

## **The Attributes of God**

Most of the teaching about holiness from contemporary Christianity is focused what is called "practical." Theology, or the study of God, has become something of a dirty word in many circles. This may be due to many so-called theologians who have made the study of God so abstract as to become unintelligible. Or due to some Bible teachers who are unable to connect the doctrine of God with the practice of daily living.

Yet holy living does not come from simply following a list. When the Lord met Moses on Mount Sinai to write the Ten Commandments on the two tablets of stone, replacing what Moses had shattered, He began with a description of His character (Exodus 34:6). This description is essential repeated in many places in the Old Testament (cf. Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3).

Understanding the attributes of God are critical to our spiritual life. As A. W. Tozer so aptly put in *The Knowledge of the Holy*, page 9,

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.... Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like."

### **The attributes of God explained**

An attribute of God is either something that the Bible says is true about God or what the Bible shows is true about God. These attributes are what God has revealed Himself to be to us and thus depict God's being to us as He has chosen to explain Himself.

It is important to note that each attribute of God is essential to Him. If God lost any of His attributes He would cease to be Himself. But yet God is not the sum total of His attributes, for God's essence is beyond our ability to comprehend. God's essence is revealed in His attributes and is beyond what we can understand. We can apprehend information about God but we can not comprehend the essence of God.

God's attributes are sometimes divided into absolute and relative attributes. Absolute attributes are considered to be those that belong exclusively to the essence of God (e.g. His eternity) while relative attributes speak of God's essence in relation to His Creation (e.g. His holiness or omniscience). However, this distinction is difficult to make when all of His attributes affect His Creation.

The Bible teaches that God is transcendent over all (1 Kings 8:27) and immanent in the world (Psalm 139). Theologians often discuss the attributes of God by dividing them into two categories, God's incommunicable attributes, which deal with His transcendency, and God's communicable attributes, which deal with His immanency. A simple way to look at this distinction is that God's incommunicable attributes are those that are completely unique to God alone and God's communicable attributes are those that we are commanded to imitate. Keep in mind that none of God's attributes are completely communicable to us. We can never become like God.

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This may give us a means of listing the attributes of God as detailed in God's revelation.

### **God's incommunicable attributes**

1. God is self-existent (Exodus 3:14; Psalm 90:2; Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16-17)

The most fundamental aspect of God is His self-sufficiency. This is sometimes referred to as God's "aseity." God is distinctly independent from everything. His being is in no way dependent upon anything outside Himself and exists forever in Himself alone. He alone can give life because life is in Him (John 5:26). He does not need anything (Acts 17:25) and can do as He pleases (Daniel 4:35).

While God designed those called by Him to bring Him glory (Isaiah 43:7; Ephesians 1:11-12), God did not need to do this to be fulfilled or be complete. God was glorified before the foundation of the world (John 17:5) and mankind does not add anything to God's being.

This realization brings humility to man. God does not need us to accomplish His will. He chooses in love to use us because we are not essential to God. We must not think more highly of ourselves that we ought to think (Romans 12:3) for if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself (Galatians 6:3).

2. God is immutable or changeless (Psalm 102:24-27; Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17)

God does not change because God cannot change (James 1:17). If God could change He could then cease to be God, which is impossible. He truly cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). God never differs from Himself.

In contrast to Process Theology, God does not improve or grow. If God were to improve in anyway, then He would prior to His improvement be somehow deficient. The idea that God changes by adding to Himself new experiences if another attempt at elevating mankind. Man needs to believe his importance and adjusts theology accordingly.

Furthermore, God acts consistent with His character at all times. While God cannot change, He can apply His character differently to different people and even to the same people at different times. These changes in God's choices do not represent a change in His being. Example of changes in God's choices include changing His mind, that is repenting (Genesis 6:6 and 1 Samuel 15:11), changing His purpose (Exodus 32:10-14; Jonah 3:10), becoming angry (Numbers 11:1, 10; Psalm 106:40) and turning from anger (Deuteronomy 13:17; Jeremiah 18:8-10). In these cases God is not changing who He is, but is simply relating differently to people who are changing.

Teaching that our actions can cause God to change is another elevation of man. God does not change His mind, He is applying His consistent character according to the changes of the situation. We do not bring change to God, our change results in different applications of God's immutable character.

Because God does not change, His promises are sure and can be completely trusted. What God has promised He will fulfill (Numbers 23:19). God will not change His mind about His promises. He will not change His plan or His purposes and the proper conviction about this truth provides us with

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the faith to live as God has designed. Doubt about God's consistency undermines our ability to trust Him and increases our desire to depend upon ourselves, which is the essence of foolishness.

