

A Study of the Attributes of God

The Nature of God

Scripture assumes the existence of God as the supreme creator of all that exists. He is the pre-existent uncaused-cause of creation (Genesis 1:1ff). He is knowable and yet incomprehensible (Job 11:7-12; 36:26; Isaiah 40:18). The nature/essence of God is revealed through His attributes. These attributes are the manifestations of who God is (essence) and how He acts (nature). These attributes can be classified as those which are incommunicable and those which are communicable.

The Incommunicable Attributes

The incommunicable attributes of God are those which surpass human comprehension. There is no correlation to the experience of mankind by which these attributes may be explained.

- 1) Eternity: God is free from the succession of time. (Psalm 90:1-6; 102:27; 2 Peter 3:8) God transcends the temporal limitations of duration and succession and possesses His existence in one indivisible present. Only God possesses this attribute which makes things like God's acts of creation, preservation, providence, incarnation, atonement, and in fact all His dealings within the created time-space universe all that much more special and wonderful. God, who is self-sufficient, chooses to deal with us. Specifically the Eternity of God gives us confidence because: 1) God sees and knows all things independent of the succession of time. Which is in direct contrast to our perception of succession within the time-space universe. For God all things occur in a single unitary now. Nothing can occur in our lives which will come as a surprise to God. And, 2) God uses time. He has mastery over sequential time. He created time for His own purposes. We are slaves being bound to time. Terms like "eternal life" and "eternal death" are qualitative not quantitative. In other words the issue is how we will spend eternity not how long eternity will be. Which is a joyful hope for the believer, Because God is eternal the promise of remaining in God's presence eternally is irrevocable.
- 2) Immutability: God never changes. (Numbers 23:19; Psalm 3:11; 102:26,27; Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 1:12; James 1:17) If God were to change it would mean that His existence is not perfect, independent, and eternal. While all change is for better or worse, God cannot change since He cannot become any more perfect (or worse). God does not need to improve. God cannot become wiser, more holy, more just, more merciful, more truthful, or less so. Nor do His purposes change. There is no variation with God. His character, power, plans, purposes, promises, love, mercy, justice, and so on all remain without variation. God deals with us (we who are constantly changing) without changing. God changes how He deals with us while He remains unchanged. While His means of dealing with us change He is consistent in purpose. He calls us to repentance and works within us to change bad to good. He is always consistent in doing right in how He deals with us.
- 3) Infinity: God is free from all limitations. (Psalm 90:2) Nothing limits His power, wisdom and justice (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chronicles 2:6; Psalm 90:2; 113:4-6; 139:7-12; Jeremiah 23:24; Acts 17:24-28) This attribute is sometimes identified as the immensity of God. God is infinite in relationship to space. In fact, all finite space is dependent upon Him. He is above space. Concepts such as "extension" and "impenetrability" do not apply. They simply cease to matter when discussing God. Nothing limits God's power, wisdom, and justice. He is unlimited in existence, capacity, energy, and perfection. God is spiritually infinite. God is wherever / whenever completely present in His power, knowledge, essence, etc. All of Him is there, always and beyond. We only understand this in a negative (the glass is half empty) form (i.e. what God isn't limited by such and such). Because we are finite in our nature and understanding and understand only what it means to be limited by

something. Put positively, freedom from limitations transcends our comprehension and limits. It becomes impossible to argue with and against and to comprehend God. Awe would be a better response. Silence in worship would be appropriate.

