

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND HOW TO STUDY THEM

THE UNIQUENESS OF GOD'S NATURE

- The Scriptures testify to God's absolute reality and uniqueness

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.'"

Isaiah 40:18 ~ To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?

Isaiah 40:28 ~ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable.

Isaiah 48:12 ~ Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last.

Isaiah 55:8-9 ~ "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts."

Romans 11:33 ~ Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

- Scripture speaks of God as One who is separated from and elevated above all his creation
- When we survey what the Word has to say about God, we see that he possesses a unique nature that sets him infinitely apart from the highest and best of his creation
- This indescribable God is revealed to us through the knowledge of his Word, whereby he reveals his nature in particular attributes
- "God hath not only revealed his being to us in general, but he hath done it in many distinct properties, all of them suited to promote in our minds our whole duty towards God, and this or that duty in particular."¹
- "What is God? God is a Spirit, in and of Himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth."²

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

- An attribute refers to a quality or characteristic that belongs to a person; in the case of God, his attributes define and describe who he is
- Although we cannot understand the full depth of God's character, Scripture identifies enough of his character for us to define who he is

at•trib•ute *n.* (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

¹ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistles to the Hebrews*, vol. 4, 365.

² The Westminster Larger Catechism.

- Various terms have been used to refer to these attributes of God:
 - “attributes” = qualities or characteristics that are closely and permanently associated with God that can be used to identify him
 - The divine attributes of God are his characteristics, the various aspects of his essence or nature, namely what we know to be true of God
 - “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.”³
 - God’s attributes are essential attributes as opposed to accidental attributes (i.e. not necessary to his essence); God has no accidental attributes as all of his attributes are essential to him since he cannot cease to possess any of his attributes without ceasing to be 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’s attributes do not add anything to God; they simply reveal His nature
 - “[T]he attributes, as revealed truths, are on the level of human knowledge and cannot express the fullness of God. Francis Turretin said, ‘The divine attributes are the essential properties by which he makes himself known to us who are weak and those by which he is distinguished from creatures.’”⁴
 - “perfections” = the expression of God’s character which demonstrate that he possesses every quality to the highest degree
 - The term “perfections” comes from 1 Peter 2:9 ~ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies (*aretas*; i.e. “perfections”) of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;
 - God’s perfections specify that his characteristics are each perfect and inherently characterize the God who is perfect
 - “A general definition of perfections is as follows: God’s perfections are the essential characteristics of his nature. Because these characteristics are necessary to his nature, all his attributes are absolutely perfect and thus rightly called perfections. Further, since these perfections are essential to God’s nature, if any one of them were denied, God would no longer be God.”⁵
 - Perhaps this term is better than “attributes” to convey who God is since “attributes” may convey the idea that his characteristics originate mankind’s concept of God rather than in God himself
 - “properties” = reflects the qualities that are proper to him
 - “God’s essential properties are common to all three persons of the Godhead, whereas his personal properties address the distinctions between or among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity.”⁶
- God is one being, yet to understand Him we must look at His various attributes on an individual basis
- An overview of God’s distinct attributes
 - God is *triune*: He is one God in three persons
 - God is *spiritual*: He does not have a material body and is transcendent
 - God is *solitary*: There is but one true and living God
 - God is *simple*: He is not made up of parts; rather every attribute is identical with his essence
 - God is *self-existent*: He has life in Himself and depends on no one
 - God is *eternal*: He has never had a beginning and will have no end
 - God is *immutable*: He never changes

³ A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 244.

⁴ Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol 1. 520.

⁵ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, 161.

⁶ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 520.

- God is *holy*: He is pure, blameless, and flawless in all of His being
 - God is *omniscient*: He knows all things
 - God is *omnipresent*: He is present in all places at once
 - God is *omnipotent*: He is all-powerful
 - God is *faithful*: He never fails to keep his promises
 - God is *good*: He deals bounteously with his creatures
 - God is *loving*: He demonstrates selfless love to his children
 - God is *wrathful*: He punishes impurity and iniquity
 - God is *truthful*: He speaks accurately and authoritatively
 - God is *righteous*: He loves purity
 - God is *jealous*: He shares his glory with no one else
 - God is *impassible*: He does not experience emotional change in any way
 - God is *patient*: He is slow to anger
 - God is *compassionate*: He is kind to all
 - God is *gracious* and *merciful*: He freely bestows salvation on undeserving sinners
 - God is *foreknowing*: He has known and loved His people from eternity
 - God is *sovereign*: He rules over all things with absolute control
- Even though that list of God’s attributes is stunning and remarkable, it barely scratches the surface of who he is

Job 26:14 ~ Behold, these are the fringes of His ways; And how faint a word we hear of Him! But His mighty thunder, who can understand?

