

THEOLOGY PROPER – The Attributes of God, Part 2

I. REVIEW

What's the difference between God's incommunicable and communicable attributes?

- Incommunicable Attributes ~ those attributes God does not share with us (i.e. eternity, immutability, omnipresence)
- Communicable Attributes ~ those attributes God shares with us (i.e. love, mercy, justice)

II. INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES (CONTINUED)

A. Immutability

Definition:

“That perfection of God by which He is devoid of all change, not only in His Being, but also in His perfections, and in His purposes and promises.”
(Berkhof, 58).

Immutability is God's “perfect unchangeability” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 169).

God's immutability refers to the absolute constancy of His Being.

Biblical Evidences:

Malachi 3:6 - “I Yahweh do not change...”

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

2 Tim. 2:13 - “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.”

Heb. 6:17-18 - In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us

1 Sam. 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.”

Cf. Psalm 102:25-27; Heb. 1:10-12

Mistaken Understandings of Immutability

1) Immutability = Immobility

Does immutability mean God doesn't do anything? Is God static and lifeless?

On the contrary, God has "life in Himself" (John 5:26, cf. 1:4).

- It is because God lives that we can "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).
- He "gives to all people life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:25; 1 Tim 6:13; Ps 36:9).

"Immutability and a being who is alive are not contradictory concepts." Rather, God alone has "perfectly active life."
(Barrett, 103–104).

"God is unchangeable not because he is inert or static like a rock, but for just the opposite reason. He is so dynamic, so active that no change can make him more active. He is act pure and simple."
(Weinandy as quoted by Barrett, 104).

2) Immutability = Inability to Relate

Doesn't God need to change in some way in order to relate to His creatures?

No. Rather, God is so infinitely full of life that He cannot possibly reveal all of Himself in one moment, which is why time must go on forever. There's more to God than creation (including time) can ever contain (1 Kings 8:27).

Scripture also alludes to this principle in stating that God's grace and wisdom are "manifold" and cannot be revealed all at once (Eph 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:10).

Analogy: As one ray of sunlight traveling through a prism will show many distinct colors on the other side, so God's singular character revealed in time will show distinct characteristics in different circumstances (grace, righteousness, judgment, wrath, etc.). However, God's character is one and unchanging (He does not change from Red to Blue).

Key Distinction: The change is always and only located in the revelation of God, not in God. The change is in man's experience of God, but not in God's Being.

Analogy: The Copernican Revolution – where we recognized that the sun does not revolve around the earth, but the earth around the sun. Therefore, "sunrises" and "sunsets" etc. are described from our perspective, when in reality, the sun does not move or change. The situation is similar with God and our experience of Him when He appears to "change" or "move" in different ways.

So, there are countless different relationships God has with created things, but we cannot *confine* God's character to a singular expression of Himself. To do this would require us to say He actually changes from circumstance to circumstance.

Did God then "become" gracious to save us? Did the "Old Testament God of wrath" undergo some change to become the "New Testament God of love"? The author of Hebrews sure didn't think so.

Biblical Example: Hebrews 12:18–29

- Some people come to experience God as at Sinai (12:18–21)
- Others come to experience God as at Mount Zion (12:22–29)

Since we experience God through His grace in Christ (via Mount Zion), "let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God *is* a consuming fire" (12:28-29)

We are to worship God with reverence and awe not because He grew slack in His holiness and felt like being nice, but because He's immutably holy, and yet now we are invited into His holy fellowship through His grace!

Malachi 3:6 – "I, Yahweh, do not change, therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."

Awesome Affirmations of God's Immutability

- God "never needs to become more perfect than he is" (Barrett, 99).
- Because God is constant, "There has never been a time *when God was not God*" (White, 42).
- We are those who are "becoming," but God alone "is."
- "He cannot be improved. He is not becoming anything." (Piper)
- There is no incompleteness in God at all.
- "His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be." (Hodge, 390).
- God doesn't become something tomorrow that He isn't today.
- God is always everything that He is.
- God "is not a God who has *potential*" (Barrett, 96).
- God never hopes to become anything one day.
- Nothing in God needs to be activated (Barrett, 96).
- He does not need to grow in strength to accomplish anything (Ps 46:6; Jer 32:27).
- He does not need to grow in wisdom to figure anything out (Isa 40:13; 1 John 3:20; Ps 147:5).
- He does not need to grow in love in order to save sinners (1 John 4:8).
- He "needs" only reveal who He *already* is.

- He has always had everything you will ever need.

Application

Caution:

- None of us should think it is okay to hold out secret hopes that God will change to become relaxed about sin. It's neither right nor wise to hope that you'll get to judgment day, stand before Him without Christ, and think maybe God, who knows you, knows your faults, knows your intentions, knows how hard you tried to obey, will brush your sins aside. No. God does not change.
(paraphrase from Kevin DeYoung)

Comfort:

- God's promises to you are absolutely unwavering and constantly dependable.

“For men swear by one greater *than themselves*, and with them an oath *given* as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.” (Heb. 6:16–18).

- Our assurance is anchored in God's love and faithfulness, not in our love and faithfulness (1 John 3:19–20; cf. 2 Tim 2:13). You cannot “sin God into a bad mood,” because God has always loved you eternally (Eph 1:3–5)!
 - “His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Ps 136).
 - “Can you imagine if God's love were not immutable? Salvation would be the first doctrine to go... Thankfully, our assurance is not based on our feelings. Rather, it rests in a love that never changes. The Father's love for us is as unchanging as his love for his Son, Jesus Christ.” (Barrett, 102–103).

B. Omnipresence

Definition:

God “is present with his whole being everywhere simultaneously” (Barrett, 166).

