

Arbor Foundations
4 – What is God Like?
Sep 30, 2018

Suggested Reading

1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapter 2: Of God and of the Holy Trinity

<https://reformedbaptistnetwork.com/1689lbcf/lbcfch2/>

Key Ideas / Biblical Basis

In this lesson we will cover two related topics:

- A. The attributes of God
- B. The trinity

As we covered in Lesson 2, some of God's attributes can be seen to some extent just by observing creation. However, God has revealed who he is in a much more complete manner through his Word.

This lesson goes through many of God's "attributes". These attributes are ways of attempting to mentally picture who God is by we who are created and are not God. It is important to understand that God is more than the sum of his attributes.

Some have said it is impossible for us to have too high of a view of God, and this is true. God is much greater than we can imagine him to be. However, it's still helpful to consider various aspects or "viewpoints" of his character.

Below we will look at a variety of God's attributes. Note that these attributes are not mutually exclusive, and the ideas overlap somewhat. Also, the list of attributes and formal definitions are drawn from Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, unless otherwise noted. The first 5 attributes of God are sometimes described as "incommunicable", because they are attributes that we as human being cannot share in ourselves in any meaningful way. The rest are sometimes called "communicable", because we can share in those attributes in limited, less perfect ways.

1. 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.*

God is completely independent of creation and self-sufficient, in and of Himself. He was never created and never came into being. He is the creator, and all things are dependent on Him.

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.*

Acts 17:24-25: *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.***

Other related passages: Psalm 50:10-12, John 17:5, John 17:24, Rev 4:11

While God does not need us in any way, we can bring him glory:

Psalm 43:7: *everyone who is called by my name, **whom I created for my glory**, whom I formed and made.*

See also Eph 1:11-12, Rev 4:11

2. Unchangeableness: *God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises.*

(being, perfections) Psalm 102:26-27: *They [the heavens and the earth] will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

(being, perfections) All good gifts come from God “*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*” (James 1:17)

(purposes) Psalm 33:11: *The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.*

(promises) Numbers 23:19: *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*

But does God sometimes change his mind? Example from the story of Jonah, when the people repented: Jonah 3:10: *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

One explanation of these kinds of passages is that we are seeing a true expression of God’s present attitude with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment. In this case, when the people of Ninevah repented, then the situation changed and so God’s expressed attitude toward the situation changed. That doesn’t mean that God has fundamentally shifted or changed in his being.

A similar issue comes up when considering whether God feels emotions. There are many passages in Scripture that describe God as having emotions such as rejoicing (Isaiah 62:5), being grieved (Ps 78:40), his wrath burning hot (Exodus 32:10), pitying his children (Ps 103:13), etc. We have difficulty relating because when we experience emotions, we are almost always affected by (changed) by them (and sometimes in a negative or sinful way). There is a sense that this is not true with God—he is not at a fundamental level emotionally impacted or changed by situations that exist.

3. Eternal: *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 acts in time.*

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.*

John 8:58: *Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”*

God is not constrained by the flow of time (is outside of time), yet as the creator of time he acts within it.

In contrast, we will always exist within time.

4. 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.*

Psalm 139:7-10: *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.*

God’s presence normally refers to a blessing, but God’s presence can also be to punish (Amos 9:-14) or to simply sustain (Col 1:17, Heb 1:3)

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

Historically, this has been referred to as the “simplicity” of God, where simplicity does not mean “easy to understand” or “not complicated”. Rather, simplicity in this context means “not composed of parts”.

God is a unified whole, not a collection of attributes added together. All of God is omnipresent, all of God is eternal, all of God is unchangeable, etc.

It is true that some of God's actions show certain of his attributes more prominently. However, everything that he does is an act of the whole person of God.

We should not single out any one attribute of God as more important than the rest.

6. Spirituality: *God's spirituality means that God exists as a being that is not made of any matter, has no parts or dimensions, is unable to be perceived by our bodily senses, and is more excellent than any other kind of existence.*

John 4:24: **God is spirit**, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

The second commandment prohibits representing God by anything in creation, because that essentially reduces him to something much less than what he is.

Note: God the son did take on a human body (see Trinity section below).

7. Invisibility: *God's invisibility means that God's total essence, all of his spiritual being, will never be able to be seen by us, yet God still shows himself to us through visible, created things.*

John 1:18: *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

See also John 6:46, 1 Tim 1:17, 1 John 4:12.

Although God's total essence will never be able to be seen by us, God still shows something of himself to us through visible, created things (such as when we see his wisdom in creation).