THE RELATIONSHIP OF GOD’S ATTRIBUTES TO HIS ESSENCE

- How are God’s perfections related to his nature? → There are some faulty ways of answering this question:
 1. His perfections are parts of or distinct from his essence – since each attribute has a distinct name, each must correspond to a distinct reality; similarly, each attribute is viewed as separate from his very nature
 - But a major problem with this view is that God’s attributes would then fluctuate; at times he would emphasize his justice and at other times he would emphasize his love. He would not be fully loving and just at the same time.
 - However, each attribute characterizes every other attribute since simple beings do not have separate, identifiable parts (as complex beings do)
 - Because God is a simple being, it is impossible to divide Him into parts so as to separate His goodness from His wisdom or His wrath
 - Instead, each attribute describes the others: i.e. God’s holiness is immutable, omnipotent, and eternal
 - God’s attributes are not independent of one another but are interconnected
 2. His perfections are all essentially the same thing – in this view, God’s love is his justice, which is his power, which is his mercy; i.e. there are no actual distinctions between the perfections
 - But a major problem with this view is that God revealed distinctions in his perfections in Scripture
 - Even though God’s perfections are the one simple unity of his essence, there are still real distinctions between his perfections
 - So his attributes are not identical with each other but are distinct characteristics of his nature
 - To equate God’s love, wisdom, and power is to empty the meaning from language

3. There is one primary perfection as God's essence while the other ones are subordinate to it – for example, open theists believe that God's essence is love and that all other attributes are derived from it
- But a major problem with this view is that it tends to make God's other perfections less necessary
 - It has led many liberals to reject Christ's substitutionary atonement because diminishes God's justice
 - We must conclude 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...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."⁷
 - God has no fundamental attribute but all of His attributes exist in perfect harmony, equality, and unity within the very essence of God
 - The whole essence of God is in each attribute...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 qualifies every other attribute
- The correct way to conceive of the relationship between God's perfections and his essence is to conclude that they are identical
 - God's essence is not some kind of substance that underlies his attributes as if it were some distinct entity
 - To identify God's attributes is to describe exactly who God is
 - "The being and attributes of God are coextensive. The attributes are not additions to God's being; neither can they be subtracted from God, as we might cut an arm off of a man. The attributes are God and God is his attributes...However, God is greater than what Scripture can say about the attributes, for they are revelations of his infinite glory in a manner suited to finite human beings."⁸
 - "There is no essential distinction between God's essence and his perfections, and there is no essential difference between God's perfections to one another. Each perfection characterizes God's complete essence simply and eternally. That is to say, God is what he has. He does not merely possess love, justice, and goodness; he is love and justice, eternally, fully, and completely. God is eternally all-powerful, all-holy, and all-loving."⁹
 - Why is this important? → "If God's perfections were not identified with his essence but were rather conceived as parts or properties that compose God's essence, the simplicity of God would be undermined. Then the perfections themselves would be not divine but only parts that make up the divine. Yet this is out of accord with the teaching of Scripture. Also, Scripture never discusses God's essence (being) in the abstract but always in connection with his perfections."¹⁰
 - There are some important implications of this reality:¹¹
 1. God is fully each of his perfections – whatever God is, he is totally in his essence...God is what he possesses; he is all of his perfections, fully and completely; if he is not, then he is neither immutable nor simple.
 2. God's perfections qualify each other – each of his perfections complements each of his other perfections
 3. God's perfections are active – he is never passive or inactive in any of his essence; if all of God's perfections are not continuously and completely active in his essence, God is not actively God in any

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 178-180.

⁸ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 528.

⁹ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 164.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 164-165.

aspect, because some aspect of his entire essence is not active and his other perfections are without a necessary divine complement and qualifier

4. God's perfections should be studied in concert with one another – his attributes should not be studied in isolation from each other since God is totally each of his perfections at all time
5. God's perfections are reflexive – they are focused on him; what God is, he is to and for himself before his perfections are directed toward anything or anyone else
6. God's perfections are revealed in each person of the Trinity – these divine attributes are present in the entire Godhead; they are all possessed by all three persons of the Trinity

