

Systematic Theology Study
Session 3A
Who is God and what's He like?

In our last session we examined how we come to know anything about God. After all, He is spirit and we are physical beings and our five senses cannot detect God. However, He has not left us without a witness of Himself because He has chosen to reveal Himself to mankind in two ways: general revelation and then special revelation.

Now in this session we are going to focus on what God has revealed about Himself. What is God like? What are some of His major characteristics and attributes? Before we get started, there are three common misconceptions about God and who He is. These need to be settled before we get started so they don't taint our investigation.

False belief #1 - God is a cosmic cop. He sees and punishes all who dare misbehave and since He sees everyone and everything, He's busy writing spiritual citations to everyone. He is mentioned in insurance policies as "acts of God" which means a natural disaster or horrible event outside the realm of normal experiences that God has done against a person.

False belief #2 - God is a giant grandfather. He is kind and indulgent. He would never detract a person from their pursuit of happiness. He's like an infinite vending machine or a genie wrapped in a warm sweater, rocking in His chair and showering us approval on anything we want.

False belief #3 - God is a master barterer. He relates to us on a purely transactional basis. If we do something for Him, then and only then will He do something for us. If He does anything for us, we must reciprocate or expect no more blessings from Him.

Q: Have you ever heard any other views of God that are obviously wrong when compared to the Bible teachings?

If our spiritual lives are to have any meaning, we have to put aside all false concepts of God and seek after the true God revealed in Scripture. As we look at what the Bible, the compilation of all special revelation, says about God, that we will see all three of these as wrong. What we will see is that the God revealed in the Bible is awesome, majestic, magnificent, and completely beyond our ability to fully understand Him - at least in these finite bodies. In this session we are going to briefly investigate a few major questions concerning God and His attributes of magnificence.

1. What is God like? What is His essential nature and some of His attributes? Does God grow or develop in any way or does He remain fixed and unchanging? What are the implications of these truths about God?

In our next study we will explore these other three areas of God's nature.

1. Is God a good God and if so what does that goodness look like? Does God ever do bad things and if so do these cancel out His goodness to some degree?

2. Is God close to us and the rest of His creation or does He remain distant and separate

from it (and us)?

3. Is God a Trinity or not?

Remember, the purpose of knowing who God is and what He's like is to develop a closer relationship with Him - not just gain head knowledge.

In this session, the word "attribute" will be defined as the qualities of God that constitute how He truly is. These attributes are not His actions but His actual nature. These attributes apply to every member of the Godhead equally and represent their essential nature. Attributes are permanent in that they were never gained nor can they be lost by God. They just are. Up front, we must admit that we, even as God's highest creation, do not know God's nature completely. All we know is what He's reveal to us through general and special revelation.

I. Attributes of Greatness (God's magnificence)

These commonly get broken down into five different groups: spirituality, personality, life, infinity, and constancy. All of these deal with God being majestic and awesome.

A. Spirituality - When we say this is an attribute of God, it means that God is a spirit being. He does not have a physical or material body like we do.

[John 4:24]

[I Timothy 1:17, 6:13-16]

[Acts 17:24]

[Luke 24:39]

Q: What are some of the characteristics of a spirit? *(It is not limited to being in a particular place or time. It does not have the limits or needs of a physical body. It is not destructible. It cannot be controlled by humans. Others answers possible)*

Q: When we get to heaven, will we be spirits, too? **[I John 3:1-2]** *(While we don't know, fully, we do from I Corinthians 15, it will be some sort of body and it will be greatly different from our current body. It seems it will share some aspects of our physical body but also God's spiritual nature - whatever it will be, we will be like the resurrected Lord Jesus.)*

<Instruct those reading these verses to keep their Bibles open to these verses>

[Psalm 89:13]

Q: What does this passage tell us that God has? *(a strong arm and a right hand)*

[Psalm 57:1]

Q: What does this passage tell us that God has? (*wings*)

[Psalm 110:1]

Q: What does this passage tell us that God has? (*feet*)

On one hand we see that God is a spirit and is thus very different from us yet on the other hand He is said to have some physical body parts such as arms, hands, feet. and wings such as humans and other physical animals have.

Q: What are we to make of these passages in Scripture that say that God has physical body parts like the physical beings of this earth? (*These are called anthropomorphisms. They are attempts to express a truth about God through human analogies or things related to physical beings.*)

Q: Going back to Psalm 89:13, what does the analogy of arms and a right hand say about God? (*He is strong and mighty and by these traits He will be exalted*)

Q: Going back to Psalm 57:1, what does the analogy of wings say about God? (*God is a source of refuge, a hiding place for us when trouble arises in our lives*)

There is an exception that we see happening in the Bible concerning God being a spirit and it is when God shows up in actual human form. This is called a theophany. It's limited to the Old Testament. (This is usually, but not always, denoted by the phrase "THE angel of the Lord" instead of "an angel of the Lord".) In the New Testament when God shows up in human form it's called the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Once the Son of God arrived, there was never a need for any further theophanies.

