. And he himself is the true God because in his being and character he perfectly conforms to his own idea of what the true God should be. In addition, he has implanted in our minds a reflection of his own idea of what the true God must be, and this enables us to recognize him as God.

The definition given above also affirms that all of God's *knowledge* is true and is the final standard of truth. Job tells us that God is "perfect in knowledge" (Job 37:16; see also the verses cited above under the discussion of God's omniscience). To say that God knows all things and that his knowledge is perfect is to say that he is never mistaken in his perception or understanding of the world: all that he knows and thinks is true and is a correct understanding of the nature of reality. In fact, since God knows all things infinitely well, we can say that the standard of true knowledge is conformity to God's knowledge. If we think the same thing God thinks about anything in the universe, we are thinking truthfully about it.

Our definition also affirms that God's words are both *true* and the *final standard of truth*. This means that God is reliable and faithful in his words. With respect to his promises, God always does what he promises to do, and we can depend on him never to be unfaithful to his promises. Thus, he is "a God of faithfulness" (Deut. 32:4). In fact, this specific aspect of God's truthfulness is sometimes viewed as a distinct attribute: *God's faithfulness means that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised* (Num. 23:19; cf. 2 Sam. 7:28; Ps. 141:6; et al.). He can be relied upon, and he will never prove unfaithful to those who trust what he has said. Indeed, the essence of true faith is taking God at his word and relying on him to do as he has promised.

In addition to the fact that God is faithful to his promises, we must also affirm that all of God's *words* about himself and about his creation completely correspond to reality. That is, God always speaks truth when he speaks. He is "the unlying God" (Titus 1:2, author's translation), the God for whom it is impossible to lie (Heb. 6:18), the God whose every word is perfectly "pure" (Ps. 12:6), the one of whom it can be said, "Every word of God proves true" (Prov. 30:5). God's words are not simply true in the sense that they conform to some standard of truthfulness outside of God. Rather, they are truth itself; they are the final standard and definition of truth. So Jesus can say to the Father, "Your word is *truth*" (John 17:17). What was said about the truthfulness of God's knowledge can also be said about God's words, for they are based on his perfect knowledge and accurately reflect that perfect knowledge: God's words are "truth" in the sense that they are the final standard by which truthfulness is to be judged: whatever conforms to God's own words is also true, and what fails to conform to his words is not true.

The truthfulness of God is also communicable in that we can in part imitate it by striving to have true knowledge about God and about his world. In fact, as we begin to think true thoughts about God and creation, thoughts that we learn from Scripture and from allowing Scripture to guide us in our observation and interpretation of the natural world, we begin to think God's own thoughts after him! We can exclaim with the psalmist, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" (Ps. 139:17).

This realization should encourage us in the pursuit of knowledge in all areas of the natural and social sciences and the humanities. Whatever the area of our investigation, when we discover more truth about the nature of reality, we discover more of the truth that God already knows. In this sense we can affirm that "all truth is God's truth" and rejoice whenever the learning or discovery of this truth is used in ways pleasing to God. Growth in knowledge is part of the process of becoming more like God or becoming creatures who are more fully in God's image. Paul tells us that we have put on the "new nature," which, he says, "is being *renewed in knowledge* after the image of its creator" (Col. 3:10).

In a society that is exceedingly careless with the truthfulness of spoken words, we as God's children are to imitate our Creator and take great care to be sure that our words are always truthful. "*Do not lie to one another* seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature" (Col. 3:9–10).

Again Paul admonishes, “Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one *speak the truth* with his neighbor” (Eph. 4:25). In his own ministry, Paul says that he sought to practice absolute truthfulness: “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). God is pleased when his people put “devious talk” far from them (Prov. 4:24) and speak with words that are acceptable not only in the sight of people but also in the sight of the Lord himself (Ps. 19:14).

Furthermore, we should imitate God’s truthfulness in our own reaction to truth and falsehood. Like God, we should *love* truth and *hate* falsehood. The commandment not to bear false witness against our neighbor (Ex. 20:16), like the other commandments, requires not merely outward conformity but also conformity in heart attitude. One who is pleasing to God “speaks truth from his heart” (Ps. 15:2), and strives to be like the righteous man who “hates falsehood” (Prov. 13:5). God commands his people through Zechariah, “Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, says the LORD” (Zech. 8:17).

These commands are given because God himself loves truth and hates falsehood: “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight” (Prov. 12:22; cf. Isa. 59:3–4). Falsehood and lying come not from God but from Satan, who delights in falsehood: “When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). It is appropriate then that with “the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted” and the “murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, [and] idolaters” who are found in “the lake that burns with fire and sulphur” far from the heavenly city, are found also “all *liars*” (Rev. 21:8).

Thus, Scripture teaches us that lying is wrong not only because of the great harm that comes from it (and much more harm comes from lying than we often realize), but also for an even deeper and more profound reason: when we lie we dishonor God and diminish his glory, for we, as those created in God’s image and created for the purpose of reflecting God’s glory in our lives, are acting in a way that is contrary to God’s own character.

C. Moral Attributes

6. Goodness. *The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval.*

In this definition we find a situation similar to the one we faced in defining God as the true God. Here, “good” can be understood to mean “worthy of approval,” but we have not answered the question, approval by whom? In one sense, we can say that anything that is truly good should be worthy of approval by us. But in a more ultimate sense, we are not free to decide by ourselves what is worthy of approval and what is not. Ultimately, therefore, God’s being and actions are perfectly worthy of his own approval. He is therefore the final standard of good. Jesus implies this when he says, “No one is good but God alone” (Luke 18:19). The Psalms frequently affirm that “the LORD is good” (Ps. 100:5) or exclaim, “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good” (Pss. 106:1; 107:1; et al.). David encourages us, “O taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8).

But if God is himself good and therefore the ultimate standard of good, then we have a definition of the meaning of “good” that will greatly help us in the study of ethics and aesthetics. What is “good”? “Good” is what God approves. We may ask then, why is what God approves good? We must answer, “Because he approves it.” That is to say, there is no higher standard of goodness than God’s own character and his approval of whatever is consistent with that character. Nonetheless, God has given us some reflection of his own sense of goodness, so that when we evaluate things in the way God created us to evaluate them, we will also approve what God approves and delight in things in which he delights.

Our definition also states that all that God *does* is worthy of approval. We see evidence of this in the creation narrative: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*” (Gen. 1:31). The psalmist connects the goodness of God with the goodness of his actions: “You are good and you do *good*; teach me your statutes” (Ps. 119:68). Psalm 104 is an excellent example of praise to God for his goodness in creation, while many Psalms, such as Psalms 106 and 107, give thanks to God for his goodness in all his actions toward his people. And Paul encourages us to discover in practice how God’s will for our lives is “*good* and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

Scripture also tells us that God is the source of all good in the world. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow

due to change” (James 1:17; cf. Ps. 145:9; Acts 14:17). Moreover, God does only good things for his children. We read, “No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). And in the same context in which Paul assures us that “in everything God works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28), he also says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom. 8:32). Much more than an earthly father, our heavenly Father will “give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:11), and even his discipline is a manifestation of his love and is for our good (Heb. 12:10). This knowledge of God’s great goodness should encourage us to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18).

In imitation of this communicable attribute, we should ourselves do good (that is, we should do what God approves) and thereby imitate the goodness of our heavenly Father. Paul writes, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10; cf. Luke 6:27, 33–35; 2 Tim. 3:17). Moreover, when we realize that God is the definition and source of all good, we will realize that God himself is the ultimate good that we seek. We will say with the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever” (Ps. 73:25–26; cf. 16:11; 42:1–2).

God’s goodness is closely related to several other characteristics of his nature, among them love, mercy, patience, and grace. Sometimes these are considered separate attributes and are treated individually. At other times these are considered part of God’s goodness and are treated as various aspects of God’s goodness. In this chapter we will treat love as a separate attribute since it is so prominent in Scripture. The other three characteristics (mercy, patience, and grace), while also prominent in Scripture, will be treated together as aspects of God’s goodness to individuals in specific situations. Thus, God’s *mercy* is *his goodness toward those in distress* his *grace* is *his goodness toward those who deserve only punishment* and his *patience* is *his goodness toward those who continue to sin over a period of time* (see below, section C.8, on mercy, patience, and grace).