THE CLASSIFICATION OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

- Many attempts have been made to classify the perfections of God
- In recognizing such classifications, it is important to understand that the Bible never establishes such specific categories
- Thus, any attempt at such classification is done by theologians and naturally possesses some limitations
- There have been some insufficient attempts at categorizing God's attributes: negative vs. positive...natural vs. moral...absolute vs. relative)
- Probably the best method of cataloguing God's perfections is the following:
 1. Incommunicable/Non-Moral
 - These attributes are those that are unique to God and belong to him alone
 - These are attributes which belong to God exclusively so that there is nothing resembling them in a mankind
 - These describe how God is different from us; we cannot copy these attributes
 - Examples: self-existence, immutability, eternity, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, simplicity, immensity
 2. Communicable/Moral
 - These attributes are those that are transferable in part to humans
 - These are attributes that, although they find their fullest expression in Him, can also be displayed on a smaller scale by his human image-bearers
 - These are attributes that 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*)
 - Examples: spirituality, justice, love, mercy, patience, goodness, righteousness
- One note on this classification: "A problem with the incommunicable versus communicable categorization is that since man cannot know God in his essence apart from his relations to his creation, it is impossible to know any characteristic of God apart from those relations. Even the incommunicable perfections are at least somewhat like human characteristics, or no one could understand anything about God's perfections. Also, God's communicable perfections are not completely like human characteristics, or God would not be greater than man in every characteristic."¹²

KEY TEXTS THAT REVEAL THE CHARACTER OF GOD

¹² Ibid., 167.

- The only way for us to accurately know God is through what he has revealed about himself in the Scriptures
- The attributes of God are specially revealed in biblical words and doctrines
- Man, by himself and in his depravity, cannot know God completely...and even though God has revealed himself in nature (Psalm 19; Romans 1:18-20), humanity corrupts that knowledge
- The problem with mankind attempting to determine the nature of God on their own is that, rather than beginning with God's self-revelation in Scripture, they begin with their own ideas
- "In short, they practice 'theology from below.' They build their concept of God from human observation and reasoning, which are finite at best and blighted by sin at worst. Theology from below assumes that what is in man is also in God and makes man the standard of measuring God, suggesting that man can discover God without God's initiated help."¹³
- Only the Bible gives accurate information about who God is and the nature of his divine perfections
- And although all of Scripture reveals God, there are some key texts of Scripture that constitute significant divine self-revelations, where God pulls back the veil and allow us to see who he is and what he is really like

Exodus 34:6-8

- Perhaps one of the greatest self-disclosures of God occurs at Mount Sinai where a marvelous self-portrait of the Almighty occurs

Exodus 34:6-8 ~ Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship.

- The context of this passage gives us great insight to this occasion:
 - Exodus 32 describes how Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai where he received the 10 Commandments from God as well as other instructions
 - During those weeks, the people became restless and they asked Aaron to make them a god, which he did fashioning gold into a calf idol
 - When Moses came down from the mountain he saw the people worshipping the golden calf, dancing around it and offering sacrifices
 - The people had forsaken God, having broken the 1st and 2nd commandments
 - Moses burned with anger, threw down the 2 tablets, and destroyed the calf
 - Because of His anger against the Israelites idolatry, God said he would not go with His people to the promised land (Ex 33:1-3)
 - His divine presence was no longer going to accompany them on their journey to the Promised land, lest he destroy them on the way
 - This was devastating news for the people and they went into mourning (Ex 33:4-6)
 - Moses knew he needed to intervene and so he prayed that God would relent and go with them to Canaan (Ex 33:12-13)
 - In response to Moses' pleas, God graciously agreed to go with the people (Ex 33:14)
 - But Moses was concerned that that God might change his mind and asked him how he could know for sure that he would go with them as promised (Ex 33:15-16)
 - So, he pleaded with God to show him His glory as a confirmation of His promise (Ex 33:18)

¹³ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 162.