- 4) Omnipresence: God is not limited spatially and occupies all space with the entirety of His being. (Genesis 16:13; 1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 139:7-12; Isaiah 66:1; Jeremiah 23:23; Acts 7:48; 17:24; Romans 10:6-8; Hebrews 4:13) God is everywhere present at once. Infinity (above) deals with not God's not being limited by space. Omnipresence deals with His presence in space. Omnipresence is not a necessary part of God's being. He chooses freely as an act of His will to be everywhere. If God destroys the universe His omnipresence ceases. God is not stuck in some spot so that He misses things going on elsewhere. Nothing clouds His vision of what happens in us, to us, against us. We should be comforted by the reality that God is ever present for God is always able to help us. When we cry out He is there. There is a warning also. We really don't get away with anything.
- 5) Self-existence: God's existence is not dependent upon anything outside of Himself. (Exodus 3:14,15; 6:3; Isaiah 41:4; John 5:26; 8:58; Revelation 1:8) Thomas Aquinas said, "*He is the first cause; Himself uncaused.*" We struggle with this because for us everything has a point of origin. But, by saying that God is "uncaused" we are not talking about origins. God's self-existence is His nature and not an act of His will. Otherwise He would have power to will His annihilation. Everything is dependent on God. He caused it's existence. God, speaking of His self-existence, reveals Himself to Moses as "I am" (Exodus 3:14,15). An identity by which Jesus later identified Himself (John 8:58). It is important for us to consider this relationship as God the self-existent One, in Jesus, becomes personally knowable. Jesus said, "*I am with you always*" (Matthew 28:20). Because God is self-existent we know that He will always be with us. God will remain eternally the same with His people. (John 5:26) God is an independent thinker. His thoughts (Romans 11:33,34), counsel and wisdom (Psalm 33:11), will (Daniel 4:35; Romans 9:19), and power (Psalm 115:3) are independent of all things and exist because of Him. God is the ultimate source of wisdom, strength, and truth. There is no source which is greater.
- 6) Unity: God's attributes are unified without division or separation. (Deuteronomy 6:4; John 17:21,22; Romans 12:4; 1 Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 5:30) God's unity is derived from and exemplified by the Godhead and is essential to the nature of the Church. Unity is not uniformity. It does not allow division. It does allow variety. Unity in the Church does not come because we are an institution (structure). But because we are in Christ as His Body (spiritual) God's unity can be divided into two aspects. First God's Singularity: There is only one God. (1 Kings 8:60; 1 Corinthians 8:6) There is but one infinite and perfect spirit. God is one and so unique. God is uniquely one as the only true God. He is one divine being. All other beings exist of and through and unto Him. Scripture declares, "*Who is like God*" (Exodus 15:11). Because there is only one God and Jesus is deity we can have confidence in Him as the one mediator between us and God (1 Timothy 2:5). The second aspect of God's unity is His Simplicity: God's attributes are unified without division or separation (Deuteronomy 6:4). God's simplicity speaks of God's inner and qualitative unity. He is free from division into parts. God is perfection, light, life, righteousness, love, self-existent, just, omnipresent, gracious, omnipotent, and merciful, etc. - His nature / essence / attributes / personhood are without division. The three divisions of the Godhead are not so many parts (i.e. this eliminates polytheism, tritheism, and dualism). God's simplicity makes incarnation and deity possible as well as the efficacious atonement in which God gives Himself for us.

The Communicable Attributes

The communicable attributes of God are those which are comprehensible by mankind. There is found within them a correlation to the experience of mankind.