7. Love. *God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.*

This definition understands love as self-giving for the benefit of others. This attribute of God shows that it is part of his nature to give of himself in order to bring about blessing or good for others.

John tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). We see evidence that this attribute of God was active even before creation among the members of the Trinity. Jesus speaks to his Father of “my glory which you have given me in your *love* for me *before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:24), thus indicating that there was love and a giving of honor from the Father to the Son from all eternity. It continues at the present time, for we read, “The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:35).

This love is also reciprocal, for Jesus says, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31). The love between the Father and the Son also presumably characterizes their relationship with the Holy Spirit, even though it is not explicitly mentioned. This eternal love of the Father for the Son, the Son for the Father, and of both for the Holy Spirit makes heaven a world of love and joy because each person of the Trinity seeks to bring joy and happiness to the other two.

The self-giving that characterizes the Trinity finds clear expression in God’s relationship to mankind, and especially to sinful men. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10, author’s translation). Paul writes, “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). John also writes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Paul also speaks of “the Son of God, who *loved me* and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20), thus showing an awareness of the directly personal application of Christ’s love to individual sinners. It should cause us great joy to know that it is the purpose of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to give of themselves to us to bring us true joy and happiness. It is God’s nature to act that way toward those upon whom he has set his love, and he will continue to act that way toward us for all eternity.

We imitate this communicable attribute of God, first by loving God in return, and second by loving others in imitation of the way God loves them. All our obligations to God can be summarized in this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–38). If we love God, we will obey his commandments (1 John 5:3) and thus

do what is pleasing to him. We will love God, not the world (1 John 2:15), and we will do all this because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

It is one of the most amazing facts in all Scripture that just as God's love involves his giving of himself to make us happy, so we can in return give of ourselves and actually bring joy to God's heart. Isaiah promises God's people, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so *shall your God rejoice over you*" (Isa. 62:5), and Zephaniah tells God's people, "The LORD, your God, is in your midst ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival" (Zeph. 3:17–18).

Our imitation of God's love is also seen in our love for others. John makes this explicit: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). In fact, our love for others within the fellowship of believers is so evidently an imitation of Christ that by it the world recognizes us as his: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35; cf. 15:13; Rom. 13:10; 1 Cor. 13:4–7; Heb. 10:24). God himself gives us his love to enable us to love each other (John 17:26; Rom. 5:5). Moreover, our love for our enemies especially reflects God's love (Matt. 5:43–48).

8. Mercy, Grace, Patience. God's mercy, patience, and grace may be seen as three separate attributes, or as specific aspects of God's goodness. The definitions given here show these attributes as special examples of God's goodness when it is used for the benefit of specific classes of people.

God's *mercy* means God's goodness toward those in misery and distress.

God's *grace* means God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment.

God's *patience* means God's goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time.

These three characteristics of God's nature are often mentioned together, especially in the Old Testament. When God declared his name to Moses, he proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). David says in Psalm 103:8, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Because these characteristics of God are often mentioned together, it may seem difficult to distinguish among them. Yet the characteristic of mercy is often emphasized where people are in misery or distress. David says, for example, "I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the LORD for his *mercy* is great ..." (2 Sam. 24:14). The two blind men who wish Jesus to see their plight and heal them cry, "Have *mercy* on us, Son of David" (Matt. 9:27). When Paul speaks of the fact that God comforts us in affliction, he calls God the "Father of *mercies* and God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). In time of need, we are to draw near to God's throne so that we might receive both mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16; cf. 2:17; James 5:11). We are to imitate God's mercy in our conduct toward others: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7; cf. 2 Cor. 1:3–4).

With respect to the attribute of *grace* we find that Scripture emphasizes that God's grace, or his favor toward those who deserve no favor but only punishment, is never obligated but is always freely given on God's part. God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Ex. 33:19; quoted in Rom. 9:15). Yet God is regularly gracious toward his people: "Turn to me and be *gracious* to me, *After Thy manner* with those who love Thy name" (Ps. 119:132 NASB). In fact, Peter can call God "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10).

Grace as God's goodness especially shown to those who do not deserve it is seen frequently in Paul's writings. He emphasizes that salvation by grace is the opposite of salvation by human effort, for grace is a freely given gift. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his *grace* as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23–24). The distinction between grace and a salvation earned by works that merit a reward is also seen in Romans 11:6: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." Grace, then, is God's favor freely given to those who do not deserve this favor.

Paul also sees that if grace is unmerited, then there is only one human attitude appropriate as an instrument for receiving such grace, namely, faith: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace ..." (Rom. 4:16). Faith is the one human attitude that is the opposite of depending on oneself, for it involves trust in or dependence upon another. Thus, it is devoid of self-reliance or attempts to gain righteousness by human effort. If God's favor is to come to us apart from our own merit, then it must come when we depend not on our own merit but on the merits of another, and that is precisely when we have faith.

In the New Testament, and especially in Paul, not only the forgiveness of sins, but also *the entire living of the Christian life* can be seen to result from God's continuous bestowal of grace. Paul can say, "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). Luke speaks of Antioch as the place where Paul and Barnabas "had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled" (Acts 14:26), indicating that the church there, in sending out Paul and Barnabas, saw the success of their ministry as dependent upon God's continuing grace. Furthermore, the blessing of "grace" upon Paul's readers is the most frequent apostolic blessing in his letters (see, e.g., Rom. 1:7; 16:20; 1 Cor. 1:3; 16:23; 2 Cor. 1:2; 13:14; Gal. 1:3; 6:18).

God's *patience* similarly, was mentioned in some of the verses cited above in connection with God's mercy. The Old Testament frequently speaks of God as "*slow to anger*" (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3; et al.). In the New Testament, Paul speaks about God's "kindness and forbearance and patience" (Rom. 2:4), and says that Jesus Christ displayed his "perfect patience" toward Paul himself as an example for others (1 Tim. 1:16; cf. Rom. 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20).

We are also to imitate God's patience and be "slow to anger" (James 1:19), and be patient in suffering as Christ was (1 Peter 2:20). We are to lead a life "with patience" (Eph. 4:2), and "patience" is listed among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 (see also Rom. 8:25; 1 Cor. 13:4; Col. 1:11; 3:12; 2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2; James 5:7–8; Rev. 2:2–3; et al.). As with most of the attributes of God that we are to imitate in our lives, patience requires a moment-by-moment trust in God to fulfill his promises and purposes in our lives at his chosen time. Our confidence that the Lord will soon fulfill his purposes for our good and his glory will enable us to be patient. James makes this connection when he says, "You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:8).

9. Holiness. *God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.* This definition contains both a relational quality (separation from) and a moral quality (the separation is from sin or evil, and the devotion is to the good of God's own honor or glory). The idea of holiness as including both separation from evil and devotion to God's own glory is found in a number of Old Testament passages. The word *holy* is used to describe both parts of the tabernacle, for example. The tabernacle itself was a place separate from the evil and sin of the world, and the first room in it was called the "holy place." It was dedicated to God's service. But then God commanded that there be a veil, "and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy" (Ex. 26:33). The most holy place, where the ark of the covenant was kept, was the place most separated from evil and sin and most fully devoted to God's service.

The place where God himself dwelt was itself holy: "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (Ps. 24:3). The element of dedication to God's service is seen in the holiness of the sabbath day: "the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy" (or "hallowed it"; the verb is a Piel form of **וְקַדַּשׁ**, H7727, and means "to make holy") (Ex. 20:11; cf. Gen. 2:3). The sabbath day was made holy because it

was set apart from the ordinary activities of the world and dedicated to God's service. In the same way the tabernacle and the altar, as well as Aaron and his sons, were to be "made holy" (Ex. 29:44), that is, set apart from ordinary tasks and from the evil and sin of the world and dedicated to God's service (cf. Ex. 30:25–33).