8. Omniscience (all knowing): *God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and external act.*

1 John 3:20: *for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.*

God knows the most minute details, such as what we'll say before we even speak (Ps 139:4) and the number of hairs on our head (Matt 10:30).

There is nothing that can be known that God doesn't know.

9. Wisdom: *God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals.*

Romans 16:27: *...to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

His wisdom is clearly shown in creation: Psalm 104:24: *O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.*

We gain wisdom when we fear God: Psalm 111:10: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!*

10. Truthfulness (and Faithfulness): *God's truthfulness means that he is the true God, and that all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth.*

Jeremiah 10:10-11: *But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King...The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.*

John 17:17: *...your word is truth.*

God is the one who ultimately defines truth—not us. We cannot define who God should be and then see if God lives up to our expectations.

God is also faithful, meaning he will always fulfill what he has promised: Numbers 23:19: *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*

11. Goodness: *The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and all that God is and does is worthy of approval.*

The psalms often declare the goodness of God. “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Psalm 34:8)

Other examples: Psalm 100:5, Psalm 106:1, Psalm 107:1.

Genesis 1:31: *And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.*

James 1:17: *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

See also Rom 12:2, Psalm 145:9, Psalm 84:11, Romans 8:28, Romans 8:32, Matthew 7:11.

There is a philosophical question as to what is to be considered “good”. The true answer is that God is the definer of good, so “good” is what God approves. God is the ultimate definer of what is good—there is no higher standard.

Many of the characteristics that follow are closely related to the goodness of God.

12. Love: *God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.*

1 John 4:8: *God is love.*

1 John 4:10: *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

Romans 5:8: *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

13. Mercy, Grace, Patience: *God’s mercy means God’s goodness toward those in misery and distress. God’s grace means God’s goodness toward those who deserve only punishment. God’s patience means God’s goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time.*

These characteristics are often mentioned together:

Exodus 34:6: *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*

See also Psalm 103:8.

Mercy: 2 Samuel 24:14, 2 Corinthians 1:3, Hebrews 4:16, James 5:11

Grace: Exodus 33:19, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Romans 3:23-24

Patience: Psalm 86:15, Psalm 145:8, Jonah 4:2, Romas 2:4, 1 Timothy 1:16

14. Holiness: *God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.*

God is holy: Isaiah 6:3: *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!*

God's holiness is a pattern for us to imitate: 1 Peter 1:15-16: *but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*

See also Hebrews 12:10, Hebrews 12:14, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, 2 Corinthians 7:1

15. Peace (or Order): *God's peace means that in God's being and in his actions he is separate from all confusion and disorder, yet he is continually active in innumerable well-ordered, fully controlled, simultaneous actions.*

1 Corinthians 14:33: *For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.*

See also Romans 15:33, Romans 16:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 13:20

Note that peace does not mean inactivity.

16. Righteousness, Justice: *God's righteousness/justice means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.*

Deuteronomy 32:4: *his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.*

See also Gen 18:25, Psalm 19:8

Justice includes the idea of not overlooking sin. Just as a modern judge who ignores wrongdoing would be considered to be "unjust", God would not be just if he simply ignored sin. Paul says that God sent Christ to bear punishment for sin, and *"This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."* (Romans 3:25-26)

17. Jealousy: *God's jealousy means that God continually seeks to protect his own honor.*

Exodus 3:14: *for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*

See also: Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9

We have a hard time relating to this, because we as human beings should not have jealousy for our own honor, but humility instead, because of who we are. God is different in nature than us, though, and his perfection does mean that jealousy for his honor is appropriate. God deserves all honor and glory from his creation (Rev 4:11), and it is right for him to seek that honor.

18. Wrath: *God's wrath means that he intensely hates all sin.*

Romans 1:18: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*

See also: Deuteronomy 9:7-8, Romans 2:5,8, Colossians 3:6, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Hebrews 3:11, Revelation 6:16-17

Wrath seems very negative, but it is good that God doesn't delight in sin. Sin is hateful and is worthy of being hated, and God is right in doing so.

God's wrath is very real, but Christians need not fear it, for although we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph 2:3), we now have trusted in Jesus, "who delivers us from the wrath to come." (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

19. Freedom: *God's freedom is that attribute of God whereby he does whatever he pleases.*

Psalm 115:3: *Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.*

See also: Proverbs 21:1, Daniel 4:35

God is not limited in what he does in concert with his own perfect character. Whatever pleases God is right, and there are no external constraints on God's decisions.