[Exodus 20:4]

Q: With this knowledge of God being a spirit, why do you think the Second Commandment God gave Israel was to not make any idols or any likenesses of Him? (*No idol or creation of man can adequately represent or depict God. He is distinct from creation, not part of it. He cannot be controlled like an idol could be and He cannot be contained in one single location. Other ideas possible*)

B. Personality -

Q: What makes an individual an individual?

When we speak of God and personality we are speaking about Him being a person and possessing the attributes of an individual. He is self-conscious. He has a will. He is capable of feelings and independent thought. He is able to have relationships.

Not every religion believes in personal gods. In Hinduism reality is called Brahma. Brahma is the whole of everything and every person and living being is just a part of this whole.

In Hinduism, the individual relates to the whole by contemplation so that one loses their individual identity and self-consciousness to be absorbed by the whole. This is Nirvana - the state where all personal striving ends and one is simply at rest. Thus, there may be “gods” but they are not personal or gods to whom the worshiper relates to in any way. Thus the Biblical God is quite different from the gods of Hinduism.

[Exodus 3:14]

God has a personal name.

Q: What does possessing a personal name teach us about God’s personhood? *(He is knowable and wants to be known. He can relate to us and wants to relate to His creation, etc.)*

[Genesis 4:26]

Q: What did men start doing after the birth of Enosh? *(They started calling upon the name of the Lord. They began praying to Him. They sought out a personal relationship with God at this time.)*

[Exodus 20:7]

Q: What is the commandment given concerning God’s name in this verse? *(God’s name is to be treated respectfully and reverently.)*

Q: Why do you think it is important to God that His name be treated in reverently? *(Because God’s name encompasses who He is. Thus, His name needs to be treated in line with who God truly is. By doing so, it shows that we respect God and honor His magnificence. To take God’s name in a common or vain manner means we are treating Him as less than He truly is.)*

Throughout Scripture, in addition to the personal name of God given in Exodus, there are many other names of God revealed in Scripture. These names refer to His relationship with humans and His works. These names are given to shape and deepen the worship and lives of those who worship Him.

[Exodus 17:8-15]

Q: What did God do for the Israelites in this passage? *(He caused them to prevail in battle over the Amalekites.)*

Q: What did Moses call the altar he built for God at the site of the victory? *(God is my banner)*

A banner was a flag used by an army in battle to signal various commands. The Lord revealed Himself to Israel in this situation as the God who brings victory in battle. The Israelites could count on God to fight for them and with them and bring them victory in the battles they would face. That name is still one we can call upon in our battles in this life.

[Matthew 6:7-9]

Q: How is God's personhood revealed in this passage? *(v.9 - God is a Father, He is holy, He doesn't want us to approach Him with meaningless repetition but with what's on our hearts. The key to prayer, one way we relate to God, is that our hearts and minds are fully engaged with Him. We are not acting out in rote with our minds wandering and our hearts are not concerned about Him. (Matthew 15:7-9))*

For the Jewish person in Jesus' day and time, calling upon God as a Father would have been rare as it showed a level of comfortableness or ease around God. But Jesus' teachings (as well as the rest of the Bible) teaches us that God is not a force or an object but a person. Attempts to harness Him belong to the realm of magic or technology. Like getting to know any person, God is an end to Himself and not a means to an end. He is of value for who He is not merely what He does. He is to be loved and served for who He is.

C. Life - God is alive and He often draws distinctions between Himself and the other gods who are not alive.

[Jeremiah 10:1-10]

[I Thessalonians 1:8-10]

God has life but it is different from other life on earth. His life is independent of us or anything else. He exists. On the other hand, everything else other than God exists and has life because God bestowed it upon that creature or plant. God is the "uncaused One" because it is His nature to exist. Think back to the creation account. God had to exist in order to bring into being all of creation. Since nothing else was around, we can know that God needs nothing else to maintain His life, as we do.

D. Infinity - We use the terms omnipresence (He is everywhere at the same time), omnipotent (He has all power to do His will as He wants it done), and omniscience (He knows everything perfectly as it truly is) to describe God. God is not subject to any limitations when it comes to being in one place at a time or not being able to carry out a work in His own strength to His desired completion.

[Psalm 139:7-12]

Q: What does this passage teach us about God? *(That He is everywhere.)*

Q: Why is that a comforting truth to know? *(Because no matter where a person may be, God is with them.)*

God is also not restricted by time as we are. Time and age are meaningless when it comes to God. So when we say that God is everywhere, we are also saying that He is outside of time. He is everywhere in the eternity past, present, and eternity future simultaneously and all

the time.

[Psalm 90:1-2]

[Jude 24-5]

God also knows everything. Nothing is hidden from His sight.

[Psalm 147:5]

Q: What does this passage teach us about God's knowledge? *(It is infinite. He knows everything. Since He is a first-hand witness to everything at all times, His knowledge of everything is complete and fully accurate.)*

Because God knows everything, He always acts in light of all the facts and the correct values. This God's wisdom at work. His judgments are always wise and correct the first time. He never revises His decisions or judgments. God never reacts to developments in the world. He has always known what was going to happen and how He was going to act before the event happened. Thus, He is never surprised.