God himself is the Most Holy One. He is called the "Holy One of Israel" (Pss. 71:22; 78:41; 89:18; Isa. 1:4; 5:19, 24; et al.). The seraphim around God's throne cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). "The LORD our God is holy!" exclaims the psalmist (Ps. 99:9; cf. 99:3, 5; 22:3).

God's holiness provides the pattern for his people to imitate. He commands them, "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2; cf. 11:44–45; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:16). When God called his people out of Egypt and brought them to himself and commanded them to obey his voice, then he said, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a *holy nation*" (Ex. 19:4–6). In this case the idea of separation from evil and sin (which here included in a very striking way separation from life in Egypt) and the idea of devotion to God (in serving him and in obeying his statutes) are both seen in the example of a "holy nation."

New covenant believers are also to "strive ... for the *holiness* without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14) and to know that God's discipline is given to us "that we may share his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Paul encourages Christians to be separate from the dominating influence that comes from close association with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14–18) and then encourages them, "Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and *make holiness perfect in the fear of God*" (2 Cor. 7:1; cf. Rom. 12:1). The church itself is

intended by God to grow “into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21), and Christ’s present work for the church is “that he might sanctify her ... that he might present the church to himself in splendor ... that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26–27). Not only individuals but also the church itself must grow in holiness!

Zechariah prophesies a day when everything on earth will be “holy to the LORD.” He says:

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, “Holy to the LORD.” And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts. (Zech. 14:20–21)

At that time, everything on earth will be separated from evil, purified from sin, and devoted to the service of God in true moral purity.

10. Peace (or Order). In 1 Corinthians 14:33 Paul says, “God is not a God of confusion but of *peace*.” Although “peace” and “order” have not traditionally been classified as attributes of God, Paul here indicates another quality that we could think of as a distinct attribute of God. Paul says that God’s actions are characterized by “peace” and not by “disorder” (Gk. ἀκαταστασία (G189) a word meaning “disorder, confusion, unrest”). God himself is “the God of peace” (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20; cf. Eph. 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:16). But those who walk in wickedness do not have peace: “ ‘There is no peace,’ says the LORD, ‘for the wicked’ ” (Isa. 48:22; 57:21; cf. 59:8).

However, when God looks with compassion upon the people whom he loves, he sees them as “afflicted ... storm-tossed (LXX, ἀκατάστατος (G190) “in disorder, in confusion”), and not comforted” (Isa. 54:11), and promises to establish their foundations with precious stones (Isa. 54:11–12) and lead them forth in “peace” (Isa. 55:12). The proclamation of God’s plan of redemption contains the promise of peace to God’s people (Pss. 29:11; 85:8; 119:165; Prov. 3:17; Isa. 9:6–7; 26:3; 57:19; John 14:27; Rom. 8:6; 2 Thess. 3:16; et al.). In fact, the third element that Paul lists as part of the fruit of the Spirit is “peace” (Gal. 5:22).

This peace certainly does not imply inactivity, for it was at a time of intense growth and activity that Luke could say that “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up” (Acts 9:31). Furthermore, although God is a God of peace, he is also the one who “will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121:4). He is the God who is continually working (John 5:17). And even though heaven is a place of peace, it is a place also of continual praise to God and service for him.

Thus, God’s peace can be defined as follows: *God’s peace means that in God’s being and in his actions he is separate from all confusion and disorder, yet he is continually active in innumerable well-ordered, fully controlled, simultaneous actions.*

This definition indicates that God’s peace does not have to do with inactivity, but with ordered and controlled activity. To engage in infinite activity of this sort, of course, requires God’s infinite wisdom, knowledge, and power.

When we understand God’s peace in this way we can see an imitation of this attribute of God not only in “peace” as part of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23, but also in the last-mentioned element in the fruit of the Spirit, namely, “self-control” (Gal. 5:23). When we as God’s people walk in his ways, we come to know more and more fully by experience that the kingdom of God is indeed “righteousness and *peace* and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17), and we can say of the path of God’s wisdom, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are *peace*” (Prov. 3:17).

11. Righteousness, Justice. In English the terms *righteousness* and *justice* are different words, but in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament there is only one word group behind these two English terms. (In the Old Testament the terms primarily translate forms of the קִדְּוָה, H7406, word group, and the New Testament members of the δικαίως (G1469) word group.) Therefore, these two terms will be considered together as speaking of one attribute of God.

God’s righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.

Speaking of God, Moses says, “All his ways are *justice*. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, *just* and *right* is he” (Deut. 32:4). Abraham successfully appeals to God’s own character of righteousness when he says, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). God also speaks and commands what is right: “The precepts of the LORD are *right* rejoicing the heart” (Ps. 19:8). And God says of himself, “I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is *right*” (Isa. 45:19). As a result of God’s righteousness, it is necessary that he treat people according to what they deserve. Thus, it is necessary that God punish sin, for it does not deserve reward; it is wrong and deserves punishment.

When God does not punish sin, it seems to indicate that he is unrighteous, unless some other means of punishing sin can be seen. This is why Paul says that when God sent Christ as a sacrifice to bear the punishment for sin, it “was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25–26). When Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins it showed that God was truly righteous, because he did give appropriate punishment to sin, even though he did forgive his people their sins.

With respect to the definition of righteousness given above, we may ask, what is “right”? In other words, what *ought* to happen and what *ought* to be? Here we must respond that *whatever conforms to God’s moral character is right*. But why is whatever conforms to God’s moral character right? It is right because it conforms to his moral character! If indeed God is the final standard of righteousness, then there can be no standard outside of God by which we measure righteousness or justice. He himself is the final standard. (This is similar to the situation we encountered with respect to truth and God being the ultimate standard of truth.) Whenever Scripture confronts the question of whether God himself is righteous or not, the ultimate answer is always that we as God’s creatures have no right to say that God is unrighteous or unjust. The creature cannot say that of the Creator. Paul responds to a very difficult question about God’s righteousness by saying, “But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me thus?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?” (Rom. 9:20–21).

In answer to Job’s questioning about whether God has been righteous in his dealings with him, God answers Job, “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? ... Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?” (Job 40:2, 8). Then God answers *not* in terms of an explanation that would allow Job to *understand* why God’s actions were right, but rather in terms of a statement of God’s own majesty and power! God does not need to explain the rightness of his actions to Job, for God is the Creator and Job is the creature. “Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” (Job 40:9). “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place ...?” (Job 38:12). “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, “Here we are?”” (Job 38:34–35). “Do you give the horse his might?” (Job 39:19). “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south?” (Job 39:26). Job answers, “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4).

Nevertheless, it should be a cause for thanksgiving and gratitude when we realize that righteousness and omnipotence are both possessed by God. If he were a God of perfect righteousness without power to carry out that righteousness, he would not be worthy of worship and we would have no guarantee that justice will ultimately prevail in the universe. But if he were a God of unlimited power, yet without righteousness in his character, how unthinkable horrible the universe would be! There would be unrighteousness at the center of all existence and there would be nothing anyone could do to change it. Existence would become meaningless, and we would be driven to the most utter despair. We ought therefore continually to thank and praise God for who he is, “for *all his ways are justice*. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deut. 32:4).

12. Jealousy. Although the word *jealous* is frequently used in a negative sense in English, it also takes a positive sense at times. For example, Paul says to the Corinthians, “I feel a divine jealousy for you” (2 Cor. 11:2). Here the sense is “earnestly protective or watchful.” It has the meaning of being deeply committed to seeking the honor or welfare of someone, whether oneself or someone else.

Scripture represents God as being jealous in this way. He continually and earnestly seeks to protect his own honor. He commands his people not to bow down to idols or serve them, saying, “for I the LORD your God am a *jealous* God” (Ex. 20:5). He desires that worship be given to himself and not to false gods. Therefore, he

commands the people of Israel to tear down the altars of pagan gods in the land of Canaan, giving the following reason: “For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex. 34:14; cf. Deut. 4:24; 5:9).

