

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 6

What Characteristics of God Make Him Unique?

Theology that focuses on God specifically—who he is and what he has done—is known as “theology proper.” This is really the most important topic in theology, because if you do not understand God properly, you cannot understand the rest of theology properly. Everything else flows from God’s character and work, even what we have already looked at: God’s Word.

God is an infinite being, and therefore we cannot know him perfectly and exhaustively. In this sense, God is “incomprehensible.” Nevertheless, God has revealed himself—primarily through his Son, Jesus Christ—and therefore he is comprehensible to an extent (John 14:7; 1 John 5:20). Our goal, then, is to so desire to know our amazingly great God that we continue to deepen our understanding of him for the rest of our lives.

But we should also be careful to distinguish between knowing *about* God and really knowing *God*. Knowing about God just deals with facts. Really knowing God includes relationship. Our longing should be to have such an intimate and growing relationship with God that we want to go beyond mere facts about God. This means we need to consider implications and applications of what we know about God. If God is like this, then what? What difference does it make? We will try to do a bit of this in what follows, but truly it will only be scratching the surface.

We could start with arguments for the existence of God, but that is not where the Bible starts. The biblical authors simply *assume* God’s existence and build on that (Genesis 1:1), so that is what we will do as well. Arguments for the existence of God really fall more under philosophy or the philosophical end of theology.

The study of God’s nature is usually done by examining his attributes or characteristics, that is, whatever God has revealed to be true about himself. Sometimes called “perfections,” these are usually divided into two categories. God’s *incommunicable* attributes are those characteristics that are only true of himself; they make him unique. God’s *communicable* attributes are those characteristics he shares to a limited extent with humans. Here and in

chapter 7, we will consider a few of his incommunicable attributes. In chapter 8 we will consider a few of his communicable attributes.

Some of God's Incommunicable Attributes

A good place to start is with God's *spirituality*. This seems to be the closest we can come to "defining" the nature of God. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24 NIV1984). This basically means he is immaterial or incorporeal—he has no physical, material body. The second commandment is related to this fact: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Exodus 20:4). Trying to represent the one, true God by means of a material form fundamentally misrepresents him. God's spiritual nature also means that he is invisible; he cannot be seen by the human eye (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15–16).

One application of God's spirituality comes from that declaration of Jesus: Because "God is spirit," we are to worship him "*in spirit* and in truth" (John 4:24). At the least, this means we must not try to drag him into our material realm, as if he could be contained in a place—cathedral, church, chapel, wherever. Rather, we enter into *his* realm—the spiritual—and we can do that anywhere, at any time.

Another application is that God's realm is ultimate and central, and our prerogatives in life should reflect this. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness [spiritual things], and all these things [material things] will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Another important implication of God's spirituality, a divine attribute in itself, is his perfect *unity* or *simplicity*. This means God has no parts to divide up. Nothing can be added to God, and nothing can be taken away from God. As we study his attributes, we should not think of them as "parts," that if we add all his attributes together the sum will be God. Rather, we should think of his attributes as different perspectives on, or descriptions of, his perfect unity.

God's *sovereignty* means he rules over and controls his entire creation absolutely and completely. The Bible often uses terms like *reign*, *authority*, and *dominion* to describe this. Read King David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:10–16, where, even though he does not use the word *sovereignty*, the concept permeates what he says. Sovereignty is why Paul can say that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). What God wants to do, God does (see also Psalm 115:3).

Because he is God, he does not tolerate encroachments upon his sovereignty. We must always be humble before him and gladly willing to submit to him. The story of King Nebuchadnezzar, recorded in Daniel 4, is an illustration (especially vv. 25, 34–37). Another application is that we can trust the work of God implicitly. He is in perfect control of all circumstances of our lives, even when those circumstances *seem* to us to be totally out of control.

An implication of God's sovereignty, and yet another attribute, is his *self-sufficiency* or *independence* (Acts 17:24–25). God needs nothing from outside of himself; he is not dependent on anyone or anything *for* anything. In contrast, all the rest of creation is totally dependent upon him.

God's *omnipotence* means he is able to do whatever he wills to do; he is not limited by anything outside of himself; he is all-powerful. This does not mean that God can do *anything*—he cannot do anything contrary to his nature. For example, he cannot sin or cause himself to cease to exist.

It does mean he can do anything that is consistent with his nature and his will. This is why God can simply say, "Let there be," and what did not exist before springs into existence (Psalm 33:6, 9). This is why he could enable Abraham's wife, Sarah, to conceive at the age of eighty-nine (Genesis 18:10–14). This is why he could enable Mary to conceive Jesus apart from a human father (Luke 1:26–38). And this is why he can save sinners (Matthew 19:23–26). After all, the gospel "is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

This assures us that God will do whatever he promises to do (Romans 4:20–21). It also assures us that when we need help and strength, God can and will provide it (Ephesians 1:18–20).

God's *omnipresence* means he is present everywhere (Psalm 139:7–10). This along with his omnipotence and sovereignty is a source of great comfort to believers (Psalm 139:10). Over and over again, when God's people needed comfort and encouragement, he would say, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:11–12; cf. Deuteronomy 31:7–8; Joshua 1:9; Hebrews 13:5–6; et al.). On the other hand, God's omnipresence is a warning: Those who persist in sin cannot hide themselves or their sinful deeds from him (Psalm 139:11–12).

FACT?

As I delight to tell my students at the beginning of the term, theology class is not just for a semester; it will be for all eternity. Here is my proof: Question—How long does it take to comprehend something that is infinite, that is, God? Answer—An infinite number of days, that is, eternity. Every day of eternity, I think, we will learn something new and amazing about God. I can't wait!