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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
God's Character (4)

God: Divine Attributes and Trinitarianism
Part Four

Divine Sovereignty

Our approach to God's sovereignty will be to look at the many ways in which or spheres of human existence and experience over which he exercises sovereign control.

A. *Over Nature and Weather*

Psalms 104; 105:16; 135:7; 147:7-20; 148; Job 9:5-10; 26:5-14; 37:1-24; 38:8-38; Mark 4:39,41. Other texts:

"It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, and brings out the wind from His storehouses" (Jer. 10:12-13).

"Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers? Is it not Thou, O Lord our God? Therefore we hope in Thee, for Thou art the one who hast done all these things" (Jer. 14:22).

"And furthermore [declares the Lord], I withheld the rain from you while there were still three months until harvest. Then I would send rain on one city and on another city I would not send rain; one part would be rained on, while the part not rained on would dry up" (Amos 4:7).

B. *Over Kings and Nations*

Daniel 1:2 (cf. Jer. 25:1-12; Isa. 10:5-14) (see also Dan.2:37-38; 4:25,30,32; 5:18,20,21; Isa. 10:5-13; 40:23-24)

"the Lord gave" . . . Ultimately it was neither the sin and weakness of Jehoiakim nor the brilliance and strength of Nebuchadnezzar, not even the impotence or inactivity of God, but the sovereign good pleasure of Yahweh that determined the historical outcome (cf. Dan. 2:20-23). The Israelites "are not mere pawns on a political and geographical chessboard. To be in the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is not to be out of the control of God" (Goldingay, 22).

C. *Over People and their Hearts*

Gen. 20:6; Prov. 21:1; 16:9; Exodus 3:21-22; 12:35-36; 34:23-24; Deut. 2:30; Joshua 11:20; Judges 7:2-3,22; 1 Sam. 14:6,15,20; 2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15; 20:28-29; 2 Chron. 13:14-16; Ezra 1:1,5; 6:22; 7:27; Isa. 45:4-5; Acts 4:27-28; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Rev. 17:17.

D. *Over the Closing and Opening of the Womb*

Gen. 16:2; 29:31; 1 Sam. 1:5; Judges 13:3.

E. *Over Everything (including evil) in General*

Genesis 50:20 (cf. Ps. 105:17); Exodus 4:11 (disease and disability); Job 1:21-22; 2:10; 42:2 (cf. James 5:11); 42:2; Ps. 115:3; Prov. 16:33; 21:31; Isa. 45:7 (virtually all of Isa. 42-48); Lam. 3:37-38; Daniel 4:32,35; Amos 3:6; Matthew 10:29-31; Acts 4:27-28; Eph. 1:11; 2 Cor. 12:7; Rom. 8:28

F. *Over Life and Death*

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut. 32:39; see also 1 Samuel 2:6-7; 2 Samuel 12:15; James 4:14-15).

G. *Over Destructive Animals*

When the Assyrians populated Samaria with foreigners, *2 Kings 17:25* says, "Therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them."

And in *Daniel 6:22*, Daniel says to the king, "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths." Other Scriptures speak of God commanding birds and bears and donkeys and large fish to do his bidding. This means that all calamities that are owing to animal life are ultimately in the control of God. God also controls the invisible animal and plant life that wreaks havoc in the world: bacteria and viruses and parasites and thousands of microscopic beings that destroy health and life. If God can shut the mouth of a ravenous lion, then he can shut the mouth of a malaria-carrying mosquito and nullify every other animal that kills.

H. *Over the Death of his own Son*

Isaiah 53:10; Acts 2:23; Acts 4:27-28

I. *Over our Salvation*

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Romans 9:15-16).

“As many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:29-30).

J. *Divine Sovereignty in Proverbs*

1. *over all our actions and words* (16:1-3,9)
2. *over the destiny of the wicked* (16:4)
3. *over the casting of the lot* (16:33)
4. *over the heart of the king* (21:1). See also Gen.. 20:6; Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:16; 10:1-2; 14:4-5; Isaiah 10:5-19; 45:1-13; Ezra 1:1,5 (Cyrus, king of Persia); Jer. 25:3-14; Hab. 1:5-11; Acts 4:25-28; Rev. 17:16-17.
5. *over the battle and its outcome* (21:30-31) - See also Ps. 20:7; 33:13-17; Isa. 31:1-3.
6. *over our souls* (24:12c; 18:10; 30:5b)

This is why Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century London pastor said,

“I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.”

When Spurgeon was challenged that this is nothing but fatalism and stoicism, he replied,

“What is fate? Fate is this – *Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains, must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some great end. Fate does not say that. . . . There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man.”