Thus, God’s jealousy may be defined as follows: *God’s jealousy means that God continually seeks to protect his own honor.*

People sometimes have trouble thinking that jealousy is a desirable attribute in God. This is because jealousy for our own honor as human beings is almost always wrong. We are not to be proud, but humble. Yet we must realize that the reason pride is wrong is a theological reason: it is that we do not deserve the honor that belongs to God alone (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7; Rev. 4:11).

It is not wrong for God to seek his own honor, however, for he deserves it fully. God freely admits that his actions in creation and redemption are done for his own honor. Speaking of his decision to withhold judgment from his people, God says, “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it ... *My glory I will not give to another*” (Isa. 48:11). It is healthy for us spiritually when we settle in our hearts the fact that God deserves all honor and glory from his creation, and that it is right for him to seek this honor. He alone is infinitely worthy of being praised. To realize this fact and to delight in it is to find the secret of true worship.

13. Wrath. It may surprise us to find how frequently the Bible talks about the wrath of God. Yet if God loves all that is right and good, and all that conforms to his moral character, then it should not be surprising that he would hate everything that is opposed to his moral character. God’s wrath directed against sin is therefore closely related to God’s holiness and justice. God’s wrath may be defined as follows: *God’s wrath means that he intensely hates all sin.*

Descriptions of God’s wrath are found frequently in the narrative passages of Scripture, especially when God’s people sin greatly against him. God sees the idolatry of the people of Israel and says to Moses, “I have seen this people ...; now therefore let me alone, that my *wrath* may burn hot against them and I may consume them” (Ex. 32:9–10). Later Moses tells the people, “Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to *wrath* in the wilderness ... Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to *wrath* and the LORD was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you” (Deut. 9:7–8; cf. 29:23; 2 Kings 22:13).

The doctrine of the wrath of God in Scripture is not limited to the Old Testament, however, as some have falsely imagined. We read in John 3:36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but *the wrath of God rests upon him.*” Paul says, “For the *wrath of God* is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men” (Rom. 1:18; cf. 2:5, 8; 5:9; 9:22; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; Heb. 3:11; Rev. 6:16–17; 19:15). Many more New Testament verses also indicate God’s wrath against sin.

As with the other attributes of God, this is an attribute for which we should thank and praise God. It may not immediately appear to us how this can be done, since wrath seems to be such a negative concept. Viewed alone, it would arouse only fear and dread. Yet it is helpful for us to ask what God would be like if he were a God that did not hate sin. He would then be a God who either delighted in sin or at least was not troubled by it. Such a God would not be worthy of our worship, for sin is hateful and it is *worthy* of being hated. Sin ought not to be. It is in fact a virtue to hate evil and sin (cf. Heb. 1:9; Zech. 8:17; et al.), and we rightly imitate this attribute of God when we feel hatred against great evil, injustice, and sin.

Furthermore, we should feel no fear of God’s wrath as Christians, for although “we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3), we now have trusted in Jesus, “who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10; cf. Rom. 5:10). When we meditate on the wrath of God, we will be amazed to think that our Lord Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God that was due to our sin, in order that we might be saved (Rom. 3:25–26).

Moreover, in thinking about God’s wrath we must also bear in mind his patience. Both patience and wrath are mentioned together in Psalm 103: “The LORD is ... *slow to anger* and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever” (Ps. 103:8–9). In fact, the delay of the execution of God’s wrath upon evil is for the purpose of leading people to repentance (see Rom. 2:4).

Thus, when we think of God’s wrath to come, we should simultaneously be thankful for his patience in waiting to execute that wrath in order that yet more people may be saved: “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all

should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise ...” (2 Peter 3:9–10). God’s wrath should motivate us to evangelism and should also cause us to be thankful that God finally will punish all wrongdoing and will reign over new heavens and a new earth in which there will be no unrighteousness.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

Spirituality

1. Why is God so strongly displeased at carved idols, even those that are intended to represent him? How then shall we picture God or think of God in our minds when we pray to him?
2. What is it about our culture or our way of thinking today that makes us think of the physical world as more real and more permanent than the spiritual world? What can we do to change our intuitive perspective on the reality of the spiritual world?

Knowledge

3. When should we try to hide our thoughts and deeds from God? How is your answer to this question a blessing for your life?
4. With regard to the circumstances of your life, will God ever make a mistake, or fail to plan ahead, or fail to take into account all the eventualities that occur? How is the answer to this question a blessing in your life?
5. When did God learn that you would be at the location you are now in, reading this sentence, at this time on this day? How is the realization of your answer to this question a blessing to your life?

Wisdom

6. Do you really believe that God is working wisely today in your life? In the world? If you find this difficult to believe at times, what might you do to change your attitude?

Truthfulness

7. Why are people in our society, sometimes even Christians, quite careless with regard to truthfulness in speech? Why do we not very often realize that the greatest harm of all that comes from lying is the fact that God himself is dishonored? Do you need to ask God’s help to more fully reflect his truthfulness in speech in any of the following areas: promising to pray for someone; saying that you will be some place at a certain time; exaggerating events to make a more exciting story; taking care to remember and then be faithful to what you have said in business commitments; reporting what other people have said or what you think someone else is thinking; fairly representing your opponent’s viewpoint in an argument?

Goodness

8. Remembering that every good and perfect gift is from God (James 1:17), see how many good gifts from God you can list on a piece of paper in five minutes. When you have finished, ask yourself how often you have an attitude of thankfulness to God for most of these gifts. Why do you think we tend to forget that these blessings come from God? What can we do to remember more frequently?

Love

9. Is it appropriate to define love as “self-giving” with respect to our own interpersonal relationships? In what ways could you imitate God’s love specifically today?
10. Is it possible to decide to love someone and then to act on that decision, or does love between human beings simply depend on spontaneous emotional feelings?

Mercy

11. If you were to reflect God’s mercy more fully, for whom among those you know would you show special care during the next week?

Holiness

12. Are there activities or relationships in your present pattern of life that are hindering your growth in holiness because they make it difficult for you to be separated from sin and devoted to seeking God’s honor?

Peace

13. As you think about reflecting God’s peace in your own life, think first about your own emotional, mental, and spiritual state. Can you say that by-and-large you have God’s peace in the sense that your inner life is separate from confusion and disorder, and is frequently or continually active in well-ordered and well-controlled actions that further God’s glory? Then ask the same questions concerning what may be called the “external circumstances” of your life, that is, your family relationships, your relationships with neighbors, your activities in studying or at your job, and your relationships in church activities. What about the overall picture of your life, viewed as a whole? Does it exhibit God’s peace? What might you do to reflect God’s peace more fully?

Righteousness

14. Do you ever find yourself wishing that some of God’s laws were different than they are? If so, does such a wish reflect a dislike for some aspect of God’s moral character? What passages of Scripture might you read to convince yourself more fully that God’s character and his laws are right in these areas?

Jealousy

15. Do you reflect God’s jealousy for his own honor instinctively when you hear him dishonored in conversation or on television or in other contexts? What can we do to deepen our jealousy for God’s honor?

Wrath

16. Should we love the fact that God is a God of wrath who hates sin? In what ways is it right for us to imitate this wrath, and in what ways is it wrong for us to do so?

SPECIAL TERMS

attributes of being
beatific vision
communicable attributes
faithfulness
good
goodness
grace

holiness
impassible
invisibility
jealousy
justice
knowledge
love
mental attributes
mercy
moral attributes
omniscience
one simple and eternal act
order
patience
peace
reasonable self-determination
righteousness
spirituality
theophany
truthfulness
veracity
wisdom
wrath

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Since chapters 12 and 13 are so closely related in subject matter, the bibliographic material for both is at the end of chapter 13.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Exodus 34:6–7: *The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*

Note: The last section of this passage speaks of God “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children.” Some might want to stop short of this part in memorizing the passage, but we should remember that this, too, is Scripture and is written for our edification. This statement shows the horrible nature of sin in the way it has effects far beyond the individual sinner, also harming those around the sinner and harming future generations as well. We see this in tragic ways in ordinary life, where the children of alcoholics often become alcoholics and the children of abusive parents often become abusive parents.