“that perfection of the Divine Being by which He transcends all spatial limitations, and yet is present in every point of space with His whole Being” (Berkhof, 60).

“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” (Grudem, 173).

Biblical Evidences:

- 1 Kings 8:27 – “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!” (cf. Isa 66:1; Acts 7:48–49).
- Psa. 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. 23:23–24 – “Am I a God who is near,” declares Yahweh, “and not a God far off?” “Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?” declares Yahweh. Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” declares Yahweh.”
- Acts 17:27–28 – “...that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...”

Clarifications

In affirming God is be present everywhere, we do not mean that God is divided or “stretched out” across creation (~Barrett).

- “...it is never safe to assume that the manifestation of his presence at any one place to any one person is the containment of his being to that place...The reason why is simple: God does not have a body... His being cannot be identified with matter.” (Barrett, 163).
- “He is not absent from any part of [space], nor more present in one part than another.” (Berkhof, 60–61).
- “Heaven ‘is the court of His majestical presence, but not the prison of His essence’” (Charnock, as cited by Barrett, 170).
- One man said so well, in response to the idea that God is pieced out among different locations, “Such conclusions would be ‘unworthy of the majesty of God.’” (Muller, 337).

Question: If God is everywhere with all of who He is, does that mean God is in hell?

Answer: Yes, as the apostle John tells us in Revelation:

“Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (Revelation 14:9–10).

“A breath of relief is usually heard when someone declares, ‘Hell is a symbol for separation from God.’ To be separated from God for eternity is no great threat to the impenitent person. The ungodly want nothing more than to be separated from God. Their problem in hell will not be separation from God, it will be the

presence of God that will torment them. In hell, God will be present in the fullness of His divine wrath. He will be there to exercise His just punishment of the damned. They will know Him as an all-consuming fire... Hell is an eternity before the righteous, ever-burning wrath of God.”

(R. C. Sproul, “What is Hell?” <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/hell/>).

Caution: No one will ever escape God. There are only 2 options for how to meet Him, as the author of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 10:26–27:

“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.”

God’s presence will be encountered in one of 2 ways (per Hebrews 12).

- 1) As at Mount Sinai – Consuming Fire / glorifying His wrath in Christ
- 2) As at Mount Zion – Joyous Festival / glorifying His grace in Christ

Key Distinction: As with immutability above, believers must realize that God’s presence does not actually change or relocate (since He is everywhere), but rather, the change is only in the *revelation* of His presence and in *man’s experience* of His presence.

God’s omnipresence shows us that our distance from God is not local but spiritual.

“What alone separates us from him is sin. It does not distance us from God locally but spiritually (Isa. 59:2). To abandon God, to flee from him, as Cain did, is not a matter of local separation but of spiritual incompatibility. ‘It is not by location but by incongruity that a person is far from God.’ Conversely, going to God and seeking his face does not consist in making a pilgrimage but in self-abasement and repentance. Those who seek him, find him—not far away, but in their immediate presence. For in him we live and move and have our being. To draw near to him is to become like him; to move away from him is to become unlike him... But since there is One even more deeply inward than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from an angered God except to a God who is pacified. There is absolutely no place for you to flee to. Do you want to flee from him? Rather flee to him.” (Bavinck, also quoting Augustine, 169–70).

Comfort: If hell is where God will forever glorify His wrath, heaven on earth is where He will forever glorify His grace, His love, His mercy, His compassion. That’s His presence in the positive sense. It is the place where saved sinners will be forever embraced and welcomed by God as their Father.

Revelation 21:1–7 – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice

from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.” Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. “He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.”

Psalm 16:11 - You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever

This is the end for which Christ died for you:

1 Peter 3:18a – “For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God.”

With a big picture lens on the Bible, you can see God moving His manifest presence closer and closer to His people.

→ God in the tabernacle (Exod 25:8)

→ God the Son incarnate (John 1:14)

→ God the Spirit indwelling believers (John 14:16–18)

John 14:16–18 - “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

The flow of Scripture tells you, Christian, that God will bring you to Himself entirely and completely. That’s your future! The Spirit with you is a pledge (Eph 1:13–14) of what will be yours with God in His presence. And even until then, you have the promises of God: “I will never leave you nor will I ever forsake you.” (Heb 13:5), and “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

III. COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES

A. Spirituality / Invisibility

Definitions:

- a. *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 (Grudem 187–88).*
- b. *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 (Grudem, 188).*
- c. "By ascribing spirituality to God we also affirm that He has none of the properties belonging to matter, and that He cannot be discerned by the bodily senses" (Berkhof, 66).

In short, this attribute states that God is immaterial in His essence and cannot be perceived by bodily senses. As with God, there is an immaterial, spiritual, and invisible aspect of our existence. This is a dimension to reality which we cannot see.

Biblical Examples

John 4:24 – "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth." (This is what Jesus calls a "true worshiper" in John 4:23).

John 1:18 – "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*."

Colossians 1:15 – "He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God"

Acts 17:29 – "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, and image formed by the art and thought of man." Cf. Rom 1:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; 1 John 4:12a; Heb 11:3; Exod 33:20; John 6:46.

Caution: This truth serves as a warning against heartless hypocrisy. Worship must be from the deepest parts of your being.

Mark 7:6 – "And He said to them, 'Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.'"

Comfort: As our spirits come from God and are how we become living beings (Gen 2:7; Heb 12:9), this is another reminder that, as with all reality, our existence and life and worship and wellbeing depend entirely upon God alone. You can only worship and obey God with God! And God Himself has given you His Spirit to give you new life and guide you into true and proper worship (cf. John 3:6–8; Rom 8:3–4).