Why Does God Ordain that there Be Evil?

It is evident from what has been said that it is not because he delights in evil as evil. Rather he "wills that evil come to pass . . . that good may come of it." What good? And how does the existence of evil serve this good end? Here is Edwards' stunning answer:

"It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . .

Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . .

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect."

If I didn't believe in the absolute sovereignty of God . . .

1. I would despair of my eternal destiny and that of all the people to whom I minister and preach. Neither I nor they could ever rest in the assurance of salvation. Knowing the depravity of my soul, I would most certainly apostatize were it not for God's sovereign preservation of me (cf. Rom. 8).
2. I would be terrified of all suffering, with no confidence that God can turn evil for good and bring me safely through. Cf. Rom. 8:28 and relation to vv. 29-30.
3. I would become manipulative and pragmatic in evangelism, believing that conversion is altogether a matter of my will/skill vs. will/skill of unbeliever. Packer:

"While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves. It is God who brings men and women under the sound of the gospel, and it is God who brings them to faith in Christ. Our evangelistic work is the instrument that He uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument. We must not at any stage forget that. For if we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize" (*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1961], p. 27).

It is not right when we take it upon ourselves to do more than God has commissioned us to do:

"It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts, and look to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Ghost, and to exalt ourselves as the agents of the new birth. And the point that we must see is

this: *only by letting our knowledge of God's sovereignty control the way in which we plan, and pray, and work in His service, can we avoid becoming guilty of this fault*" (29).

4. I would cease praying for God to convert and save the lost. If the ultimate causal factor in human conversion is the self-determined human will, not the divine will, it is futile and useless to ask God to work or touch or move upon the human will so as to assuredly bring them to faith.
5. I would despair of the political process and live in fear/anxiety/resentment of those elected officials who oppose the kingdom of God.
6. I would live in fear of nature: tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, wind and hail and rain. Cf. Pss. 147-148.
7. I would despair of ever doing anything of a spiritual nature that God requires and commands of me. Phil. 2:12-13.

Divine Omniscience

It will help to begin by noting how God's knowledge differs from ours.

1. *God's knowledge is intuitive, not discursive* - Our knowledge is discursive in that it comes by way of observation, reasoning, comparison, induction, deduction, and so on. In other words, *we learn*. But God's knowledge is intuitive, by which is meant that it is innate and immediate. God does not learn: He simply knows. He neither discovers nor forgets. [This is one element of divine omniscience that is challenged by open theists.]
2. *God's knowledge is simultaneous, not successive* - He sees things at once and in their totality, whereas we know only as the objects of knowledge are brought before us, one bit after another. With God the act of perception is complete and instantaneous. God thinks about all things at once.
3. *God's knowledge is independent, not dependent* - He does not receive his knowledge from anyone or anything external to himself:

"Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding?" (Isa. 40:13-14).

4. *God's knowledge is infallible, not subject to error* - As Ronald Nash has said, "Divine omniscience means that God holds no false beliefs. Not only are all of God's beliefs true, the range of his knowledge is total; He knows all true propositions" (51). God is always correct in what he knows.
5. *God's knowledge is infinite, not partial* - "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). God's knows exhaustively all his own deeds and plans. He also knows us thoroughly and exhaustively. No secret of the human heart, no thought of the mind or feeling of the soul escapes his gaze. Carl Henry points out: "Psychologists and psychoanalysts speak of deep areas of subconscious experience of which human beings are hardly aware. But God knows all men thoroughgoingly, psychologists and psychoanalysts and theologians included" (V:268).

Consider David's description of God's knowledge as found in Psalm 139:1-4.

"O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me. Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar. Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, and art intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, Thou dost know it all" (Ps. 139:1-4).

Other relevant texts include:

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13).

"And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts" (1 Chron. 28:9a).

"The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Prov. 15:3).

"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? 'I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve'" (Jer. 17:9-10; cf. also Jer. 16:17; 1 Kings 8:39).

"You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you" (Ps. 69:5).

"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt. 6:8).

"... for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (1 John 3:20).

"Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord, how much more the hearts of men!" (Prov. 15:11).

"Yet Thou, O Lord, knowest all their deadly designs against me; do not forgive their iniquity or blot out their sin from Thy sight" (Jer. 18:23).

"Yet, O Lord of hosts, Thou who dost test the righteous, who seest the mind [lit., kidneys] and the heart . . ." (Jer. 20:12).

"And they prayed, and said, 'Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two Thou hast chosen'" (Acts 1:24).

"Then the Spirit of the Lord fell upon me, and He said to me, 'Say, thus says the Lord, so you think, house of Israel, for I know your thoughts'" (Ezek. 11:5).