Christians who are forgiven by Christ should not think of these phrases as applying to them, however, for they are in the other category of people mentioned just before this section on “the guilty”: they are among the “thousands” to whom God continually shows “steadfast love,” and is continually “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (v. 7). When someone comes to Christ the chain of sin is broken. Here it is important to remember Peter’s words: “You know that *you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers* not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18–19).

HYMN

“O WORSHIP THE KING”

Almost the entire hymnbook could be used to sing of one aspect or another of God's character. Literally hundreds of hymns would be appropriate. Yet this hymn contains a listing of many of God's attributes and combines them in such a way that the hymn is worthy of being sung again and again. Verse 1 speaks of God's glory, power, love; verse 2 speaks of his might, grace, wrath; and so forth. In verse 6, "ineffable" means "incapable of being expressed fully." The hymn is written as an encouragement for Christians to sing to one another, exhorting each other to "worship the King, all glorious above." Yet in the process of such exhortation the song itself also contains much high praise.

O worship the King all glorious above,
O gratefully sing his pow'r and his love;
Our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days,
Pavilioned in splendor, and girded with praise.

O tell of his might, O sing of his grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space.
His chariots of wrath the deep thunder-clouds form,
And dark is his path on the wings of the storm.

The earth with its store of wonders untold,
Almighty, your power has founded of old;
Has 'stablished it fast by a changeless decree,
And round it has cast, like a mantle, the sea.

Your bountiful care what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air; it shines in the light;
It streams from the hills; it descends to the plain;
And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In you do we trust, nor find you to fail;
Your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend!

O measureless might! Ineffable love!
While angels delight to hymn you above,
The humbler creation, though feeble their ways,
With true adoration shall lisp to your praise.

Author: Sir Robert Grant, 1833 (based on Psalm 104)

Alternative hymn: "Round the Lord in Glory Seated"

Chapter 13

The Character of God: "Communicable" Attributes (Part 2)

How is God like us in attributes of will and in attributes that summarize his excellence?

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we discussed the attributes of God that described his *being* (spirituality, invisibility), his *mental* attributes (knowledge, wisdom, and truthfulness), and his *moral* attributes (goodness, love, mercy, grace, patience, holiness, peace, righteousness, jealousy, and wrath). In this chapter we will examine God's attributes of *purpose* that is, attributes that have to do with making and carrying out decisions (will, freedom, and omnipotence) and his *summary* attributes (perfection, blessedness, beauty, and glory).

D. Attributes of Purpose

In this category of attributes we will discuss first God's will in general, then the freedom of God's will, and finally the omnipotence (or infinite power) of God's will.

14. Will. *God's will is that attribute of God whereby he approves and determines to bring about every action necessary for the existence and activity of himself and all creation.*

This definition indicates that God's will has to do with deciding and approving the things that God is and does. It concerns God's choices of what to do and what not to do.

a. God's Will in General: Scripture frequently indicates God's will as the final or most ultimate reason for everything that happens. Paul refers to God as the one "who accomplishes all things *according to the counsel of his will*" (Eph. 1:11). The phrase here translated "all things" (τὰ πάντα) is used frequently by Paul to refer to everything that exists or everything in creation (see, for example, Eph. 1:10, 23; 3:9; 4:10; Col. 1:16 [twice], 17; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6 [twice]; 15:27–28 [twice]). The word translated "accomplishes" (ἐνεργέω, G1919, "works, works out, brings about, produces") is a present participle and suggests continual activity. The phrase might more explicitly be translated, "who continually brings about everything in the universe according to the counsel of his will."

More specifically, all things were created by God's will: "For you created all things, and *by your will they existed and were created*" (Rev. 4:11). Both Old and New Testaments speak of human government as coming about according to God's will: the voice from heaven tells Nebuchadnezzar that he is to learn "that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:32), and Paul says that "there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1).

All the events connected with the death of Christ were according to God's will, the church at Jerusalem believed, for in their prayer they said, "truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with all the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do *whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*" (Acts 4:27–28). The specific mention of the various parties involved at different stages of the crucifixion, together with the indefiniteness of the plural relative pronoun "whatever" (Gk. ὅσα, from ὅσος, G4012, "the things which") implies that not simply the fact of Jesus' death but all the detailed events connected with it are comprehended in this statement: God's hand and will had predestined that all those things would come about.

Sometimes it is God's will that Christians suffer, as is seen in 1 Peter 3:17, for example: "For it is better to suffer for doing right, *if that should be God's will* than for doing wrong." Then in the next chapter Peter says, "Therefore let those who suffer *according to God's will* do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19). In this verse, the phrase "according to God's will" cannot refer to the manner in which Christians endure suffering, for then it would make the verse say essentially, "Let those who suffer *while doing right, do right* and entrust their souls ..." This would make the phrase "according to God's will" redundant. Rather, the phrase "according to God's will" must refer to the fact that these Christians are suffering, just as "God's will" referred to suffering in the previous chapter (1 Peter 3:17).

James encourages us to see all the events of our lives as subject to God's will. To those who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain," James says, "You do not know about tomorrow ... Instead you ought to say, *if the Lord wills* we shall live and we shall do this or that" (James 4:13–15). To attribute so many events, even evil events, to the will of God often causes misunderstanding and difficulty for Christians. Some of the difficulties connected with this subject will be treated here and others will be dealt with in chapter 16 on God's providence.

b. Distinctions in Aspects of God's Will: (1) Necessary will and free will: Some distinctions made in the past may help us understand various aspects of God's will. Just as we can will or choose something eagerly or reluctantly, happily or with regret, secretly or publicly, so also God in the infinite greatness of his personality is able to will different things in different ways.

One helpful distinction applied to aspects of God's will is the distinction between God's *necessary will* and God's *free will*. God's necessary will includes everything that he must will according to his own nature. What does God will necessarily? He wills himself. God eternally wills to be, or wants to be, who he is and what he is. He says, "I AM WHO I AM" or, "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE" (Ex. 3:14). God *cannot* choose to be different than he is or to cease to exist.

God's *free will* includes all things that God decided to will but had no necessity to will according to his nature. Here we must put God's decision to create the universe, and all the decisions relating to the details of that creation. Here we must also place all God's acts of redemption. There was nothing in God's own nature that required him to decide to create the universe or to redeem out of sinful mankind a people for himself (see the discussion above concerning God's independence). However, God did decide to create and to redeem, and these were totally free choices on his part. Though within the members of the Trinity love and fellowship and glory exist in infinite measure for all eternity (see John 17:5, 24), nonetheless God decided to create the universe and to redeem us for his own glory (cf. Isa. 43:7; 48:9-11; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 1:12; Rev. 4:11). It would be wrong for us ever to try to find a necessary cause for creation or redemption in the being of God himself, for that would rob God of his total independence. It would be to say that without us God could not truly be God. God's decisions to create and to redeem were totally free decisions.

(2) Secret will and revealed will: Another helpful distinction applied to different aspects of God's will is the distinction between God's *secret will* and his *revealed will*. Even in our own experience we know that we are able to will some things secretly and then only later make this will known to others. Sometimes we tell others before the thing that we have willed comes about, and at other times we do not reveal our secret will until the event we willed has happened.

Surely a distinction between aspects of God's will is evident in many passages of Scripture. According to Moses, "The *secret things* belong to the LORD our God; but the *things that are revealed* belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). Those things that God has revealed are given for the purpose of obeying God's will: "that we may *do* all the words of this law." There were many other aspects of his plan, however, that he had not revealed to them: many details about future events, specific details of hardship or of blessing in their lives, and so forth. With regard to these matters, they were simply to trust him.

Because God's revealed will usually contains his commands or "precepts" for our moral conduct, God's revealed will is sometimes also called God's *will of precept* or will of command. This revealed will of God is God's declared will concerning *what we should do* or what God *commands* us to do.

On the other hand, God's secret will usually includes his hidden decrees by which he governs the universe and determines everything that will happen. He does not ordinarily reveal these decrees to us (except in prophecies of the future), so these decrees really are God's "secret" will. We find out what God has decreed when events actually happen. Because this secret will of God has to do with his decreeing of events in the world, this aspect of God's will is sometimes also called God's *will of decree*.