3. God is infinite (Psalm 40:5; 145:3; Jeremiah 32:27)

God is free from all limitations except for self-imposed limitations. God is infinite with respect to time, space and being.

God is infinite in time in that He is immortal (Deuteronomy 32:40; 1 Timothy 1:17; Psalm 102:27) and eternal (Genesis 21:33; Psalm 90:2; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 1:10-12; 11:6; 2 Peter 3:8; Revelation 13:8). God is the creator of time, pre-dating and post-dating all of creation.

God is immortal in that He can never die. He is eternal in that He always was and He always will be, without both beginning and ending. He must be eternal because He cannot have received His being from another and be God, for that other being would be the originator.

God's eternity is essential in honoring Him as the Creator of all. God's immortality is essential for our immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53).

God is infinite in respect to time because He created time. All events are equally present to God; in His timelessness there is no succession of moments. Therefore, God can communicate about all future and past events with equal certainty and the prophetic Word of God is sure.

While God is timeless, God nevertheless acts in the context of time. God brings certain events about at the right time (Galatians 4:4-5; Acts 17:30-31). But God is in time only in terms of His relationship to His creation.

God is infinite with regard to space in that He is omnipresent (Genesis 16:13, 1 Kings 8:27, Isaiah 66:1, Jeremiah 23:23-24, Psalm 139:7-10, Amos 9:2-3; Acts 17:27-28). God's infinity and immutability makes Him omnipresent in that He exists at all times everywhere. There is no place that we can go from His presence because He is not simply in all space, all space is in Him. He is beyond all in His infinitude.

There is no place we can go to hide from God (Psalm 139:7) and God will not leave the guilty unpunished (Exodus 34:7; Nahum 1:3). God does not miss the sin of man (Matthew 12:36). Not only is there no place we can hide from God, there is no place we can go that is beyond His care. Nothing can come between us and God's presence. Most of the time that the Bible speaks of God's omnipresence, it is for His blessing.

God's essence is everywhere but God is not present in the same sense everywhere. God dwells in a special way in heaven as opposed to earth, in man as opposed to in animals and in believers as opposed to unbelievers.

Unlike the old covenant, in the church age God does not dwell in a special way in any one special place. God dwells in a special way in the church (1 Corinthians 3:16-17) and in every believer in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19).

God is infinite in His being also regarding His perfection (Psalm 18:30-32; Matthew 5:48; Romans 12:2). Every communicable attribute of God exists perfectly in God. Not only is every quality of

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God present but each is without defect. Since God's being is perfect, all His ways are flawless as well and can be completely trusted. It is on this basis that Christ can command us to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

4. God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2:5)

God is one in both number and in unity. Not only is there only one God but His nature renders impossible the existence of more than one. No more than one God can embody the attributes of God, of originating all and sustaining all completely and independently. Every attribute is found completely and uniquely perfectly in God alone. God is unique over all but this does not need to mean that a plurality of persons in one being is excluded.

God is one in quality as well as quantity. This means that God is not divisible. He is one in being, not three parts united together. Since God is God alone, He deserves our entire, undivided worship and allegiance.

Certain of God's attributes are emphasized at different times. Yet this does not mean that any of God's attributes ceases. When God acts justly in judgment, this does not mean He ceases to be all-loving at that point. God's attributes are always united in His being. When we consider God, we must not think of Him in one aspect divorced from His other qualities. A balanced, accurate view of God is important for worship and holy living.

### **God's communicable attributes**

1. God is spirit (John 4:24)

God is not dependent upon matter and cannot be discerned by the bodily senses. Because God is spirit, we do not need to be at a certain place to worship Him (John 5:21). The Scripture often describes God with bodily parts but these are unquestionably anthropomorphic figures of speech.

God as spirit is invisible (1 Timothy 1:17) and no created person has ever seen God (John 1:18; John 6:46; 1 John 4:12). The Bible records appearances of God (Genesis 18; 32; Exodus 13; 24; 33; etc.), known as *theophanies*. These outward manifestations of God in the Old Testament were climaxed by the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who was "the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3). While no one has seen God, Christ made God known to us in a unique fashion (John 1:18).

The truth that God is spirit is behind the second commandment to not make any image of God. It is impossible for man to picture God as similar to His creation without dishonoring Him.

God as a spiritual being possesses life in Himself (John 5:26; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). He is self-conscious and self-determining as a distinct personality, with intellect and will. As spirit and life, He is able to impart spirit and life to man.

