

Theology

The Attributes of God *pt. 1*



The Character of God

Introduction

God's Nature

The doctrine of God is the central point of theology. Your view of God affects what you believe about Him, how you live your life and how you do ministry.

We need to understand God correctly for our spiritual lives to have real meaning and depth.

Some common ways people misunderstand God include:

1. God is a kind of celestial police officer who looks for opportunities to pounce upon people who go astray.
2. God is like a favorite grandfather - indulgent, kindly old gentleman who would never want to detract from humans' enjoyment of life.
3. How can God be three persons yet be one being at the same time?
4. Is God so separate and removed from the creation (i.e. so *transcendent*) that He does not work through it, and hence nothing can be known of Him from it?
5. Is God fixed and unchanging in essence? Or does he grow and develop like the rest of the universe?

When we attempt to understand God we can make mistakes that fall along a spectrum:

- On one end, there can be *excessive analysis* where God's attributes are laid out and classified like one would do an autopsy, ending up with a lot of speculation about God, even pressing beyond what He has revealed.
- On the other end, there can be *mystical, unfocused generalization*, ending up in what some have called "belief in the great whatever", where God is perceived as a hazy, undefined blur.

We know God only as He has revealed himself. His self-revelation is consistent with His nature, but it is not exhaustive.

The study of God should get us to arrive at an accurate understanding of Him and hence, a closer personal relationship with Him.

God's Character

Scripture provides various descriptions of God that reveal elements of his character:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a fountain (Ps. 36:9)• a rock (Deut. 32:4)• a hiding place (Ps. 119:114)• a tower (Prov. 18:10)• a moth (Ps. 39:11)• a shadow (Ps. 91:1)• a shield (Ps. 84:11)• a temple (Rev. 21:22)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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)	<p>in terms of human actions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• knowing (Gen. 18:21)• remembering (Gen. 8:1; Ex. 2:24)• seeing (Gen. 1:10)• hearing (Ex. 2:24)• smelling (Gen. 8:21)• testing (Ps. 11:5)• sitting (Ps. 9:7)• rising (Ps. 68:1)• walking (Lev. 26:12)• wiping away tears (Isa. 25:8)
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These passages show that: 1) in some sense, all of creation reveals something about God to us and that humans, who are made in God's image reveal him more fully; 2) God uses human terms (terms that we know) in Scripture to teach us about things we do not and cannot know from experience (such as His attributes); 3) God made the universe to demonstrate the excellence of His character ([Rev. 4:11](#); [Ps. 148:3, 7-11, 13](#))

God's Attributes

Attributes of God are:

- The **qualities** of God that constitute what He is, the very characteristics of His nature.
- Permanent and intrinsic qualities; they cannot be gained or lost.
- Inseparable from His nature or essence (e.g. God *is* his love, holiness, and power.)
- Different ways of understanding the objective aspects of His being.

Attributes of God are **NOT**:

- His acts, such as creating, guiding, and preserving or His roles, such as Creator, Guide, Preserver.
- Our conceptions projected upon Him.
- A collection of separate parts or an addition to His essence.
- His properties (functions, activities, acts), which can be better understood as the distinctive characteristics of the 3 persons in the Trinity.

Classifying God's Attributes

Immanent (intransitive) vs Emanant (transitive)	<p>Immanent: attributes that remain within God's nature, e.g., spirituality</p> <p>Emanant: attributes that go out from and operate outside the nature of God, affecting creation e.g., mercy</p>
Moral vs Natural	<p>Moral: attributes that in the human context would relate to the concept of rightness (as opposed to wrongness) e.g., holiness, love, mercy, and faithfulness</p> <p>Natural: nonmoral superlatives of God, such as his knowledge and power</p>
Absolute vs Relative	<p>Absolute: qualities that God has in Himself, and has always possessed, independently of the objects of His creation.</p> <p>Relative: qualities manifested through His relationship to other subjects and inanimate objects.</p>
Incommunicable Vs Communicable	<p>Incommunicable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attributes of God as He is in Himself, God as the absolute Being • those attributes that God does not share or "communicate" to others • unique qualities for which no counterpart can be found in humans e.g., omnipresence - God is everywhere simultaneously <p>Communicable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attributes of God as He is related to His creatures, God as a personal Being • those attributes God shares or "communicates" with us • qualities of God for which at least a partial counterpart can be found in his human creations e.g., love is infinite in God and is found in partial form in humans

We will use the 4th classification, but all classifications are inadequate. For example, God's wisdom can be considered a communicable attribute because humans can also be wise. However, we will never be infinitely wise as God is. His wisdom is shared with us to an extent, but never *fully* shared with us.