There are several instances where Scripture mentions God's revealed will. In the Lord's prayer the petition, "*Your will be done* On earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) is a prayer that people would obey God's *revealed* will, his commands, on earth just as they do in heaven (that is, fully and completely). This could not be a prayer that God's secret will (that is, his decrees for events that he has planned) would in fact be fulfilled, for what God has decreed in his secret will shall certainly come to pass. To ask God to bring about what he has already decreed to happen would simply be to pray, "May what is going to happen happen." That would be a hollow prayer indeed, for it would not be asking for anything at all. Furthermore, since we do not know God's secret will regarding the future, the person praying a prayer for God's secret will to be done would never know for what he or she was praying. It would be a prayer without understandable content and without effect. Rather, the

prayer “*Your will be done*” must be understood as an appeal for the *revealed* will of God to be followed on earth.

If the phrase is understood in this way, it provides a pattern for us to pray on the basis of God’s commands in Scripture. In this sense, Jesus provides us with a guide for an exceedingly broad range of prayer requests. We are encouraged by Christ here to pray that people would obey God’s laws, that they would follow his principles for life, that they would obey his commands to repent of sin and trust in Christ as Savior. To pray these things is to pray that God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

A little later, Jesus says, “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the *will* of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Once again, the reference cannot be to God’s secret will or will of decree (for all mankind follows this, even if unknowingly), but to God’s *revealed* will, namely, the moral law of God that Christ’s followers are to obey (cf. Matt. 12:50; probably also 18:14). When Paul commands the Ephesians to “understand *what the will of the Lord is*” (Eph. 5:17; cf. Rom. 2:18), he again is speaking of God’s revealed will. So also is John when he says, “If we ask anything *according to his will* he hears us” (1 John 5:14).

It is probably best to put 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9 in this category as well. Paul says that God “*desires* [or “wills, wishes,” Gk. θέλω, G2527] all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Peter says that the Lord “is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). In neither of these verses can God’s will be understood to be his secret will, his decree concerning what will certainly occur. This is because the New Testament is clear that there will be a final judgment and not all will be saved. It is best therefore to understand these references as speaking of God’s *revealed will* his commands for mankind to obey and his declaration to us of what is pleasing in his sight.

On the other hand, many passages speak of God’s secret will. When James tells us to say, “*If the Lord wills* we shall live and we shall do this or that” (James 4:15), he cannot be talking about God’s revealed will or will of precept, for with regard to many of our actions we *know* that it is according to God’s command that we do one or another activity that we have planned. Rather, to trust in the secret will of God overcomes pride and expresses humble dependence on God’s sovereign control over the events of our lives.

Another instance is found in Genesis 50:20. Joseph says to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me; but *God meant it for good* to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” Here God’s *revealed* will to Joseph’s brothers was that they should love him and not steal from him or sell him into slavery or make plans to murder him. But God’s *secret* will was that in the disobedience of Joseph’s brothers a greater good would be done when Joseph, having been sold into slavery into Egypt, gained authority over the land and was able to save his family.

When Paul says to the Corinthians, “I will come to you soon, *if the Lord wills*” (1 Cor. 4:19), he is not speaking of God’s revealed will, for Paul has already determined, in obedience to God and in fulfillment of his apostolic office, to come to visit the Corinthians. He is speaking rather of God’s secret will, his hidden plan for the future, which is unknown to Paul and which will be known only as it comes to pass (cf. Acts 21:14; Rom. 1:10; 15:32; Eph. 1:11; 1 Peter 3:17; 4:19).

Both the revealing of the good news of the gospel to some and its hiding from others are said to be according to God’s will. Jesus says, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, *for such was your gracious will*” (Matt. 11:25–26). This again must refer to God’s secret will, for his revealed will is that all come to salvation. Indeed, only two verses later, Jesus commands everyone, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). And both Paul and Peter tell us that God wills all people to be saved (see 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Thus, the fact that some are not saved and some have the gospel hidden from them must be understood as happening according to God’s secret will, unknown to us and inappropriate for us to seek to pry into. In the same way we must understand the mention of God’s will in Romans 9:18 (“He has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills”) and Acts 4:28 (“to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place”) as references to God’s secret will.

There is danger in speaking about evil events as happening according to the will of God, even though we see Scripture speaking of them in this way. One danger is that we might begin to think that God takes pleasure in evil, which he does not do (see Ezek. 33:11), though he can use it for his good purposes (see chapter 16 for

further discussion). Another danger is that we might begin to blame God for sin, rather than ourselves, or to think that we are not responsible for our evil actions. Scripture, however, does not hesitate to couple statements of God's sovereign will with statements of man's responsibility for evil. Peter could say in the same sentence that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," and also that "this Jesus ... *you crucified and killed* by the hands of *lawless men*" (Acts 2:23). Both God's hidden will of decree and the culpable wickedness of "lawless men" in carrying it out are affirmed in the same statement. However we may understand the secret workings of God's hidden will, we must never understand it to imply that we are freed from responsibility for evil, or that God is ever to be blamed for sin. Scripture never speaks that way, and we may not either, even though how this can be so may remain a mystery for us in this age.

15. Freedom. *God's freedom is that attribute of God whereby he does whatever he pleases.* This definition implies that nothing in all creation can hinder God from doing his will. This attribute of God is therefore closely related to his will and his power. Yet this aspect of freedom focuses on the fact that God is not constrained by anything external to himself and that he is free to do whatever he wishes to do. There is no person or force that can ever dictate to God what he should do. He is under no authority or external restraint.

God's freedom is mentioned in Psalm 115, where his great power is contrasted with the weakness of idols: "Our God is in the heavens; *he does whatever he pleases*" (Ps. 115:3). Human rulers are not able to stand against God and effectively oppose his will, for "the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov. 21:1). Similarly, Nebuchadnezzar learns in his repentance that it is true to say of God, "*he does according to his will* in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What are you doing?" ' (Dan. 4:35).

Because God is free we should not try to seek any more ultimate answer for God's actions in creation than the fact that he willed to do something and that his will has perfect freedom (so long as the actions he takes are consistent with his own moral character). Sometimes people try to discover the reason why God had to do one or another action (such as create the world or save us). It is better simply to say that it was God's totally free will (working in a way consistent with his character) that was the final reason why he chose to create the world and to save sinners.

16. Omnipotence (Power, Sovereignty). *God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will.* The word *omnipotence* is derived from two Latin words, *omni* "all," and *potens* "powerful," and means "all-powerful." Whereas God's freedom referred to the fact that there are no external constraints on God's decisions, God's omnipotence has reference to his own power to do what he decides to do.

This power is frequently mentioned in Scripture. God is "The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!" (Ps. 24:8). The rhetorical question, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:27) certainly implies (in the contexts in which it occurs) that nothing is too hard for the LORD. In fact, Jeremiah says to God, "*nothing* is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17).

Paul says that God is "able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20), and God is called the "Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 1:8), a term (Gk. παντοκράτωρ, G4120) that suggests the possession of all power and authority. Furthermore, the angel Gabriel says to Mary, "With God nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37), and Jesus says, "With God *all things are possible*" (Matt. 19:26).

These passages indicate that God's power is infinite, and that he is therefore not limited to doing only what he actually has done. In fact, God is able to do more than he actually does. For example, John the Baptist says in Matthew 3:9, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." God is one who "does whatever he pleases" (Ps. 115:3); he could have destroyed Israel and raised up a great nation from Moses (cf. Ex. 32:10), but he did not do so.

However, there are some things that God cannot do. God cannot will or do anything that would deny his own character. This is why the definition of omnipotence is stated in terms of God's ability to do "all his holy will." It is not absolutely everything that God is able to do, but everything that is consistent with his character. For example, God cannot lie. In Titus 1:2 he is called (literally) "the unlying God" or the "God who never lies." The author of Hebrews says that in God's oath and promise "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18, author's translation). 2 Timothy 2:13 says of Christ, "He cannot deny himself." Furthermore, James says, "God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). Thus, God cannot lie, sin, deny himself, or be

tempted with evil. He cannot cease to exist, or cease to be God, or act in a way inconsistent with any of his attributes.