20. Omnipotence (Power, Sovereignty): *God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will.*

Jeremiah 32:27: *Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?*

Matthew 19:26: *with God all things are possible.*

See also Ephesians 3:20, 2 Corinthians 6:18, Revelations 1:8

It is not accurate to say that God can do anything, because he cannot act contrary to his character. That is why we define omnipotence as God being able to do *all his holy will*.

God's exercise of his power over his creation is often referred to as his "sovereignty".

21. Blessedness: *God's blessedness means that God delights fully in himself and in all that reflects his character.*

1 Timothy 6:15: *he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords*

1 Timothy 1:11: *in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*

We imitate God's blessedness when we find delight and happiness in all that is pleasing to God.

22. Beauty: *God's beauty is that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable qualities.*

The idea here is that God possesses all desirable qualities. As stated by Grudem, "It reminds us that all of our good and righteous desires, all of the desires that really ought to be in us or in any other creature, find their ultimate fulfillment in God and in no one else."

Psalm 27:4: *One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.*

The Trinity

The concept of the trinity is challenging to grasp fully, yet it is taught throughout scripture. A good summary of this teaching can be found in these three statements, which are all simultaneously true:

1. God is three persons.
2. Each person is fully God.
3. There is one God.

There are many, many passages that support all three of these ideas. Below is a very brief collection of examples of these supporting verses. A thorough coverage of the trinity is beyond the scope of this lesson.

1. God is three persons.

The idea here is that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, etc. The Father, Son, and Holy spirit are three persons.

For example, John 1:1-3 shows that the Father is not identical to the Son: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

In John 14:26, we see all three persons of the trinity interacting as individual persons: *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

See also Matthew 28:19, John 16:7, 2 Corinthians 13:14 for other similar concepts.

2. Each person is fully God.

God the Father is clearly God. See Genesis 1:1, and pretty much the rest of the Bible.

The Son is fully God. Once again, John 1:1: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Also see John 20:28 for another example where Jesus is called God by Thomas, and this is considered praiseworthy.

The Spirit is fully God. There are many Trinitarian passages where the Holy Spirit is listed with the Father and the Son (Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 2 Corinthians 13:14, 1 Peter 1:2). In Acts 5:3-4, the Holy Spirit is referred to as God. Many other Scriptures treat the Holy Spirit as being equivalent with God (see 1 Corinthians 2:10-11, Psalm 139:7-8, John 3:5-7/1 John 3:9)

3. There is one God.

Scripture is also clear that there is only one God.

Deuteronomy 6:4: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*

See also: Exodus 15:11, Isaiah 45:5-6, 1 Timothy 2:5, James 2:19

It is hard to hold all three of these statements together in our minds. How can God be both three persons and one God at the same time?

Many heresies throughout the years have denied one of these concepts:

- Modalism: There is one person who appears in three different modes (denies that there are three persons)
- Arianism: The Son was created by the Father (denies that Jesus is God). This is believed by Mormons as well.

Also, note that there is no analogy that has been found that does not violate one of the three statements.

So What?

Having a correct understanding of God is really a foundation for properly engaging with him and understanding the rest of what the Bible says, because how he acts always perfectly flows directly from his perfect character.

Having a misunderstanding of who God is can lead to significant error. There are many examples of this—here are a few:

- God’s unchangeableness means that we cannot speak or think of “the God of the Old Testament” and “the God of the New Testament” as though God has fundamentally changed between the OT and NT. God’s perfect love, mercy, grace, judgment, and wrath were all present and working together in everything that he did in both the OT and NT times.
- God is the standard of goodness. Looking to other ways to define “what is good and what is not” often leads to great difficulty and suffering. For example, if we define “good” by “what is the best for the most people”, then we can justify great evils, such as forced euthanasia. Many throughout history (and today) define “good” as “being part of our political party”, which not only is such a shallow definition of “goodness”, but also often leads to great suffering.
- “Goodness” is not equal to “whatever is most comfortable for me”. If we only think of how good God is when things go the way we want them to, we have an unbalanced view of God’s goodness.

Many false religions have denied the trinity (Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.). Many of these have in particular denied the deity of Jesus.

We should strive to have an accurate view of God. Recognizing and reflecting on all of his attributes helps us to better understand who he is in a much more correct and full way than just thinking of him with some vague sense of “Godness”. Even reflecting that he exhibits all of these attributes perfectly at the same time and forever helps us to worship him as he deserves to be worshipped.

For Further Study

Many good articles/references on the Trinity can be found here:

<https://www.monergism.com/topics/trinity>

Likewise, numerous resources on the various attributes of God can be found here:

<https://www.monergism.com/topics/god%E2%80%99s-attributes>

Wayne Gruden, *Systematic Theology (Chapters 11-14)*