God's Attributes

Incommunicable	Communicable				
	<i>Attributes describing God's being</i>	<i>Mental Attributes</i>	<i>Moral Attributes</i>	<i>Attributes of Purpose</i>	<i>"Summary" Attributes</i>
Independence (Self-Existence)	Spirituality	Knowledge (Omniscience)	Goodness	Will	Perfection
Constancy (Unchangeableness)	Invisibility	Wisdom	Love	Freedom	Blessedness
Eternity		Truthfulness (and Faithfulness)	Mercy, Grace, Patience	Omnipotence (Power, Sovereignty)	Beauty
Omnipresence (Immensity)			Holiness		Glory
Unity			Peace (or Order)		
			Righteousness, Justice		
			Jealousy		
			Wrath		

N.B. This is only a guide. There is **no** perfect, definitive categorization of the attributes of God. This lesson we will focus on the **incommunicable** attributes and the next lesson on the **communicable** ones.

Incommunicable Attributes

- attributes of God as He is in Himself, God as the absolute Being
- those attributes that God does not share or “communicate” to others
- unique qualities for which no counterpart can be found in humans e.g., omnipresence - God is everywhere simultaneously

Independence (Self-Existence)

Independence: 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.

- Also referred to as God's *self-existence* or *aseity* (from Latin *a se* meaning "from himself")
- God is independent in His being, virtues, decrees, works, etc.
- God is the ultimate ground of all things, who voluntarily enters into various relations with other beings
- As the self-existent God, He is not only independent in Himself, but also causes everything to depend on Him. This self-existence of God finds expression in the name Jehovah.
- God's life is different from that of every other living being. While all other beings have their life in God, he does not derive his life from any external source. He is never depicted as having been brought into being.
- God's continued existence does not depend on anything outside himself. All other creatures, insofar as they are alive, need something to sustain that life - nourishment, warmth, protection.

Support for both aspects of this attribute can be found in:

- [Acts 17:24-25](#)
- [Job 41:11](#)
- [Ps. 50:10-12](#)
- [John 17:5, 24](#)
- [Rev. 4:11](#)
- [John 1:3](#)
- [Rom. 11:35-36](#)
- [1 Cor. 8:6](#)
- [Ps. 90:2](#)
- [Ex. 3:14](#)
- [Isa. 43:7](#)
- [Eph. 1:11-12](#)
- [Isa. 62:3-5](#)
- [John 5:26](#)

Constancy (Unchangeableness)

Constancy: 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.

- Also referred to as God's *immutability*.
- There is no quantitative or qualitative change in God. He cannot increase in anything because He is already perfection, nor can He decrease, for to do so He would cease to be God. Also, His nature, mind, plans, actions do not change.
- Descriptions in Scripture where God seems to change His mind are either: 1) descriptions of God's actions/feelings in human terms; 2) new stages in the working out of His plan; 3) changes of orientation resulting from humans' move into a different relationship with God (e.g. what happened in Nineveh in [Jonah 3:10](#))
- God is not immobile or sterile. He is active and dynamic in a way that is stable and consistent with His nature. In other words, He is dependable - He will be the same tomorrow as He is today. He will act as He has promised. He will fulfil His commitments.

Support for both aspects of this attribute can be found in:

- [Ps. 102:25-27](#)
- [Mal. 3:6](#)
- [James 1:17](#)
- [Ps. 33:11](#)
- [Matt. 13:35](#); [25:34](#)
- [Eph. 1:4, 11](#); [3:9, 11](#)
- [2 Tim. 2:19](#)
- [1 Pet. 1:20](#)
- [Rev. 13:8](#)
- [Isa. 46:9-11](#)

Eternity

Eternity: 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 He acts in time.