- 1) Faithfulness: God is true to His word. He keeps His promises. (Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 36:5; 100:5; 89:9; Isaiah 11:5; Lamentations 3:22,23; 2 Timothy 2:12,13) Faithfulness is essential to His being. Without it He would not be God. Faithfulness is one of the glorious perfections of God. For God to be anything other than faithful would be against His nature and impossible. God never forgets, never fails, never falters, never forfeits His word. God keeps His promises. He is absolutely reliable. God is faithful in all things and at all times. His word is His bond. To every declaration of promise or prophecy the Lord has exactly adhered. Every engagement of covenant or threatening He will make good. God's faithfulness is revealed in His covenant loyalty to His people. Regardless of how we have strayed away from Him He is faithful to us. We can be preserved from worry and anxiety while trusting in Him. Whatever our circumstance, whether in darkness or light, despair or hope, we can trust the continuance of His everlasting faithfulness towards His people. He is always there.
- 2) Goodness: God graciously and kindly provides for His creation. (Psalm 145:9,15; Acts 14:17) While someone may do "good" by visiting the sick or feeding the homeless, God is good. His nature is absolute good. He is always acting in goodness towards His creation. Sometimes we question the goodness of God because of what we see happening around us. That God is good reminds us that God is still good and is working good in His creation and our lives whether we think so or not. The Bible declares God good because of His acts of goodness evidenced through His works of redeeming love and promotion of truth and righteousness.
- 3) Grace: God's unmerited favor. (John 1:17; Ephesians 2:8,9) God is gracious to us because He is gracious in Himself. If God acts out of obligation to us to be gracious to us it would no longer be grace. It is within His divine freedom, and without coercion, that God is gracious to us. We are sinners for whom God undertakes salvation. He takes responsibility for our enmity upon Himself. The crucifixion of Jesus shows us both God's enmity against sin and sinners and His grace. Because God is gracious we are no longer enemies of God (Romans 8:31). But, God is for us. The Bible warns us that we cannot take for granted God's grace but we are to live as people touched by grace.
- 4) Holiness: God's attributes separate Him from everything else. Relationally, He is separate according to His moral excellence. (Exodus 15:11; 1 Peter 1:14-16) God is without impurity or the tarnish of sin. God's is separated from, transcending over, all His creation. The holiness of God is considered a communicable attribute in that we are called to holiness. We are called to withdraw from what is common or unclean while living in consecration to what is divine, sacred, and pure. Baker's Dictionary of Theology states the principle this way, "The moral quality of the character and actions of those who, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, share Christ's nature and consent to be ruled by it."
- 5) Justice: God acts according to His holiness in relationship to Himself and creation. (Acts 17:31; James 4:12; Revelation 16:5) God's relative justice means that He always acts towards Himself with moral uprightness and honesty of purpose. In relation to this aspect of God's justice we question whether we judge ourselves rightly. God's absolute justice means that with moral uprightness and honesty of purpose He resists any act against Him which may violate His holiness. This aspect challenges us to resist temptation so that there is no chance that we might sin. God's rectoral justice (being in charge of creation) means that He institutes righteous laws with just rewards and penalties. Unlike human judges there is no chance that God might slant His justice in anyone's favor. God is absolutely fair. God's distributive justice means that He acts justly while handing out reward and punishment. Thus we get what we deserve. The demand of the Law with regard to God's justice is for punishment and reward. With regard to our sin, God's justice demands punishment. But God has met the demands of the Law in Jesus Christ. We, therefore, need only trust in Christ's righteousness.
- 6) Love: God has committed Himself to the ultimate good of His creation. Love is that attribute which motivates God to self-disclosure. (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8-10,16) God in essence is love.

Love is fellowship between persons. It is an act of self-surrender. In the Godhead that self-surrender takes place between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Within the Godhead there is perfect unity and fellowship. God the Father plans. God the Son executes. God the Holy Spirit applies. By the incarnation the perfect love of the Godhead is revealed in the flesh. Love is a contact point between God and man. Man in the image of God comes with a capacity for self-surrender. The more we love the more we are like God. It is significant that the summation of the law focuses on loving God and loving man (Matthew 12:29-31).

