

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 7: The Attributes of God Part 1

In our study, we have been in the process of answering three questions as it relates to God: Does God exist, and if so is it possible to know him, and if we can know him, what is he like? We've explored the first two questions having to do with God's existence knowability. This week we will begin looking at the attributes of God and answer the question "what is God like?".

The Attributes of God: Incommunicable and Communicable

The Attributes of God refers to the essence of God's nature and being as they are revealed to us in the Scriptures. As we come to know God in and through his actions and words as recorded across the breadth of Scripture, we find that God is described as possessing certain characteristics or attributes. Some of these attributes are unique to God alone (incommunicable attributes) and some are shared with those who are made in his likeness and image (communicable attributes). These attributes give us a biblical framework that we can use to understand who God is and to talk about what God is like

Some of God's incommunicable attributes include his:

- Eternal nature (he is infinite, but we are finite)
- Unchangeableness (he never changes, but we do)
- Omnipresence (God is everywhere at once, but we can only be in one place at a time)

Some of God's communicable attributes include his:

- Love (God is love, and we're capable of love)
- Knowledge (God has knowledge, and we can have it, too)
- Mercy (God is merciful, and we're also capable of mercy)
- Justice (God is just, and we're capable of justice)

This breakdown seems pretty straightforward, but while it can be helpful, it isn't perfect. No attribute of God is completely communicable, and no attribute of God is completely incommunicable. We can be wise, but we can never be as wise as God. We can express and experience love, but we'll never be infinitely loving like God. Really, we should say that "communicable" attributes are the ones that are *somewhat* shared with us.

When studying the attributes of God, we will break them down into three parts:

1. God's Grandeur: Self-Existence and Omnipresence
2. God's Greatness: Omniscience and Omnipotence
3. God's Goodness (Moral Attributes): Justice and Love

Attributes of God's Grandeur: God's Self-Existence (Aseity)

In exploring God's Self-Existence, we will also explore attributes related to his Self-Existence: God is Independent, Eternal, Transcendent and Infinite

God is Self-Existent (God's Aseity)

The first attribute that we want to examine together is God's self-existence or, as it is more properly called, God's aseity. This comes from two Latin root words that mean "**from**" (*a*) and "**self**" (*se*). Thus, aseity literally means "from himself". Therefore God's self-existence says that God exists in and of himself.

The fact that God is self-existent means that he was created by nothing, he never 'came into being'. He is the 'cause' of everything, yet he himself is 'uncaused' (nothing caused God to exist).

God's self-existence is seen in the fact that **he created all things**, yet he himself is never seen as being created.

In John's apocalyptic vision, the 24 elders proclaim, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Revelation 4:11). John's gospel opens with the claim that, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Genesis 1:1 claims "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth".

The Scripture thus testifies that God is the source, the sustainer, and the goal of all reality outside himself. Romans 11:36: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

Aseity means that God exists by a necessity of his own nature. That is to say, it belongs to God's very nature to exist. He doesn't just happen to exist, it's necessary for him to exist. God therefore is a necessary being. He is a being which must exist, a being whose non-existence is impossible.

God is Independent

This means that God doesn't depend upon anything else for his existence. If everything else were magically to disappear, God would still be there. He exists independently of anything else. Every living thing is dependent on someone or something else but God is independent and existent in Himself

In several places, Scripture teaches that God is absolutely independent and self-sufficient. He's independent because: **He doesn't need creation for any reason.** Paul proclaims to the men of Athens, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything*, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24–25).

God asks Job, "Who has given to me, that I should repay him? *Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine*" (Job 41:11).

God is Eternal

Eternity is usually thought of in relation to time, however, God is not limited or bound by time. God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being—he is timeless—and he sees past, present, and future equally vividly. The psalmist affirms that God is timeless in Psalm 90:2: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."

Augustine realized this when he stated that God exists above time, and all moments are to him immediately present. However, this transcending of time does not remove God from our universe or our experience. God interacts with our universe in time and space. While this may be a mystery to us, the Scriptures do teach both God's transcendence and immanence regarding our existence in space and time.

Since he is timeless in his own being, and he sees all time with equal clarity, 2 Peter 3:8 can state, "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Though God stands above time, able to see all of it as present before him, he still sees events in their temporal context and he acts within time.

God is Transcendent (Yet Immanent)

When we say that God is transcendent, we mean that He exists beyond and above the created order. He is not limited by the constraints of time, space, or the physical universe. Instead, He transcends all finite categories and exceeds human comprehension.

On the other hand, God's immanence refers to His presence and activity within the created world. While God transcends creation, He is also intimately involved in it. God's immanence emphasizes His closeness and accessibility to His creatures. He is not a distant or aloof deity but is actively engaged in the affairs of the world, caring for His creation and revealing Himself to humanity.

These are an important pair of concepts. Both truths are taught in Scripture. Jeremiah 23:23-24, for example, stresses God's presence throughout the whole of the universe, yet also that God is not far away.

"Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?" declares the LORD. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the LORD.

God is Infinite

To say that God is infinite is to affirm that there are no limits or boundaries to His being, attributes, or qualities. It suggests that God transcends all finite categories and exceeds any measure or constraint that might be applied to created beings or things. Here are some examples from Scripture:

- infinite in thoughts (Ps 40:5)
- infinite in righteousness and salvation (Ps 71:15)
- infinite in mercy and faithfulness (Ps 89:2)
- infinite in forgiveness (Ps 103:12)
- infinite in understanding (Ps 147:5)

God is infinite in being, filling all of space and time (immensity and eternity), in intelligence, in power, and in all moral qualities (being absolutely perfect in each).

Attributes of God's Grandeur: God's Omnipresence

In exploring God's Omnipresence we will also explore attributes related to his Omnipresence: God is Spirit, Incorporeal, has Personality, and is Immutable

God's Omnipresence

The term omnipresence comes from two Latin root words meaning "all present". God's omnipresence is the attribute that describes His presence everywhere at all times. It signifies that God is not limited by physical boundaries or constraints but is fully present in every part of His creation simultaneously.

God's Omnipresence includes things like:

- **Inherent Nature:** God's omnipresence is inherent to His nature as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Unlike created beings who are confined to specific locations in space, God's omnipresence stems from His infinite and transcendent nature.
- **Immensity:** Means that God fills all of space, not only in our universe, but any others that do or could ever exist. There is nowhere in the universe where His presence is absent. He fills the heavens and the earth, permeating every atom and molecule with His being. Whether in the depths of the ocean, the vastness of outer space, or the innermost recesses of the human heart, God is fully present.
- **Unrestricted Access:** God's omnipresence grants Him unrestricted access to every aspect of His creation. He sees and knows all things, from the tiniest microorganisms to the largest galaxies. Nothing is hidden from His sight, and nothing escapes His attention.

God is Spirit

John 4:24 says that "God is a Spirit" (John 4:24). "Spirit" refers to the non-material essence of a being, distinct from physical matter. This concept is used to describe the fundamental nature of entities such as God, angels, and the human soul. This also tells us that while God is present within the material world, he is not a part of it. God exists in a spiritual dimension beyond the confines of the physical universe.

Because God exists in a spiritual dimension, he is inherently beyond human understanding. While we can apprehend aspects of God's nature through revelation and reason, our finite minds are incapable of fully comprehending the infinite greatness and majesty of God. Therefore an experiential knowledge of God must be **accessible through faith and spiritual understanding**. While we cannot grasp God's full essence with our finite minds, we can encounter Him in faith and spiritual experience.

1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

John 3:5-7 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

God is Incorporeal

The concept of God as spirit underscores His incorporeality, meaning that unlike created beings, he is not composed of physical substance, he is immaterial in nature, therefore God does not have a physical body composed of atoms or molecules but exists as pure spirit. As such, He cannot be perceived by the physical senses or observed through empirical means.

God is incorporeal; he doesn't have a physical body, yet in Scripture we see descriptions of God as having physical attributes. How can we explain this? We explain this through the **anthropomorphism**. Anthropomorphic language describes God in human terms, using human attributes or characteristics, to convey divine truths. This language helps us relate to and understand God's actions and attributes in terms familiar to us.

When scripture describes God with physical attributes such as eyes, hands, or feet, it is often symbolic or metaphorical rather than literal. These descriptions are intended to convey spiritual truths or aspects of God's character rather than to suggest that God has a physical body. This does not mean God has physical eyes, but it means that God is aware and 'sees' what is going on in the world.

The use of anthropomorphic language in scripture reflects God's accommodation to human understanding. While God's true nature is beyond human comprehension, He reveals Himself to humanity in ways that they can understand and relate to.

God Has Personality

The fact that God is spirit and transcends the physical realm means that God is often associated with immaterial aspects of spiritual (or nonmaterial) essence such as: consciousness, intellect, and emotions. These attributes show us that God exists as a person and not a mere force outside of our experiential knowledge but also within our experiential knowledge.

Therefore God possesses:

- Intelligence: rational, propositional thinking, and wisdom
- Volition: power of choice. God has his own determined purposes and will.
- Emotion: God is said to possess a range of emotions such as: jealousy (Deut 5:9), grief (Judg 10:16), hate (Ps 5:5), pity (Ps 103:13), compassion and patience (Ps 145:8), joy (Isa 62:5), love (Isa 63:9; Jer 31:3), and anger (Rom 1:18).

God is Immutable

This means that God is "unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feels differently in response to different situations." Malachi 3:6 says simply, "I the Lord do not change." Malachi is speaking of God's essence. Those times in Scripture when God threatens and then withholds his judgment (Ex 32:9-14; Jonah 3:4, 10) or when he indicates sorrow for some decision he has made (Gen 6:6; 1 Sam 15:10) do not express a change in God, but a change in his present attitude toward a present situation.