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God'? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable" (Isa. 40:27-28).

As for God's knowledge of the inner man, see also John 2:25; 21:17; Jer. 11:20; 32:19; Luke 16:15; Rom. 8:27; Ps. 94:9-11; 1 Cor. 3:20; 1 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 2:23; 1 Sam. 16:7; Isa. 66:18; Deut. 31:21; Mt. 9:4; Acts 15:8.

As for God's knowledge of all our activities and ways, see also Job 23:10; 24:23; 31:4; Ps. 1:6; 33:13-15; 37:18; 119:168; Isa. 29:15; 1 Sam. 2:3; Mt. 10:30.

Divine Omnipresence

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Ps. 139:7-12).

A. *Inexhaustibly Infinite in Space*

A slight distinction between *immensity* and *omnipresence* ought to be noted. Whereas immensity affirms that God transcends all spatial limitations, that his being cannot be contained or localized, omnipresence signifies more specifically the relationship which God in his whole being sustains to the creation itself. In other words, omnipresence (being positive in thrust) means that God is everywhere present in the world; immensity (being negative in thrust) means that he is by no means limited to or confined by it.

This means that it is probably inappropriate to speak of God as having *size*, for this term implies something that is measurable, definable, with boundaries and limitations. Is the question, then, "*How big is God?*" theologically inappropriate?

God, of course, is not "in space" in the sense that, say, we or the angelic host are. We who have material bodies are bounded by space and thus can always be said to be here and not there, or there and not here. That is, a body occupies a place in space. Angelic spirits, on the other hand, as well as the dead in Christ now in the intermediate state, are not bound by space and yet they are somewhere, not everywhere. But God, and God alone, fills all space. He is not absent from any portion of space, nor more present in one portion than in another. To put it in other terms, we are in space *circumscriptively*, angels are in space *definitively*, but God is in space *repletively*.

B. *Essentially and Wholly Present*

The teaching of Scripture on God's omnipresence is unassailable. In addition to what we have already seen in Psalm 139, note the following:

"Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" declares the LORD. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the LORD" (Jer. 23:24).

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27; see also 2 Chron. 2:6; Isa. 66 :1).

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church) which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph. 1:22-23).

"For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28a).

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

In the first place, *God is omnipresent according to his being and not merely according to his operation.* That is to say, he is essentially or substantially, not only dynamically, omnipresent. It is the heresy of deism which contends that God is present in all places only by way of influence and power, acting upon the world from a distance, but not himself wholly present throughout.

Second, *although God is wholly present throughout all things, he is yet distinct from all things.* It does not follow that because God is essentially in everything that everything is essentially God. It is the heresy of pantheism that the being of God is one and the same with the being of all reality. Pantheism asserts that God minus the world = 0; theism asserts that God minus the world = God. The universe is the creation of God and thus, in respect to essence, no part of him. The creation is ontologically other than God, a product *ex nihilo* of the divine will, not an extension of the Divine Being itself. Consequently, although all things are permeated and sustained in being by God (Col. 1:16-17; Acts 17:28), God is not all things. Again, God is not present *as* each point in space but rather present *with/in* each point in space.

Third, *this presence of God throughout the whole of space is not by local diffusion, multiplication, or distribution.* Being wholly spirit, God is not subject to the laws of matter such as extension and displacement. He cannot be divided or separated such that one part of his being is here and not there, and another part there and not here. The whole of his being is always everywhere, no less nor more here than there, or there than here.

Finally, *whereas the presence of a body in a place of space excludes the simultaneous and in all ways identical presence of another body in the same place of space, such is not true of the Divine Being. God is, in the whole of his being, where everything else is (including matter).* Substance or matter is in no way displaced or spatially excluded by the presence of God. To put it bluntly, **when God created all things out of nothing, he did not have to "move out of the way" to make room for the world.** He is where it is.

Divine Omnipotence

A highly simplistic definition of "power" would be that it is the ability to produce effects, or to accomplish what one wills. The Scriptures clearly affirm not only that God has such an ability but that he has it without limitations. Hence, we speak of God as being *omnipotent*, infinite in power.

His "power is vast" (Job 9:4). He is "the Lord strong and mighty" (Ps. 24:8), "great and awesome" (Deut. 7:21), "the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel" (Isa. 1:24). "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the father's sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the Lord Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds" (Jer. 32:17-19a). Creation is a testimony to "his great power and mighty strength" (Isa. 40:26). He is Lord, Owner, Ruler, and King of all creation, whom none can resist or overpower (Matt. 11:25; Rev. 1:8; Ps. 29:10; Jer. 10:7,10). He is "the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 4:8; 11:17), "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Nothing is too difficult for him; all things are within his power (Gen. 18:14; Zech. 8:6; Jer. 32:27).

