

INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES

WHAT ARE THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD?

- The divine attributes are what we know to be true of God. In the most accurate sense, God does not "possess" certain attributes or qualities, rather they are what God has revealed to be true of Himself
- God is one being, yet to understand Him we must look at His various attributes and characteristics on an individual basis
- It is important that we distinguish between God's attributes and His works.
- God's attributes do not add anything to God; they simply reveal His nature.
- "The attributes of God are those distinguishing characteristics of the divine nature which are inseparable from the idea of God and which constitute the basis and ground for his various manifestation to his creatures" ~ A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 244

at•trib•uten. (a-trībyööt) **1.** A quality or characteristic: distinctive feature. **2.** An object associated with and serving to identify a character, personage, or office. **3.** A word, especially an adjective, used to ascribe a quality

HOW SHOULD THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD BE STUDIED?

1. Incommunicable/Non-Moral

- An attribute that cannot be caught and is not shared in common with God
- Those attributes which belong to God exclusively so that there is nothing resembling them in a created spirit; i.e. there is nothing similar in mankind
- These describe how God is different from us; we cannot copy these attributes
- Examples: self-existence, unchanging, eternal, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence

2. Communicable/Moral

- An attribute that can be caught or that we share in common with God
- A good test for this is: if the attribute is commanded somewhere in Scripture, it is usually considered a communicable attribute
- Those attributes which belong to God that can also be imparted to man; those attributes which are possessed by men and angels in a more or less finite degree
- It is in reference to these that man is said to be made in the image of God (*imago dei*)
- There is some similarity (though small) in mankind
- Examples: spiritual, justice, love, mercy, patience

➔ Is there a primary attribute of God?

A. Some say OMNIPOTENCE is God's fundamental attribute

- "...there is good reason for regarding omnipotence as God's most fundamental attribute. This is because in the Bible, the attribute is not described as an adjective, or alluded to in some kind of metaphor, but is given to us as a name, which is a title of God...For this reason, a modern restructuring of the divine attributes ought probably to begin with omnipotence, and arrange the rest accordingly" ~ Bray, 103

B. Some say LOVE is the primary attribute of God

- *“More specifically concerning love: God has not attained unto love, nor does He by an effort maintain love; it is the structure of His being. He is the unfailing source of all love. It is, because of this fact, preeminently the thing which He requires...Without the attribute of love, God would not be what He is. As no other attribute, love is the primary motive in God, and to satisfy His love all creation has been formed. It is because of the fact that God has no need which He depends on others to supply, that He is ever bestowing and imparting.” ~ Chafer, 205*
- *“Love is ontologically ultimate. I think this is one of the ways in which we can express the meaning of the fundamental Christian understanding of God: the Trinity” ~ Bonino, 105*

C. Some say HOLINESS is the primary attribute of God

- *“I desire especially to call attention to the section on Perfection, and the Attributes therein involved, because I believe that the recent merging of Holiness in Love, and the practical denial that Righteousness is fundamental in God’s nature, are responsible for the utilitarian views of love and the superficial views of sin which now prevail in some systems of theology. There can be no proper doctrine of the atonement and no proper doctrine of retribution, so long as Holiness is refused its preeminence.” ~ Strong, x*

D. Some say that there is NO primary attribute of God

- *“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” ~ Grudem, 178*
- *“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...all such attempt 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.” ~ Grudem, 179-80*

Conclusion:

- God has no fundamental attribute but all of His attributes exist in perfect harmony, equality, and unity within the very essence of God
- His attributes are not abstract qualities that He happens to exemplify; rather they are identical to God Himself
- The whole essence of God is in each attribute - this refers to the simplicity of God – He can’t be divided up into parts
- To talk about God’s attributes is to talk about God Himself...and each attributes describes the whole nature of God; thus, every attribute of God also qualifies every other attribute!
- For example, His justice is holy and His holiness is just....His goodness is eternal and His eternity represents the eternal life of a good person
- Consider the cross which equally emphasizes God’s justice and love

THE INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Self-Existence

A. Explanation

- The ground of God’s existence is in Himself...God is the uncaused Being...He exists by the necessity of His own being...His existence is based on nothing outside of Himself...He is dependent on no one
- God is the First Cause and the ultimate source of all life.
- Every living thing on earth is dependent on something: a child, his mother; an animal, its surroundings; plants and trees, need sun and rain
- But God is completely independent and existent in Himself

- Kids often ask “Where did God come from?” – the idea of a self-existent being is beyond us!
- This is a badge of his divinity, an expression of His glory He will give to no one else!
- *“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.” ~ Grudem, 160*
- This is known as the “aseity” of God – this comes from the Latin phrase *a se* which means “from or by oneself”
- God is *a se* and therefore He does not owe his existence to anything or anyone outside Himself
- He is thus self-contained, self-existent, self-sufficient, and independent
- God is so much “from Himself” that He doesn’t need us; thus He is perfectly great and satisfied in us!

B. Scripture

Exodus 3:14 ~ And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Psalm 36:9 ~ For with You is the fountain of life; In Thy light we see light.