This means that it is not entirely accurate to say that God can do anything. Even the Scripture passages quoted above that use phrases similar to this must be understood in their contexts to mean that God can do anything he wills to do or anything that is consistent with his character. Although God's power is infinite, his use of that power is qualified by his other attributes (just as all God's attributes qualify all his actions). This is therefore another instance where misunderstanding would result if one attribute were isolated from the rest of God's character and emphasized in a disproportionate way.

God's exercise of power over his creation is also called God's *sovereignty*. God's sovereignty is his exercise of rule (as "sovereign" or "king") over his creation. This subject will be discussed in more detail in chapter 16, on God's providence.

As we conclude our treatment of God's attributes of purpose, it is appropriate to realize that he has made us in such a way that we show in our lives some faint reflection of each of them. God has made us as creatures with a *will*. We exercise choice and make real decisions regarding the events of our lives. Although our will is not absolutely free in the way God's is, God has nonetheless given us *relative freedom* within our spheres of activity in the universe he has created.

In fact, we have an intuitive sense that it is our ability to exercise our wills and make choices, and to do so in a relatively free way, that is one of the most significant marks of God-likeness in our existence. Of course our desire to exercise our wills and our desire to be free from restraint can show themselves in sinful ways. People can become proud and can desire a kind of freedom that involves rebellion against God's authority and a refusal to obey his will. Nonetheless, when we use our will and our freedom to make choices that are pleasing to God, we reflect his character and bring glory to him. When human beings are deprived of their ability to make free choices by evil governments or by other circumstances, a significant part of their God-likeness is suppressed. It is not surprising that they will pay almost any price to regain their freedom. American revolutionary Patrick Henry's cry, "Give me liberty or give me death!" finds an echo deep within every soul created in the image of God.

We do not of course have infinite power or omnipotence any more than we have infinite freedom or any of God's other attributes to an infinite degree. But even though we do not have omnipotence, God has given us *power* to bring about results, both physical power and other kinds of power: mental power, spiritual power, persuasive power, and power in various kinds of authority structures (family, church, civil government, and so forth). In all of these areas, the use of power in ways pleasing to God and consistent with his will is again something that brings him glory as it reflects his own character.

E. "Summary" Attributes

17. Perfection. *God's perfection means that God completely possesses all excellent qualities and lacks no part of any qualities that would be desirable for him.*

It is difficult to decide whether this should be listed as a separate attribute or simply be included in the description of the other attributes. Some passages say that God is "perfect" or "complete." Jesus tells us, "You, therefore, must be perfect, *as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48). And David says of God, "His way is *perfect*" (Ps. 18:30; cf. Deut. 32:4). There is some scriptural precedent, therefore, for stating explicitly that God lacks nothing in his excellence: he fully possesses all of his attributes and lacks nothing from any one of those attributes. Furthermore, there is no quality of excellence that it would be desirable for God to have that he does not have: he is "complete" or "perfect" in every way.

This attribute is the first of those classified as a "summary" attribute because it does not fit well into the other categories that have been listed. Even though all the attributes of God modify all the others in some senses, those that fit in this category seem more directly to apply to all the attributes or to describe some aspect of all of the attributes that it is worthwhile to state explicitly.

18. Blessedness. To be "blessed" is to be happy in a very full and rich sense. Often Scripture talks about the blessedness of those people who walk in God's ways. Yet in 1 Timothy Paul calls God "the *blessed* and only Sovereign" (1 Tim. 6:15) and speaks of "the glorious gospel of the *blessed* God" (1 Tim. 1:11). In both

instances the word is not εὐλογητός, G2329 (which is often translated “blessed”), but μακάριος (G3421, which means “happy”).

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

The definition reflects the fact that God takes pleasure in everything in creation that mirrors his own excellence. When he finished his work of creation, he looked at everything that he had made and saw that it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). This indicates God’s delight in and approval of his creation. Then in Isaiah we read a promise of God’s future rejoicing over his people: “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5; cf. Prov. 8:30–31; Zeph. 3:17).

It may at first seem strange or even somewhat disappointing to us that when God rejoices in his creation, or even when he rejoices in us, it is really the reflection of his own excellent qualities in which he is rejoicing. But when we remember that the sum of everything that is desirable or excellent is found in infinite measure in God himself, then we realize that it could not be otherwise: *whatever* excellence there is in the universe, *whatever* is desirable, must ultimately have come from him, for he is the Creator of all and he is the source of all good. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

We ought therefore to say to ourselves, as Paul says to the Corinthians, “What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor. 4:7). “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever” (Rom. 11:36).

We imitate God’s blessedness when we find delight and happiness in all that is pleasing to God, both those aspects of our own lives that are pleasing to God and the deeds of others. In fact, when we are thankful for and delight in the specific abilities, preferences, and other characteristics with which God has created us as individuals, then we also imitate his attribute of blessedness. Furthermore, we imitate God’s blessedness by rejoicing in the creation as it reflects various aspects of his excellent character. And we find our greatest blessedness, our greatest happiness, in delighting in the source of all good qualities, God himself.

19. Beauty. *God’s beauty is that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable qualities.* This attribute of God has been implicit in a number of the preceding attributes, and is especially related to God’s perfection. However, God’s perfection was defined in such a way as to show that he does not *lack* anything that would be desirable for him. This attribute, beauty, is defined in a positive way to show that God actually does possess all desirable qualities: “perfection” means that God doesn’t lack anything desirable; “beauty” means that God has everything desirable. They are two different ways of affirming the same truth.

Nevertheless, there is value in affirming this positive aspect of God’s possession of everything that is desirable. It reminds us that all of our good and righteous desires, all of the desires that really ought to be in us or in any other creature, find their ultimate fulfillment in God and in no one else.

David speaks of the beauty of the LORD in Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold *the beauty of the LORD* and to inquire in his temple.” A similar idea is expressed in another psalm: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you” (Ps. 73:25). In both cases, the psalmist recognizes that his desire for God, who is the sum of everything desirable, far surpasses all other desires. This desire culminates in a longing to be near God and to enjoy his presence forevermore. Thus, the greatest blessing of the heavenly city shall be this: “They shall see his face” (Rev. 22:4).

Anne R. Cousin certainly had a proper perspective on heaven, for in the last stanza of her hymn, “The Sands of Time are Sinking” she wrote:

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear bridegroom’s face.
I will not gaze at glory,
But on my King of grace;
Not at the crown he giveth,

But on his pierced hand:
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Emmanuel's land.

We reflect God's beauty in our own lives when we exhibit conduct that is pleasing to him. Thus, Peter tells wives in the churches to which he writes that their "adorning" (that is, their source of beauty) should be "the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (1 Peter 3:4). Similarly, Paul instructs servants that by their conduct they should "*adorn* the doctrine of God our Savior" (Titus 2:10).

The beauty of our lives is so important to Christ that his purpose now is to sanctify the entire church "that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). Thus, we individually and corporately reflect God's beauty in every way in which we exhibit his character. When we reflect his character, he delights in us and finds us beautiful in his sight.

But we also delight in God's excellence as we see it manifested in the lives of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Therefore it is right that we feel joy and delight in the fellowship of one another, and that this joy deepens as our conformity to the life of Christ increases. It is right that we long to be in the fellowship of God's people in which God's character is manifested, for when we delight in the godliness of God's people, we are ultimately delighting in God himself as we see his character evidenced in the lives of his people.

20. Glory. In one sense of the word *glory* it simply means "honor" or "excellent reputation." This is the meaning of the term in Isaiah 43:7, where God speaks of his children, "whom I created for my *glory*," or Romans 3:23, which says that all "have sinned and fall short of the *glory* of God." It also has that meaning in John 17:5, where Jesus speaks to the Father of "the *glory* which I had with you before the world was made," and in Hebrews 1:3, which says that the Son "is the radiance of God's *glory*" (author's translation). In this sense, the *glory* of God is not exactly an attribute of his being but rather describes the superlative honor that should be given to God by everything in the universe (including, in Heb. 1:3 and John 17:5, the honor that is shared among the members of the Trinity). But that is not the sense of the word *glory* that we are concerned with in this section.