- Moses wanted God to confirm His astonishing willingness to show favor to this stiff-necked, idolatrous people
 - He probed into the very heart of God to assure himself that God really is the kind of God he says he is
 - Moses staked his hope on the very character and nature of God and, thus, asked to behold his glory as confirmation of his promise
- The glory (*kabod*) of God refers to his weightiness
 - His glory manifests the awesome weight of his name and the infinite wealth of his divine attributes
 - God is awesome in every way, a true heavyweight in every one of His divine attributes
 - The glory of God is the fullness of the attributes and actions of God
- There are two features of God's glory:
 1. His ascribed glory – the glory we give him (1 Cor 10:31)
 2. His intrinsic glory – the glory he possesses, the glory that is his simply because of who he is, the fullness of all that he intrinsically is, the glory he possesses which neither increases nor decreases
- It is intrinsic glory which Moses had in mind when he asked to see God's glory
 - Significantly, the only thing that would ease Moses' burden in leading the people and would give him hope that God would go with them is a deep and robust awareness of God's intrinsic glory
 - It was an awareness of the whole of His attributes, a glimpse of the greatness of his divine being
 - It was the character of God that would anchor Moses in his responsibilities and the attributes of God that would enable him to carry on
- This is so critical for us to understand as well: the only thing that anchors us in the troubles of life is a right view of the majesty of God
 - It is the knowledge of God that keeps us anchored as we minister in his name and live the Christian life
 - That's why the knowledge of God is not a purely academic or intellectual subject; rather, it is foundational if we desire to know Him, serve Him, and become like Him
 - Although few would list a high view of God as one of their greatest needs, Moses shows us how fundamental the grandeur of God is to our lives
 - "People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure...The greatness and glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God."¹⁴
- God responded to Moses in Exodus 33:19 ~ And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.
 - God promised to do two things for Moses to confirm his promise to go up with his people:
 1. "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you"...i.e. to show Moses a portion of his glory, which he did in Exodus 33:20-23
 2. "I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you"...i.e. to speak to Moses a portion of his glory, which he did in Exodus 34:1-8
- First, God promised to show Moses His glory visually; however, there was a problem with that: Exodus 33:20 ~ But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"
 - The problem is that no one can see the fullness of God's radiant glory and not be consumed by it

¹⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 9, 11.

- So, God promised to put Moses in the cleft of a rock, cover his face until he passed by, and then allow him to see a portion of his back (Exodus 33:21-23)
- Somehow God supernaturally enabled Moses to get a glimpse of His glory, despite being a spirit with no body (perhaps a preincarnate appearance of Christ?)
- Significantly, nothing is stated about what Moses saw...**likely because what he heard was more important than what he saw**
- The second thing God promised to do for him (proclaim the name of the Lord) was far more important than the first thing God promised to do for him (make His glory pass before him)
- This tells us that God's name is synonymous with His glory...it is his very nature, what he reveals himself to be
- The glory of God is bound up in the name of God in that the name of the Lord is his glory
- In vv. 6-7, God proclaims his name by describing his attributes, thus providing an auditory description of his glory rather than a visual one
- The Lord showed Moses his glory by giving him a comprehensive description of his nature
- This demonstrates something very critical: **it is more important for us to have an understanding of God's glorious attributes than it is to have an encounter with God's glorious presence**
- So many times we want the experience with God, the encounter, the emotions, the feelings, the great display of God's presence
- But more important is for us to understand God, to think rightly about Him, and to live out of a proper understanding of who he is
- God provides Moses seven expressions of His glory in his name in these verses
 1. The compassion of God's glory
 2. The grace of God's glory
 3. The patience of God's glory
 4. The love of God's glory
 5. The faithfulness of God's glory
 6. The forgiveness of God's glory
 7. The justice of God's glory
- What impact should this have on us? → v. 8 ~ Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship
- The only proper response is worship in response to both God's lordship ("LORD, God") and love

Psalm 145

- This Psalm is an acrostic, with each stanza beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet
- Repeatedly throughout the Psalm, David presents God's attributes in order to call all mankind to worship and praise the Lord forever
- "The psalm shows us that the attributes of God give specificity to the praises of his name. God's people do not worship a nebulous, unknown mystery that inspires emotion without understanding; they worship the God whom they now in his attributes."¹⁵
- In other words, there are solid reasons for why we must worship the Lord and those reasons are the attributes of God

¹⁵ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 525

- David exalts God for his:
 - Greatness, might, and majesty (vv. 3-6)
 - Goodness, righteousness, grace, mercy, patience, love (vv. 7-9)
 - Glory, power, majesty, kingdom, eternity (vv. 11-13)
 - Provision, righteousness, kindness, nearness, merciful salvation (vv. 14-21)
- In short, the vast array of God's attributes (specifically his greatness and goodness) becomes the fertile ground from which our praise and worship should spring

1 Timothy 1:12-17; 6:15-16

1 Timothy 1:17 ~ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

- As Paul considers the immense mercy of God that brought him to salvation (vv. 12-16), he could not help but erupt in praise for God's many attributes

1 Timothy 6:15-16 ~ which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

- Similarly, the thought of God sending Christ back in the Second Coming causes Paul to respond in wonder, love, and praise as he considers the attributes of God
- This small sampling of some key texts of God's essence demonstrates that our faith and our lives are to be grounded in the attributes of God
- These attributes underscore the fact that God is wholly different than us...and they provide definitive realities about God that give clarity and vitality to our worship
- For this reason, the study of God's attributes is essential to all of life and leads to the greatest privilege of all, namely the knowledge of the One True and Living God