- 7) Mercy: God has compassion upon those who are in the pitiable condition of sin. (Deuteronomy 13:17; Psalm 57:10; Romans 9:14-18; 11:30-32; 1 Peter 1:3) Mercy expresses God's goodness and love for the guilty and miserable who are helpless in the pitiable condition of sin. Mercy is not getting what we deserve which is the condemnation and wrath of God poured out upon us. Instead of justice we receive mercy demonstrated and made available through the saving work of Christ. If we deserved mercy it would not be mercy.
- 8) Omnipotence: God is all powerful. (Job 42:2; Psalm 135:6; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 11:19; Revelation 1:8; 4:8) Scripture declares that it is the Lord God Almighty who created the heavens and the earth. He has power and control over creation which is universal in extent and in total depth. God will get done what He wills to get done. What God promises He is able to accomplish. This differs from paganism and other world religions which point towards many god who limit each other and which are not in complete control.
- 9) Omniscience: God knows all things. (Isaiah 40:13,14; Hebrews 4:13) God doesn't need to learn anything. When God declares what He created "good" it really is. Nothing is left out. God's promises are complete and not subject to revision based on subsequent discoveries. With God, everything follows a plan and purpose which comes from the Divine mind (Acts 15:18). He completely knows us (Matthew 10:30). He knows what we do (Psalm 94:9; Proverbs 15:3; Ephesians 2:10). Because God is omniscient His justice is sure. His love is complete. His grace and mercy are without fail. His lovingkindness is exactly given according to our need. We have not need to fear because He loves us.
- 10) Patience: God is long-suffering towards those who act in disobedience towards Him. (Exodus 34:6; Romans 2:4; Colossians 1:11; 1 Peter 3:20; Revelation 6:10) That God is patient means that there is hope for us. Because God is patient His Divine wrath is suspended to give us the opportunity to repent and to obey His will. Otherwise we will indeed face judgment and His just wrath. Because God is patient He puts up with us even when we don't deserve it. God is persistent at the pursuit of our hearts. God's patience should encourage us to act in patience towards others and to continue steadfastly following God's leading and according to the goals He sets before us.
- 11) Sovereignty: God upholds all things by His power and determines their just end. He is in complete control. (Genesis 14:19; Deuteronomy 10:14,17; Acts 17:24-26; Ephesians 1:11) With regard to His acts of creation and redemption no one is forcing God to do these. The initiation and completion of these acts are completely God's choice alone. God is not obligated to do anything. God's sovereignty takes us completely out of the picture. We cannot earn God's favor. That we are unable to earn God's favor gives us confidence in Him. God is not "wishy-washy" that He might be looking for a reason to "dump the whole thing" especially when we get too obnoxious with our sin. God is not going to throw up His hands and give up on us. He knew before He brought creation into being what He was getting Himself into.
- 12) Spirituality: God, in substance is invisible and without composition, extension, or spatial existence. (John 4:24; Acts 17:28; 1 Timothy 1:17) God is greater than any attempts we might make to describe or represent Him. Animism claims that God exists in everything. Scripture teaches us that we exist in God. All of which effects how we come to Him especially in worship. We are to worship God on His terms and only as He chooses to reveal Himself to us. We are to come before Him with humility, brokenness, openness, expectation, and awe. Not as before a God of our own creation.

- 13) Truth: God is the reliable source of all truth. (Number 23:19; Daniel 8:26; 10:1,21; Psalm 19:9; 119:160; John 14:6; Galatians 2:5,14; Ephesians 4:20-24; Hebrews 6:18) By definition the following describe truth. Truth is the affirmation of what is ($3 \times 3 = 9$). Every reality can be considered and affirmation of itself (a tree is a tree). The Word of God (Jesus Christ) is the truth because He expresses the Father. In the realm of sensible objects there is a resemblance to what is. There is scientific truth, historical truth, moral truth, and spiritual truth. God tells the truth so that what He says is correct. All of God's attributes are effected by His attribute of truth. His justice is not bent but totally true. His love is committed and honest. That God is truth requires us to be truthful.
- 14) Wisdom: God is complete in His knowledge and perfect in His application of that knowledge to achieving His will. (1 Samuel 2:3; Proverbs 8; Ephesians 1:11,12; Colossians 1:16) Humanly derived knowledge brings only grief and frustration (Ecclesiastes 1:12 ff; 2:9-11). In contrast, Divine wisdom given by God enables us to lead good, true, and satisfying lives. The application of Divine wisdom enables us to keep the commandments of God (Proverbs 4:11). Divine wisdom is characterized by prudence (Proverbs 8:12), discernment (Proverbs 14:8), humility (Proverbs 10:8). True wisdom is based on the fear of the Lord (Job 28:28) and is of inestimable value (Job 28:13 ff). God freely gives His wisdom to those who seek it (Proverbs 2:6; Ecclesiastes 2:26). Within wisdom is the revelation of God's divine will to man (1 Corinthians 2:4-7) and our understanding of God's will for us (Matthew 13:54). Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) and the ultimate source of the Christian's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). The truly wise man is the good man, and the truly good man is he who at the beginning wisely chooses to give God His proper place in his life (Matthew 7:24-29).