Psalm 50:10-12 ~ For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, And everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, For the world is Mine, and all it contains.

John 5:26 ~ For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself

Acts 17:24-25 ~ The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

- Sacrifices offered to idols, in today's tribal religions as in ancient Athens, are thought of as somehow keeping the god going, but the Creator needs no such support system

Romans 11:36 ~ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.

C. Did God create mankind because He was lonely? Does He have needs that He needs us to meet?

- *“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” ~ Grudem, 161*

John 17:5, 24 ~ Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.

- *“These passage 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” ~ Grudem, 161*
- Thus, we don’t do quiet times or give money or attend church to keep God happy and meeting His needs!

Omnipresence

A. Explanation

- God is everywhere at all times; He transcends all spatial limitations yet He is present in every point in space with His whole being.
- This is not pantheism which states that God is in everything

- Rather, it is the fact that no one can escape God's presence and that He is present everywhere in the totality of His person
- Each person cannot escape God since God is always present at every place, circumstance and event of a person's life
- This is an encouragement to the believer in that he can take comfort in the fact that nothing can happen to him that God is not present with him; it is also a warning to the disobedient that he cannot escape the presence of God.
- Clarification: It is not just that God is present physically or spatially in every location, but that His presence, by the virtue of Him being God, is active in all those places
- A helpful distinction:
 - Transcendent presence (God is in all places at all times) – because He is a Spirit-being (without substance) – John 4; He doesn't occupy space...He is present everywhere yet not occupying space anywhere
 - Immanent presence (God is personally involved with us)

B. Scripture

1 Kings 8:27 ~ Behold, heaven and highest heaven cannot contain You

Ps. 139:7-10 ~ Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

Jer. 23:24 ~ Do I not fill the heavens and the earth? declares the Lord.

Isaiah 66:1 ~ Thus says the LORD, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?"

C. Is God occupying space in heaven? What about Jesus?

D. Is God present equally in heaven and hell?

- Hell is not just separation from God as if it were a benign existence
- Hell is the place where God is present to pour out His wrath and to punish (see Rev 14:9-11); but heaven is the place where God is present to bless

Omniscience

A. Explanation

- God knows everything; He never comes to know anything and He is never surprised.
- God is infinite in knowledge. He knows Himself and all other things, both actual and possible, perfectly from all eternity in one simple eternal act....There is no deficiency in His knowledge or understanding of anything....He doesn't even need to remember things because they fully known by Him
- God never learns or forgets anything and his knowledge never changes or grows
- God knows Himself perfectly

1 Corinthians 2:10-11 ~ For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

- God knows all things perfectly that actually exist

Inanimate creation: **Psalm 147:4** ~ *He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them.*

Brute creation: **Matt 10:29** ~ *Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.*

Men and their works: **Ps 33:13-15** ~ *The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; From His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works.*

Men's thoughts and hearts: **Psalm 139:1-4** ~ *O Lord, You have searched me and known me.² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar.³ You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.⁴ Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all.*

Men's burdens and wants: **Matt 6:8, 32** ~ *So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him...For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*

- God knows all things possible

1 Samuel 23:11-13 ~ *Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down just as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the LORD said, "He will come down." Then David said, "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, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the pursuit.*

- God knows the future

Isaiah 46:9-10 ~ *Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'*

Acts 3:18 ~ *But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.*

Acts 15:18 ~ *Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.*

B. Other Scripture

Job 12:13 ~ *With Him are wisdom and might; To Him belong counsel and understanding.*

Job 28:24 ~ *For He looks to the ends of the earth, And sees everything under the heavens.*

1 Samuel 2:3 ~ *Boast no more so very proudly, Do not let arrogance come out of your mouth; For the LORD is a God of knowledge, And with Him actions are weighed.*

Psalm 33:13 ~ *The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; 14 From His dwelling place He looks out On all the inhabitants of the earth, 15 He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works.*

Psalm 94:9 ~ *He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?*

Proverbs 5:21 ~ *For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, And He watches all his paths.*

C. What about Open Theism?

Omnipotence

A. Explanation

- The term omnipotence signifies that God is all powerful and able to whatever He wills
- However, it does not suggest that because God is all powerful He can and does do anything or everything at random...He cannot do “anything”
- God’s will is limited by His nature; therefore, He is able to perform anything consistent with His nature and He cannot do those things which are contrary to His nature as God
- God is only limited by the absurd and the self-contradictory
- The question, “Can God create a stone so large that He could not lift it?” is not a legitimate question
- God can do all things that are in harmony with His nature and Person...because everything He does is an expression of His nature and will

B. Scripture

Genesis 18:14 ~ Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Jeremiah 32:27 ~ Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?

Job 42:2 ~ I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted.

Psalms 115:3 ~ But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Matthew 19:25, 26 ~ With God all things are possible

Luke 1:37 ~ For nothing will be impossible with God.

C. Are there things God cannot do?

A Question:

Is there anything God cannot do?

1. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).
2. God cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:13).
3. God cannot change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:7; Numbers 23:19).
4. He cannot deny Himself or go against His Word (2 Tim. 2:13).
5. God cannot look upon sin (Hab. 1:13).

Sovereignty

A. Explanation

- God does whatever He pleases, whenever He pleases, wherever He pleases.
- God is the supreme King of heaven and earth...He is Creator and His will as the cause of world events
- To be sovereign God is all powerful, all knowing, and absolutely free. Therefore history and the future are in God's control.

B. Scripture

Deuteronomy 4:39 ~ Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.

Psalms 115:3 ~ But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Psalms 145:13 ~ Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And Thy dominion endures throughout all generations.

Jeremiah 32:17 ~ Behold You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.

Matthew 19:26 ~ With God all things are possible

Acts 15:18 ~ Known to God from eternity are all His works

Romans 11:36 ~ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.

Ephesians 1:11 ~ who works all things after the counsel of His will

C. Is God's Sovereignty hindered by the sin of mankind?

- God's sovereignty is not hindered by the sin of mankind. Man loses the blessing and reward, but God still accomplishes his purpose.

Genesis 50:20 ~ And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

Acts 2:23 ~ this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

Immutability (Unchangeableness)

A. Explanation

- That perfection of God by which He is devoid of all change, not only in His being, but also in His perfections, purposes, and promises
- God is unchangeable; He does not change in His essence, attributes, character or will
- There is no arbitrariness in God
- "Once God has determined that he will assuredly bring something about, his purpose is unchanging, and it will be achieved." ~ Grudem, 164

B. Scripture

Numbers 23:19 ~ God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor 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 make it good?

1 Samuel 15:29 ~ the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.

Psalms 102:25-27 ~ Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end.

Malachi 3:6 ~ For I, the Lord do not change

James 1:17 ~ Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.

Hebrews 13:8~ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever.

C. But what about those passages that seem to indicate that God changes His mind?

Genesis 6:6 ~ And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.

Exodus 32:14 ~ So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

1 Samuel 15:11 ~ I regret that I have made Saul king

Jonah 3:10 ~ When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it

- Passages which state that God “repents” or changes His mind must be understood as anthropopathisms (the ascription of human feelings to something not human – Webster), for God must relate Himself to the decisions of men so that human choice is affirmed as significant. God’s repenting of judgment in response to human repentance from sin does not deny immutability, for God’s moral standard, His promises, and His plan, do not change.
- Note: This doctrine destroys any notion of God as a growing, increasing, or improving being. These false ideas are found in the popular trend called “process theology” which says that God is continually adding to Himself as He interacts with the universe and all its associated experiences
- *“Moses’ appeal for God to change His mind, to relent, succeeded because God had only threatened judgment, not decreed it. A divine intention is not an unchangeable divine decree. Decrees or sworn declarations (cf. Gen. 22:16–18 ; Ps. 110:4) or categorical statements of not changing or relenting (cf. Jer. 4:28 ; Ezek. 24:14 ; Zech. 8:14 , 15) are unconditional and bind the speaker to the stated course of action regardless of the circumstances or reactions of the listeners. Intentions retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action (cf. Jer. 15:6 ; 18:8–10 ; 26:3 , 13 , 19 ; Joel 2:13 ; Jon. 3:9 , 10 ; 4:2).” ~ MacArthur Study Bible, Ex 32:14*
- *“These instances should all be understood as true expression 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” ~ Grudem, 164*
- *“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 towards 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 nonetheless in the long term would ultimately achieve his good purposes” ~ Grudem, 165*
- Thus, the changes were always in man, not God...the essence of God does not change, but personally God responds to us and acts in regard to those unchanging attributes
- This is somewhat of a mystery, but not a contradiction

Eternity

A. Explanation

- God is not limited by time; He is without beginning or end; God transcends all temporal limitations of time
- That perfection whereby God is elevated above all temporal limits and all succession of moments, and possesses the whole of His existence in one indivisible present
- God sees the end and the beginning at the same time and there is no distinction between the present, past, and future

B. Scripture

Genesis 21:33~ *And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.*

Exodus 3:14 ~ *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "*

- God's eternity is related to His name; Some scholars relate his name, Lord (vs. 14), to "I AM WHO I AM" and to the present tense of the Hebrew very *hayah*, meaning "to be"

Psalm 90:2, 4 ~ *Even from everlasting to everlasting You are God...For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.*

Psalm 102:27 ~ *But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end*

Isaiah 46:10 ~ *Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';*

2 Peter 3:8 ~ *But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*

C. To what degree is God bound by time?

- Time is not unreal or non-existent with God...while God sees everything as an eternal now, He nonetheless, in relation to man and creation, sees a succession of events in time
- But He is not bound by time like we are
- *"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...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" ~ Grudem, 170*

Perfect

A. Explanation

- God is infinitely perfect in everything He does.
- Everything that God is and does is completely right and correct.

B. Scripture

Matthew 5:48 ~ *You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Psalm 18:30 ~ *As for God, His way is blameless.*

Habakkuk 1:13 ~ *Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor...*