In another sense, God's "glory" means the bright light that surrounds God's presence. Since God is spirit, and not energy or matter, this visible light is not part of God's being but is something that was created. We may define it as follows: *God's glory is the created brightness that surrounds God's revelation of himself.*

This "attribute" of God is really not an attribute of God in the sense that the others were, for here we are speaking not of God's own character but of the *created* light or brilliance that surrounds God as he manifests himself in his creation. Thus, God's *glory* in this sense is not actually an attribute of God in himself. Nevertheless, God's *glory* is something that belongs to him alone and is the appropriate outward expression of his own excellence. It seems right therefore to treat it here immediately after the attributes of God.

Scripture often speaks of God's *glory*. David asks, "Who is this King of *glory*? The LORD of hosts, *he is the King of glory!*" (Ps. 24:10). We read in Psalm 104:1-2, "O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with honor and majesty, you who cover yourself with light as with a garment ..." This *glory* of God is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament.

It is mentioned again in the New Testament in connection with the annunciation of Jesus' birth to the shepherds: "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and *the glory of the Lord shone around them* and they were filled with fear" (Luke 2:9). God's *glory* was also evident at the transfiguration of Christ (cf. Matt. 17:2), and we find in the heavenly city yet to come that "the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for *the glory of God is its light* and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23).

It is very appropriate that God's revelation of himself should be accompanied by such splendor and brightness, for this *glory* of God is the visible manifestation of the excellence of God's character. The greatness of God's being, the perfection of all his attributes, is something that we can never fully comprehend, but before which we can only stand in awe and worship. Thus, it is appropriate indeed that the visible manifestation of God be such that we would be unable to gaze fully upon it, and that it would be so bright that it would call forth both great delight and deep awe from us when we behold it only in part.

Quite amazingly, God made us to reflect his glory. Paul tells us that even now in our Christian lives we all are being “changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15). Though we do not now find ourselves surrounded by a visible light, there is a brightness, a splendor, or a beauty about the manner of life of a person who deeply loves God, and it is often evident to those around such a person. In the life to come, such brightness will be intensified, so that as we reign with Christ, it seems that we also will receive an outward appearance that is appropriate to that reign and to our status as image bearers of God and servants of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Prov. 4:18; Dan. 12:3; Matt. 13:43; 1 Cor. 15:43).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

Will, Freedom

1. As children grow toward adulthood, what are proper and improper ways for them to show in their own lives greater and greater exercise of individual will and freedom from parental control? Are these to be expected as evidence of our creation in the image of God?

Power

2. If God’s power is his ability to do what he wills to do, then is power for us the ability to obey God’s will and bring about results in the world that are pleasing to him? Name several ways in which we can increase in such power in our lives.

Perfection

3. How does God’s attribute of perfection remind us that we can never be satisfied with the reflection of only some of God’s character in our own lives? Can you describe some aspects of what it would mean to “be perfect” as our heavenly Father is perfect, with respect to your own life?

Blessedness

4. Are you happy with the way God created you—with the physical, emotional, mental, and relational traits he gave you? With the sex he gave you (whether masculine or feminine)? With the spiritual gifts he has given you? In what ways is it right to be happy or pleased with our own personalities, physical characteristics, abilities, positions, etc.? In what ways is it wrong to be pleased or happy about these things? Will we ever be fully “blessed” or happy? When will that be and why?
5. Think about the qualities that you admire in other people, both Christians and non-Christians. Which of these are right to admire and which are not? How can you decide? How can we come to delight more frequently and more fully in God himself?

Beauty

6. If we refuse to accept our society’s definition of beauty, or even the definitions that we ourselves may have worked with previously, and decide that that which is truly beautiful is the character of God himself, then how will our understanding of beauty be different from the one we previously held? Will we still be able to rightly apply our new idea of beauty to some of the things we previously thought to be beautiful? Why or why not?
7. Can you understand why David’s one desire above all others in life was “that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4)?

Glory

8. When the shepherds near Bethlehem experienced the glory of the Lord shining around them, “they were filled with fear” (Luke 2:9). Yet when we come to live forever in the heavenly city, we will continually be surrounded by the light of the glory of the Lord (Rev. 21:23). Will we then continually feel this same fear the shepherds felt? Why or why not? Would you like to live in the presence of this glory? Can we experience any of it in this life?

SPECIAL TERMS

attributes of purpose
beauty
blessedness
free will
freedom
glory
necessary will
omnipotence
perfection
power
reasonable self-determination
revealed will
secret will
sovereignty
summary attributes
will

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1223–29.)

Because systematic theologies have different ways of classifying the attributes of God, some of the sections listed below discuss only the communicable attributes of God, and some discuss all the attributes of God.

Sections in Evangelical Systematic Theologies

1. Anglican (Episcopalian)
 - 1882–92 Litton, 58–74
 - 1930 Thomas, 14–20, 495–500
2. Arminian (Wesleyan or Methodist)
 - 1847 Finney, 49–65, 135–80, 524–44
 - 1875–76 Pope, 1:248–55, 287–360
 - 1892–94 Miley, 1:159–222
 - 1940 Wiley, 1:241–393
 - 1960 Purkiser, 127–42
 - 1983 Carter, 1:111–27
 - 1983- Cottrell, 1:192–305, 388–468; 3:175–400, 461–528
 - 1987–90 Oden, 1:15–130
3. Baptist
 - 1767 Gill, 1:37–187, 359–65
 - 1887 Boyce, 54–115
 - 1907 Strong, 243–303

- 1917 Mullins, 214–50
 1976–83 Henry, 2:151–246; 5:9–164, 214–375; 6:35–89, 251–417
 1983–85 Erickson, 263–320
 1987–94 Lewis/Demarest, 1:175–248
4. Dispensational
 1947 Chafer, 1:179–224, 260–71
 1949 Thiessen, 75–88
 1986 Ryrie, 35–50
5. Lutheran
 1917–24 Pieper, 1:405–66
 1934 Mueller, 160–75
6. Reformed (or Presbyterian)
 1559 Calvin, 1:96–120 (1.10–12)
 1861 Heppe, 57–104
 1871–73 Hodge, 1:366–441
 1878 Dabney, 38–54, 144–74
 1887–1921 Warfield, *BTS* 505–22; *SSW* 1:69–81; *ST* 109–14
 1889 Shedd, 1:151–94, 334–92; 3:89–248
 1909 Bavinck, *DG* 175–251 (this is an exceptionally valuable discussion of the attributes of God)
 1938 Berkhof, 41–81
 1962 Buswell, 1:29–71
7. Renewal (or charismatic/Pentecostal)
 1988–92 Williams, 1:47–82

Sections in Representative Roman Catholic Systematic Theologies

1. Roman Catholic: Traditional
 1955 Ott, 24–49
2. Roman Catholic: Post-Vatican II
 1980 McBrien, 1:283–342

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Psalm 73:25–26: *Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.*

HYMN

“IF THOU BUT SUFFER GOD TO GUIDE THEE”

This is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful hymns ever written that expresses trust in God for his sovereignty.

If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
And hope in him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days:
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that naught can move.

What can these anxious cares avail thee,
These never-ceasing moans and sighs?
What can it help, if thou bewail thee
O'er each dark moment as it flies?
Our cross and trials do but press
The heavier for our bitterness.

Only be still, and wait his leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content
To take whate'er thy Father's pleasure
And all-deserving love hath sent;
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known
To him who chose us for his own.

All are alike before the highest;
'Tis easy to our God, we know,
To raise thee up though low thou liest,
To make the rich man poor and low;
True wonders still by him are wrought
Who setteth up and brings to naught.

Sing, pray, and keep his ways unswerving,
So do thine own part faithfully,
And trust his Word, though undeserving,
Thou yet shalt find it true for thee;
God never yet forsook at need
The soul that trusted him indeed.

Author: Georg Neumark, 1641

Alternative hymns: “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (printed at the end of chapter 16); “Crown Him With Many Crowns”¹

¹ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (pp. 156–225). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.