

Chapter VI: The Attributes of God

God reveals Himself not only in His names, but also in His attributes, that is, in the perfections of the divine Being. It is customary to distinguish between incommunicable and communicable attributes. Of the former there are no traces in the creature; of the latter there are.

1. The Incommunicable Attributes

These emphasize the absolute distinction between God and the creature, and include the following:

- a. The independence or self-existence of God. This means that God has the ground of His existence in Himself, and unlike man, does not depend on anything outside of Himself. He is independent in His Being, in His virtues and actions, and causes all His creatures to depend on Him. The idea is embodied in the name Jehovah and finds expression in the following passages, Ps. 33:11; 115:3; Isa. 40:18 ff.; Dan. 4:35; John 5:26; Rom. 11:33-36; Acts 17:25; Rev. 4:11.
- b. The immutability of God. Scripture teaches that God is unchangeable. He is forever the same in His divine Being and perfections, and also in His purposes and promises, Num. 23:19; Psa. 33:11; 102:27; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17; Jas. 1:17. This does not mean, however, that there is no movement in God. The Bible speaks of Him as coming and going, hiding and revealing Himself. He is also said to repent, but this is evidently only a human way of speaking of God, Ex. 32:14; Jonah 3:10, and really indicates a change in man's relation to God.
- c. The infinity of God. This means that God is not subject to limitations. We can speak of His infinity in more than one sense. Viewed in relation to His being, it may be called His absolute perfection. He is unlimited in His knowledge and wisdom, in His goodness and love, in His righteousness and holiness, Job 11:7-10; Psa. 145:3. Seen in relation to time, it is called His eternity. While this is usually represented in Scripture as endless duration, Ps. 90:2; 102:12, it really means that He is above time and therefore not subject to its limitations. For Him there is only an eternal present, and no past or future.

Viewed with reference to space, it is called His immensity. He is everywhere present, dwells in all His creatures, filling every point of space, but is in no way bounded by space, 1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139:7-10; Isa. 66:1; Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 17:27, 28.

d. The simplicity of God. By ascribing simplicity to God we mean that He is not composed of various parts, such as the body and soul in man, and for that very reason is not subject to division. The three persons in the Godhead are not so many parts of which the divine essence is composed. The whole being of God belongs to each one of the Persons. Hence we can also say that God and His attributes are one, and that He is life, light, love, righteousness, truth, and so on.

2. The Communicable Attributes

These are the attributes of which we find some resemblance in man. It should be borne in mind, however, that what we see in man is only a finite (limited) and imperfect likeness of that which is infinite (unlimited) and perfect in God. Here we have:

a. The knowledge of God. This is that perfection of God whereby He, in a manner all His own, knows Himself and all things possible and actual. God has this knowledge in Himself, and does not obtain it from without. It is always complete and always present in His mind. And because it is all-comprehensive, it is called omniscience. He knows all things, past, present and future, and not only the things that have real existence, but also those which are merely possible. 1 Kings 8:29; Ps. 139:1-16; Isa. 46:10; Ezek. 11:5; Acts 15:18; John 21:17; Heb. 4:13.

b. The wisdom of God. God's wisdom is an aspect of His knowledge. It is the virtue of God which manifest itself in the selection of worthy ends and in the choice of the best means for the realization of those ends. The final end to which He makes all things subservient is His own glory. Rom. 11:33; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; Col. 1:16.

c. The goodness of God. God is good, that is, perfectly holy, in Himself. But this is not the goodness we have in mind here. In this connection we refer to the divine goodness that reveals itself in doing well unto others. It is that perfection which prompts Him to

deal kindly and bounteously with all His creatures The Bible refers to it repeatedly, Ps. 36:6; 104:21; 145:8, 9, 16; Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17.

d. The love of God. This is often called the most central attribute of God, but it is doubtful whether it should be regarded as more central than the other perfections of God. In virtue of it He delights in His own perfections and in man as the reflection of His image. It may be considered from various points of view. The unmerited love of God which reveals itself in pardoning sin is called His grace, Eph. 1:6, 7; 2:7-9; Titus 2:11. That love relieving the misery of those who are bearing the consequences of sin is known as His mercy or tender compassion, Luke 1:64, 72, 78; Rom. 15:9; 9:16, 18; Eph. 2:4. And when it bears with the sinner who does not heed the instructions and warnings of God it is named His long-suffering or forbearance, Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:16.

e. The holiness of God. God's holiness is first of all that divine perfection by which He is absolutely distinct from all His creatures, and exalted above them in infinite majesty. Ex. 15:11; Isa. 57:15. But it denotes in the second place that He is free from all moral impurity or sin, and is therefore morally perfect. In the presence of the holy God man is deeply conscious of his sin, Job 34:10; Isa. 6:5; Hab. 1:13.

f. The righteousness of God. The righteousness of God is that perfection by which He maintains Himself as the Holy One over against every violation of His holiness. In virtue of it He maintains a moral government in the world and imposes a just law on man, rewarding obedience and punishing disobedience, Ps. 99:4; Isa. 33:22; Rom, 1:32. The justice of God which manifests itself in the giving of rewards is called His remunerative justice; and that which reveals itself in meting out punishment is known as His retributive justice. The former is really an expression of His love, and the latter of His wrath.