The knowledge that God is spirit moves us to awareness that the most important things in life are not seen (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). That which is seen in temporal and our spiritual life is the essence of our being.

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### 2. God is holy (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:5)

This is the most common communicable attribute that God is seeking to impart to us. It encompasses innumerable characteristics of God that are areas of obedience for mankind.

Holiness means separateness, in particular being separated from sin. His holiness manifests itself in righteousness. As Judge of all (Genesis 18:25), God deals righteously. This righteous justice encompasses God's mercy and grace, which reflect God's love (John 3:16).

God's holiness enables all of His many communicable attributes to be perfectly applied so that His character of compassion, grace, love, truth and justice can be reflected in His dealings with mankind (Exodus 34:6-7; Psalm 86:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). All of what God does is good and right. This holiness is revealed in many specific ways, including:

- God's lovingkindness, which is His special benevolent goodness to His chosen people (Psalm 6:4; 51:1; Isaiah 54:8-10; Romans 2:4; Colossians 3:12).
- God's compassion, which is His goodness to those in difficulty (2 Samuel 24:14; Nehemiah 9:19; Lamentations 3:22; Psalm 103:13; Ephesians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3).
- God's grace, which is goodness favorably applied to undeserving people (Exodus 33:12; John 1:14; Romans 5:15; 1 Peter 5:10).
- God's longsuffering, which is His patience toward those who deserve to be punished (Romans 3:25; 9:22 1 Timothy 1:16; 2 Peter 3:9, 15).
- God's love, which is His goodness in action, mostly toward His chosen people (1 John 4:7-10; John 3:16; 14:23; 16:27; Romans 5:8; 8:37; 9:13).
- God's wrath, which is a product of His holiness and the application of His justice (Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Deuteronomy 32:4).

God's holiness is the basis for our call to holiness, "like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). A fuller knowledge of God's holiness serves us well in godly living.

### 3. God is omniscient (Job 28:20-28, Psalm 139:2-4, 17-18; 147:4-5; Jeremiah 17:10; Romans 11:33; 1 John 1:5)

Omniscience, generally and classically, is defined as God's perfect knowledge of all things. In other words, there is nothing that God does not know. While God is uniquely omniscient, we can know some of what God knows and thus this is a communicable attribute. We are called to be filled with the knowledge of His will (Colossians 1:9-10).

God's knowledge differs from man's not only in its extent but in its nature. God's knowledge is beyond ours in both quantity and source. The source of God's knowledge is innate and immediate, not dependent upon another or resulting from observations or reasoning.

Along with the perfect knowledge of God is the perfect wisdom of God, known as omnisapience (Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33; Ephesians 1:11-12; 3:10). The wisdom of God is the practical side of

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God's knowledge, applying knowledge to achieve His desires in ways that will glorify Him the most.

Because God is all knowing, we can trust His Word on any subject it touches. We do not need to question who is correct when man's ideas and God's ideas are in conflict. God's omniscience renders man's wisdom as foolishness (Isaiah 55:8-9; 1 Corinthians 1:25) and we must defer to God's knowledge in all things.

4. God omnipotent (Genesis 1:1, Genesis 50:20, Jeremiah 24:5, 32:27, Psalm 139:13-16, Isaiah 46:8-13; Job 2:10; Matthew 19:26)

God is all powerful and fully able at all times to accomplish His desires. God is "Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18) and all things are possible with God (Matthew 19:26). The only limitations to God's ability to do anything are God's other attributes. For example, God cannot act foolishly because He is wise, not because He lacks power.

God, in His omnipotence, is sovereign over all (1 Timothy 6:15). All things happen as a result of God's sovereign will. God can change situations but in His wisdom He may choose not to. Bad things happen under God's sovereignty because God has, for His good purposes, allowed the world to be ruled by the evil one (1 John 5:19). One day, God will exercise His power and bring about the restoration of all His Creation. It is not God's power that brings this delay, it is God's sovereign wisdom.

The appreciation of God's omnipotence enables us to trust God fully. We can pray to God in faith knowing fully that He is able to accomplish exceedingly, abundantly beyond all we can ask or think (Ephesians 3:20).

### **Conclusion**

God reveals His character to us in the Bible for the purpose of knowing Him. The more we know about God, the more we can come to know Him personally. The more we come to know Him personally, the more we can come to love Him. The more we come to love God, the more we will obey Him. The more obedient we are to God's will, the more we will know about Him, for understanding does not only precede obedience, it follows obedience (cf. Psalm 119:100; Matthew 21:23-27). The knowledge of God is absolutely critical to our ability to live the godly life we have been called to live.