**THEOLOGY PROPER - The Attributes of God Part 1**

Welcome to Summer Sundays!

This summer we’re going to be covering the doctrine of Theology Proper, and particularly the study of the Attributes of God. Theology Proper is actually the study of the existence, knowability, and attributes of God. We are assuming the first point completely, and then considering the second briefly, before seeking to understand the third.

Why study the Attributes of God?

Because if we are to know Him, obey Him, and worship Him rightly, we must understand what He is like.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ... Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“This question of knowing God is the end, the supreme end, of all religion; it is the great thing that should be in the forefront of the mind and heart of every one of us. What is your need, what is your object, why are you studying these doctrines?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

We want to know God rightly so that we can worship Him rightly and obey Him rightly.

1. **Knowing God**

The first thing we must consider is very plain but incredibly important. If no one has ever seen God, is it even possible to know or understand Him?

* 1. Possible?

We can rightly and accurately know things about Him.

Such knowledge will always be limited, but that does not make it inaccurate or untrue.

“Yet we see that though God is finally incomprehensible, He is nevertheless knowable; He cannot be comprehended, but, thank God, He can be known. Let us be clear about this. So we argue that although God is incomprehensible, He, by His infinite grace and kindness and condescension, can be known. He is known. Even though we cannot know God exhaustively, we can know true things about God. In fact, all that Scripture tells us about God is true.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This begs the question, How can we possibly know God?

* 1. The Word

We do not necessarily know every attribute of God that He possesses. We certainly don’t have an exhaustive knowledge of any individual attribute. But, by the nature of God’s Word, we can trust that all that we do know is true. It comes from the inerrant, infallible Word of God which is revealed to us by the One who does not lie (Num. 23:19).

The Bible tells us that God is knowable, and we are therefore to pursue a knowledge of Him by studying His character.

Jeremiah 9:23–24 - 23Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord.

The Bible equates knowing God with eternal life:

John 17:3 - 3“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

The New Covenant involves knowing God:

Hebrews 8:11 - 11“And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, And everyone his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ For all will know Me, From the least to the greatest of them.

The Bible talks about Jesus providing knowledge of God:

1 John 5:20 - 20And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

The Bible tells us that knowing Christ is the single greatest treasure anyone can ever possess:

Philippians 3:8–10 ~ 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

1. **The Attributes of God Classified**

Attributes are character traits that describe a person. When we study God’s attributes, we categorize them into two types:

\* Incommunicable Attributes ~ those attributes God does not share with us (i.e. eternality, immutability, omnipresence)

\* Communicable Attributes ~ those attributes God shares with us (i.e. love, mercy, justice)

There are obvious deficiencies in these classifications since they are not absolute categories. Nevertheless, for us to understand them in any meaningful way, these classifications are helpful.

Man is limited in his sharing of God’s communicable attributes. Although we reflect the image of God to a degree, we will never fully share the full extent of God’s attributes, since He is infinite.

1. **Incommunicable Attributes**
   1. Independence

Definition: ***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.***[[4]](#footnote-4) ***(sometimes called ‘aseity’ - literally ‘from self’)***

God is fully self-sufficient. He exists solely of Himself and can properly be called the only uncaused being in the universe. He is the only being who is fully independent.

“He has no beginning and therefore no antecedent cause. He is eternal. He always was or is. He has, within Himself, the power of being. He requires no assistance from outside sources to continue to exist. This is what is meant by the idea of self-existent.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

Acts 17:24–25 ~ 24“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; 25nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

God needs nothing from mankind or any other part of creation in order to exist.

Job 41:11 ~ 11“Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine.

No one has given God anything that He needed since everything comes from God first.

There is a common misconception, even among Bible-believing Christians, that the reason why God created mankind was because He was lonely! The Bible tells us exactly the opposite.

John 17:5 ~ 5“Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

John 17:24 ~ 24“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 verses teach us that God the Father and Jesus the Son had perfect fellowship, love, and communion with each other prior to the creation of the world. Therefore, they were fully self-sufficient within themselves and enjoyed their glory in infinite joy and delight!

Details of God’s Independence:

1. ***God exists by virtue of His own nature – He was never created, but has always been.***

Exodus 3:14 ~ 14God 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 has life in Himself (John 5:26).

God existed before anything else was even made (Ps 90:2).

Everything that exists was created by God (Rev 4:11; John 1:3).

“As the self-existent God, He is not only independent, in Himself, but also causes everything to depend on Him.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

2. ***God***’***s being has always been and will always be – nothing changes God.***

“Without creation, God would still be infinitely loving, infinitely just, eternal, omniscient, trinitarian, and so forth.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

3. ***God COULD NOT need anything from His creation.***

Acts 17:24–25 ~ 24“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; 25nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

False gods need the service of human hands in order to exist. But the true God does not need anything or anyone. If God were dependent on His creation, He would no longer be God.

***Though God does not need anyone or anything, His creation and His people can give Him glory and bring Him joy.***

Isaiah 43:7 ~ 7Everyone who is called by My name, And whom I have created for My glory, Whom I have formed, even whom I have made.”

God created mankind in order to glorify Him… that is the ultimate purpose for which we were created (Isa 43:7; Eph 1:11-12).

As a result, God’s people can bring Him joy and delight. God actually delights and rejoices over His people! (Isa 62:3-5; Zeph 3:17-18).