g. The veracity of God. This is that perfection of God in virtue of which He is true in His inner being, in His revelation, and in His relation to His people. He is the true God over against the idols, knows things as they really are, and is faithful in the fulfillment of His promises. From the last point of view this attribute is also called God's faithfulness. Num. 23:19; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 10:23.

h. The sovereignty of God. This may be considered from two different points of view, namely, His sovereign will, and His sovereign power. The will of God is represented in Scripture as the final cause of all things, Eph. 4:11; Rev. 4:11. On the basis of Deut. 29:29 it is customary to distinguish between the secret and the revealed will of God. The former is the will of God's decree, which is hidden in God and can be known only from its effects, and the latter is the will of His precept, which is revealed in the law and in the gospel. God's will respecting His creatures is absolutely free, Job 11:10; 33:13; Ps. 115:3; Prov. 21:1; Matt. 20:15; Rom. 9:15-18; Rev. 4:11. The sinful deeds of man are also under the control of His sovereign will, Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23. The power to execute His will is called his omnipotence. That God is omnipotent does not mean that He can do everything. The Bible teaches us that there are some things which God cannot do. He cannot lie, sin, deny Himself, Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:18; Jas. 1:13, 17. It does mean that He can, by the mere exercise of His will, bring to pass whatsoever He has decided to accomplish, and that, if He so desired, He could do even more than that, Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:27; Zech. 8:6; Matt. 3:9; 26:53.

To memorize. Passages to prove God's:

a. Incommunicable attributes:

Independence. John 5:26. "For as the Father hath life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.

Immutability. Mal. 3:6. "For I, Jehovah, change not; therefore ye, sons of Jacob, are not consumed." James 1:17. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning."

Eternity. Ps. 90:2. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God." Ps. 102:27. "But Thou art the same, and Thy years have no end."

Omnipresence. Ps. 139:7-10. "Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in

Sheol, behold Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me." Jer. 23:23, 24. "Am I a God at hand, saith Jehovah, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places so that I shall not see him' saith Jehovah. Do I not fill heaven and earth? saith Jehovah?"

b. Communicable attributes:

Omniscience. John 21:17b. "And he said unto Him, Yea, Lord, Thou know all things', Thou know that I love Thee." Heb. 4:13. "And there is no creature that is not manifest in His sight; but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."

Wisdom, Ps. 104:24. "Jehovah, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all." Dan. 2:20, 21b. "Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever; for wisdom and might are His.... He giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that have understanding."

Goodness. Ps. 86:5. "For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness unto all them that call upon Thee." Ps. 118:29 " give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness endures forever."

Love. John 3:16. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish, but have eternal life." 1 John 4:8. "He that loves not knows not God; for God is love."

Grace. Neh. 9:17b. "But Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness." Rom. 3:24. "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Mercy. Rom. 9:18. "So then He hath mercy on whom He will and whom He will He hardens." Eph. 2:4, 5. "But God, being rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

Long-suffering or forbearance. Num. 14:18. "Jehovah is slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression." Rom. 2:4. "Or despise thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads thee to repentance?"

Holiness. Ex, 15:11. "Who is like unto Thee, Jehovah, among the gods? Who is like unto Thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" Isa. 6:3b. "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory."

Righteousness or justice. Ps. 89:14. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Thy throne." Ps. 145:17. "Jehovah is righteous in all His ways, and gracious in all His works." 1 Pet. 1:17. "And if ye call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judges according to each man's work, pass the time of your sojourning in fear."

Veracity or faithfulness. Num. 23:19. "God is not a man, that He should lie, neither the son of man, that He should repent. Hath He said, and will He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and will He not make it good?" 2 Tim. 2:13. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself."

Sovereignty. Eph. 1:11. "In whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of Him who works all things after the council of His will." Rev. 4:11. "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they were, and were created."

Secret and revealed will. Deut. 29:29. "The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."

Omnipotence. Job 42:2. "I know that Thou canst do everything." Matt. 19:26. "With God all things are possible." Luke 1:37. "For with God nothing shall be impossible."

For Further Study:

- a. Give instances in which the Bible identifies God and His attributes, Jer. 28:6; Heb. 12:29; 1 John 1:5; 4:16.
- b. How can God be just and gracious to the sinner at the same time, Zech. 9:9; Rom. 3:24-26?
- c. Prove from Scripture that God's foreknowledge includes conditional events. I Sam. 23:10-13; 2 Kings 13:19; Ps. 81:13-15; 48:18; Jer. 38:17-20; Ezek. 3:6; Matt. 11:21.

Questions for Review:

1. How do we divide the attributes of God?
2. Which belong to each one of these classes?
3. What is the independence of God?
4. What is His immutability?
5. How can we explain the fact that the Bible apparently ascribes change to God?
6. What is God's eternity and immensity or omnipresence?
7. What is the simplicity of God, and how can we prove it?
8. What is the nature and extent of God's knowledge?
9. How is His wisdom related to His knowledge?
10. What is the goodness of God? Are any other names used for it?
11. Should we speak of love as more central in God than His other attributes?
12. How do we distinguish God's grace, mercy, and long-suffering?
13. What is the holiness of God?

14. In what does God reveal His righteousness?
15. What is included in the veracity of God?
16. What distinction do we apply to the will of God?
17. Do the secret and the revealed will of God ever conflict?
18. Does God's omnipotence imply that He can do everything?