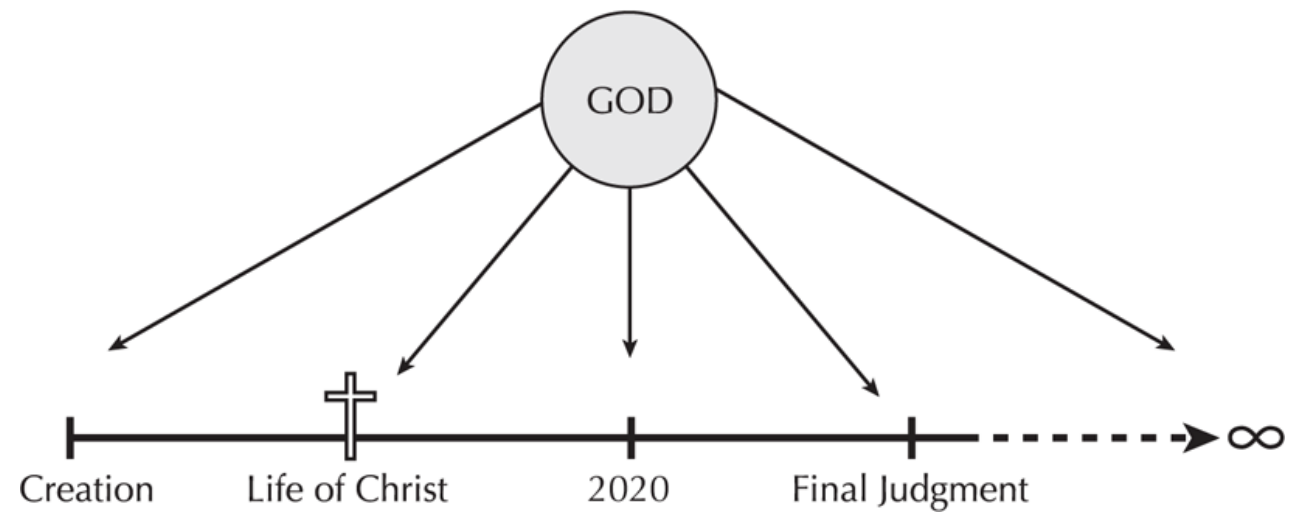
- Also referred to as the *infinity of God in relation to time*.
- Since God does not change, *time* does not change God: it has no effect on His being, perfections, purposes or promises.
- God created all things, including time. Before there was a universe and before there was time, God always existed.
- He knows what is now occurring in human experience. He is aware that events occur in a particular order, and in the biblical accounts, He knows what has already transpired, what is now the case, and what is yet in the future. From all eternity he has determined what he is now doing. Thus, His actions are not reactions to unforeseen developments. He does not get taken by surprise or have to formulate contingency plans.
- God is the eternal Lord and Sovereign over time and over history, and he sees it more clearly and acts in it more decisively than any other. 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.

Support for both aspects of this attribute can be found in:

- [Ps. 90:2, 4; 102:12](#)
- [Eph. 3:21](#)
- [Job 36:26](#)
- [Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 21:6; 22:13](#)
- [John 8:58](#)
- [Ex. 3:14](#)
- [Isa. 44:6; 57:15](#)
- [2 Pet. 3:8](#)
- [Jude 25](#)
- [2 Tim. 1:9](#)
- [Titus 1:2](#)
- [Gal. 4:4-5](#)
- [Acts 17:30-31](#)

Eternity

Grudem, W. (2020). [*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*](#) (Second Edition, p. 204). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic.



The Relationship of God to Time

Omnipresence (Immensity)

Omnipresence: 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.

- God is present with His whole being everywhere. There is nowhere in the whole of creation where one can flee from God's presence.
- God cannot be contained by any space, no matter how large. God exists without size or dimensions in space.
- God is present everywhere in His creation but is also distinct from His creation.
- God is present in different ways in different places - to punish, to sustain or to bless.
- God is available to us wherever we may be.