“He was before all things, and, therefore, depends upon no other thing which, by its own change, can bring any change upon him. That which is from itself cannot be changed, because it hath nothing before it, nothing more excellent than itself; but that which is from another as its first cause and chief good, may be changed by that which was its efficient cause and last end.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

“God does not need us for anything, yet it is the amazing fact of our existence that he chooses to delight in us and to allow us to bring joy to his heart. This is the basis for personal significance in the lives of all God’s people: to be significant to God is to be significant in the most ultimate sense. No greater personal significance can be imagined.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

* 1. Unity

Definition: ***God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times.***[[10]](#footnote-10)

Since God is infinite in all of His perfections, each of His attributes is infinite, and therefore, no one attribute is greater or more significant than another.

Furthermore, none of His attributes will come into conflict with another. God’s love and justice harmonize perfectly in God.

“For example, John can say that “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and then a little later say also that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light. Rather it is God himself who is light, and it is God himself who is also love.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

All of God’s attributes comprise who He is fully and completely. So in this way, God is unity.

"God himself is a unity - a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in all of these attributes.[[12]](#footnote-12)

***Jesus reveals the unity of God in grace***

Although there is no one greater or superior attribute of God over against another, some of God’s acts demonstrate certain attributes more than others. For example, creation demonstrates God’s power and wisdom.

If this be the case, then what does the greatest event in human history – the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – demonstrate?

It demonstrates God’s infinite wrath and justice against sin and death. But above all, it puts on display the love and mercy of God for sinners.

**Romans 5:8** ~ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

The display of God’s infinite grace is the very reason why God allowed sin to enter into the world… He desires to showcase the riches of His grace in Christ Jesus!

The “praise of the glory of His grace” is the reason why God chose us and adopted us into His family (Eph 1:6).

Forgiveness for all of our sins is “according to the riches of His grace” (Eph 1:7).

And from now throughout all of eternity, God will “show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7).

This is why the coming of Jesus Christ into the world highlights the grace of God for sinners.

John 1:14, 16-17 ~ 14And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth… 16For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. 17For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

The attribute that sets God apart from every other false god in the world is His grace. Where the Greek pantheon of gods had no gracious concern for the creation, a sentiment that continues on today in world religions such as Islam, the God of Christianity is One who humbles Himself in order to rescue fallen humanity. God is able to offer grace, and yet punish sin concurrently because of His unity.

* 1. Eternity

Definition: ***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.***[[13]](#footnote-13)

This is God’s infinity in respect to time. There are no limitations on God in relation to time.

In relation to God’s immutability, it also teaches that time has no effect on God whatsoever.

“We must conceive of eternity contrary to the notion of time; as the nature of time consists in the succession of parts, so the nature of eternity in an infinite immutable duration.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

“God never learns new things or forgets things, for that would mean a change in his perfect knowledge. This implies also that the passing of time does not add to or detract from God’s knowledge: he knows all things past, present, and future, and knows them all equally vividly.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

***God is timeless***

God’s eternality means that He has no beginning or no end. He has always existed (Rev 4:8) He speaks of Himself as existent.

Psalm 90:2 ~ 2Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

Exodus 3:14 ~ 14God 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.’ ”

Prior to the creation of the universe, God existed in eternity past. It was only at the creation that time, space, and matter were created.

“The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together: if there is no matter, there can be no space or time either. Thus, before God created the universe, there was no “time,” at least not in the sense of a succession of moments one after another. Therefore, when God created the universe, he also created time. When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another.”

Even now, God does not exist in time, but exists in eternity outside of space and time. He is eternally “present.”

***God sees all time equally vividly***

Unlike men, whose memories fade with time, time does not affect God whatsoever.

Psalm 90:4 ~ 4For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.

From God’s perspective, details from events that took place in human history thousands of years earlier are like “yesterday.”

This verse tells us that time has no bearing on God’s ability to retain or recall details.

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

The latter part of this verse is similar to Ps 90:4, but the beginning part of the verse teaches that any one day seems to last like a thousand years. This tells us that God is always eternally present, even within the confines of human time.

“God somehow stands above time and is able to see it all as present in his consciousness.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

***God sees events in time and acts in time***

“However, this is not to suggest that time is 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.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Galatians 4:4–5 ~ 4But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

God sees events in time and acts in time. He allowed time to pass before sending His Son into the world at just the right time.

Acts 17:30–31 ~ 30“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

This verse teaches that God acted a certain way in the past, is acting a certain way in the present, and will act in the future.

“God can act in time because he is Lord of time. He uses it to display his glory. In fact, it is often God’s good pleasure to fulfill his promises and carry out his works of redemption over a period of time so that we might more readily see and appreciate his great wisdom, his patience, his faithfulness, his lordship over all events, and even his unchangeableness and eternity.” [[18]](#footnote-18)

We will always exist in time. Even in heaven, believers will experience time in successive moments.

Revelation 22:2 ~ 2in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Life will go on forever, and every moment will be equally as joyful and satisfying to the soul as was the previous moment, for God’s grace will be continually lavished upon us!

Ephesians 2:7 ~ 7so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

1. Tozer, Knowledge of the Holy, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lloyd-Jones, God the Father, God the Son, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, p. 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grudem, p. 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berkhof, p. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Grudem, 161–162. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stephen Charnock, *[The Existence and Attributes of God](https://ref.ly/logosres/exattgod?ref=VolumePage.V+1%252c+p+321&off=2663&ctx=e+had+no+beginning.+~He+was+before+all+th)*, vol. 1 (Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Grudem, 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 178 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Berkhof, 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Grudem 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Stephen Charnock, *[The Existence and Attributes of God](https://ref.ly/logosres/exattgod?ref=VolumePage.V+1%252c+p+280&off=489&ctx=this+year+the+next.+~We+must+conceive+of+)*, vol. 1 (Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Grudem, 168–169. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Grudem, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Grudem, 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)