Another important aspect of God being all-knowing and present everywhere at the same time is that He is the only being like Him. He is unique throughout all time, space and eternity. All of these attributes of majesty and greatness lead Him to being singular. Another one of Him could not exist.

[Isaiah 43:10-11]

One of the names that God revealed to Abraham was El-Shaddai or God Almighty (Genesis 17:1). God was establishing a covenant between Himself and Abraham at that time. Because God is almighty, His will is never frustrated. He can always carry out His will perfectly. In the case of Abraham in Genesis 17, the covenant included a son being born to Abraham and his wife Sarah even though they were far beyond the normal age of child-bearing. God did not need to rely upon anything other than His own power to accomplish this work.

[Psalm 115:3-9]

Q: Why would this passage be comforting to know for those who worship the Lord? *(Because He has all power and He chooses to use that power to protect and care for His people.)*

Here's the deal with God's power. While it is unlimited and nothing is impossible with Him, God cannot arbitrarily do anything whatsoever that we can conceive of. He only uses His power for those things which are proper and an outflow of His essential nature and are His will. He Also when it comes to God's unlimited power, He is free. While He always keeps His promises, He does not use His power for spurious endeavors or our entertainment. He does not use His power ever to play games of philosophy or imagination with the so-called intelligent of

this world. (The philosophical arguments of “Can make a four sided triangle?” or “Can God make a rock so big He cannot move it?” are absurdities as they miss the point of God’s character completely. He deals with reality because He is reality - not fantasy, fiction, or fancy.) God always keeps the promises He makes and they reveal Him and His glory as well as benefit those who are included in the promise. God is never under compulsion to make a promise in the first place. God is not bound nor His actions determined by factors and forces external to Himself.

[Philippians 2:13]

5. Constancy - This describes the attributes that let us know God is unchanging and unchangeable. Because God is perfect, He cannot increase or decrease in any way. To change would be to change from perfection to a lesser state of being.

[Malachi 3:6]

[James 1:17]

[Psalm 102:25-27]

Q: If God is always right and knows all things and has all power and is everywhere at the same time, can God ever change His mind?

[Amos 7:1-6]

Q: How many times did God change His mind in this passage? (*Twice - v.3 & v.6*)

What does the Bible mean when it says that God changed His mind? This seems to go against God’s essential nature. It turns out that there are three ways in the Bible that the expression of God changing His mind is used. In none of these does God actually change His mind. It is impossible for God to change His mind. It’s just a figure of speech, a literary device, used to make a point.

A) Sometimes, these are simply descriptions of God’s actions and feelings given in human terms, terms we would understand, from a human perspective. These include passages that describe God experiencing pain or regret. It is merely a way of relating to human understanding. It is in these passage, such as the one in Amos or God’s dealings with Moses where the figure of speech is used to highlight the human response God is eliciting from the person with whom He is speaking. God wants the heart of the other displayed so that His heart and attributes can be revealed as well.

B) What appears as God’s changing His mind is actually the unfolding of a new stage in God’s plan. A common example of this is when God offered salvation to the Gentiles. In truth, He always planned to offer salvation to the Gentiles (as it was prophesied in the Old Testament) but when it happened in history, it appeared as a sharp break from the past - like He changed His mind.

C) Some apparent changes of God’s mind are actually changes of orientation resulting from man’s move into a different relationship with God. When Adam sinned, he fell into God’s disfavor. In the book of Jonah, God was going to wipe out the city of Nineveh in 40 days yet

they repented. God didn't actually change His mind. The city changed its mind and were spared.

A modern theology that grew popular in the 1990's is called Open Theology or Open Theism. This is because of a belief of dynamic foreknowledge. This theology stresses that God knows the past and present perfectly and He knows all the possibilities of the future but because of human free will, the actual future is unsettled and unknown - thus open.

Q: Based upon what we've read so far in this session, why is Open Theology wrong? *(It assumes that God does not know the future, thus He doesn't know everything. It presents His knowledge as less than infinite and perfect. Prophecy becomes God making a lucky guess at the future rather than knowing it completely. It elevates man's power over history and lessens God's will as subject to factors outside His control. This theology came about largely due to the passages of "God changing His mind" and those who champion it not understanding God's use of the tools of language when inspiring the Biblical authors.)*

When we talk about God being constant and unchanging, the term used is that God is stable. He isn't static, which implies inactive or not moving. God is stable in His character but dynamic in His actions which always flow from His eternal attributes.

Q: In what ways does knowing that God is unchanging give you hope? *(One is that He never changes His mind so that once you have been saved, He won't take it away from you at some point in the future. Since His nature never changes, His promises are always going to be kept. Etc.)*

These attributes are those that describe God's greatness. Next session we'll look at His attributes of goodness as well as questions concerning His nearness or distance and if He is a Trinity or not.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?