Support for both aspects of this attribute can be found in:

- [Gen. 1:1](#)
- [Deut. 10:14](#)
- [Jer. 23:23-24](#)
- [Ps. 139:7-10](#)
- [Acts 17:28](#)
- [Col. 1:17](#)
- [1 Kings 8:27](#)
- [Isa. 66:1-2](#)
- [Acts 7:48](#)
- [Amos 9:1-4](#)
- [Heb. 1:3](#)
- [Ps. 16:11](#)
- [Rev. 21:3](#)
- [John 14:23](#)
- [2 Cor. 3:17](#)

Unity

Unity: God is not divided into parts, **yet** we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times

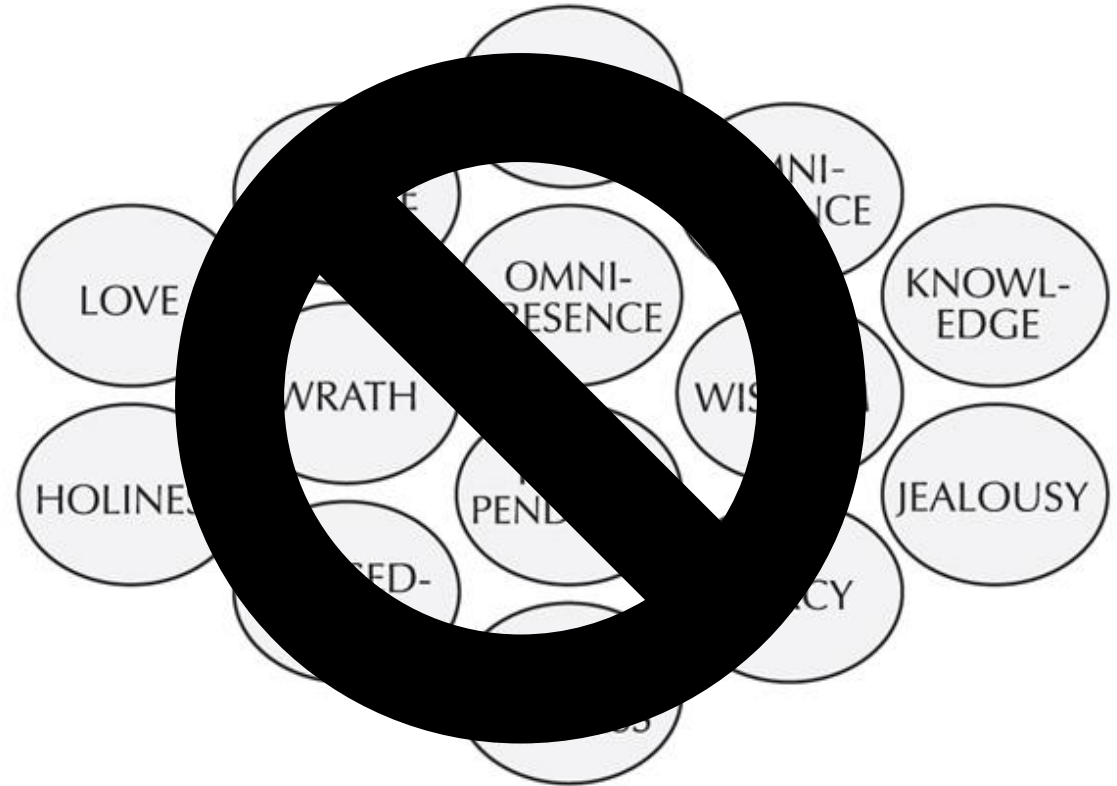
- Also referred to as God's *simplicity* (in the sense of "not composed of parts").
- Each of God's attributes characterizes the whole being of God - no attribute is more important than the rest. God is infinitely perfect in all His attributes.
- God is one and He is unique.
- God is the same God always - not loving at one point in history and wrathful at another. Everything He says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes. Some actions show certain of His attributes more prominently.

Support for both this attribute can be found in:

- [1 John 1:5; 4:8](#)
- [Ex. 34:6-7](#)
- [1 Kings 8:60](#)
- [1 Cor. 8:6](#)
- [Deut. 6:4](#)
- [Zech. 14:9](#)
- [Ex. 15:11](#)

Unity

Grudem, W. (2020). [*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*](#) (Second Edition, p. 212). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic.



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

Questions for Personal Practical Application

1. Think of the doctrine of God's immutability (constancy / unchangeableness) and ask yourself:
 - a) 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?

References

- Grudem, W. (2020). Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Second Edition). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic.
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- Erickson, M.J. (2013) Christian Theology, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