When Mary asked Gabriel how she, a virgin, could conceive a child without the involvement of a man, his response was: "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" After comparing the difficulty of a rich man getting into heaven with a camel passing through the eye of a needle, Jesus said: "*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*"

"But our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Ps. 115:3).

"Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps. 135:6).

"For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for his stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?" (Isa. 14:27).

"Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa. 46:10).

"Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted'" (Job 42:1-2).

"And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off his hand or say to him, 'What hast Thou done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

See also 2 Chron. 20:6; Job 23:13; Prov. 21:30; Isa. 43:13.

A. *Power without Limit*

We must remember that divine power is *optional* in its exercise. Whereas God *is* infinitely powerful in his eternal being, it is not necessary or an essential part of this attribute that he always and in every way exercise his power. As William G. T. Shedd explains, "God need not have created anything. And after creation, he may annihilate. Only when he has bound himself by promise, as in the instance of faith in Christ, does his action cease to be optional" (*Dogmatic Theology*, I:359).

It is also important to note that God accomplishes his will in one of two ways.

(1) He accomplishes much by *appointed means*, i.e., by the uniform and ordered operation of what are called *second causes*. This would include God's providential activity in which he makes use of existing things. God utilizes what we erroneously call "laws of nature" to carry out his purpose (e.g., sustaining human life by means of food and water, providing warmth for our atmosphere via the heat of the sun, etc.).

(2) God also accomplishes much by divine fiat, i.e., directly and immediately without the use of means or secondary causes. Creation, for example, as well as certain miracles (such as the resurrection) are expressions of this kind of divine power. They are actions which are the operation of the first cause (God) alone.

It is also the case that the *actual* exercise of God's power does not represent its limits. God *can* do all he wills (and does) but *need not do all he can* (and does not). That is to say, God's infinite power is manifested in the works of creation, but is not exhausted by them. God could have created more than he has, if he so pleased. What God *has* done, therefore, is no measure of what he *could* have done or can do.

B. *Power without Self-Contradiction*

Can God do anything and everything? Certain theologians and philosophers argued that God has an absolute power that is free from, indeed often contradictory to, all reason and morality (God is *ex lex*, outside of or beyond law). Thus, they concluded that God can sin, lie, and die, among other things. He is not only able to do all he wills, but he is able also to will everything, even the logically contradictory. Most theologians, however, have pointed to several texts of Scripture that indicate otherwise:

"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged" (Heb. 6:17-18).

"If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for **he cannot deny himself**" (2 Tim. 2:13).

"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For **God cannot be tempted by evil**, nor does he tempt anyone" (Js. 1:13).

Charles Hodge, 19th century Princeton theologian, makes this observation:

"It is . . . involved in the very idea of power, that it has reference to the production of possible effects. It is no more a limitation of power that it cannot effect the impossible, than it is of reason that it cannot comprehend the absurd, or of infinite goodness that it cannot do wrong. It is contrary to its nature. Instead of exalting, it degrades God, to suppose that He can be other than He is, or that He can act contrary to infinite wisdom and love. When, therefore, it is said that God is omnipotent because He can do whatever He wills, it is to be remembered that His will is determined by His nature. **It is certainly no limitation to perfection to say that it cannot be imperfect**" (*Systematic Theology* I:409).

These would appear to be those things God *cannot* do: (1) the logically contradictory (God's *inability* to be illogical is prevented by his truth, righteousness, faithfulness, etc.); (2) immoral actions (again, because of his moral excellency and consistency); (3) actions appropriate to finite creatures; (4) actions denying his own nature as God; and (5) the alteration of his eternal plan.

In yet another sense it must be said that God *can*, in fact, do everything. When I say God can do everything, someone will respond by pointing out that God cannot do the logically absurd or self-contradictory. For example, this objector would say: "God cannot create a round triangle!" But a "round triangle" is a non-entity, a nothing. To say that "something" is round at the same time and in the same sense in which it is triangular is to utter a contradiction. Such contradictions do not exist, indeed cannot exist, in fact cannot even be conceived as existing. It is, of course, possible to conceive of the *proposition*, "Here is a round triangle." But it is not possible to conceive of a "round triangle" as actually existing. If you think you can conceive of one, describe it to me. What does a round triangle look like? What are its properties? Therefore, God's supposed "inability" to create a round triangle is not a result of his being limited by uncreated conditions in the universe. Rather, it is an inability to do nothing, since that is precisely what a round triangle is: nothing! And to say that God is unable to do a "nothing" is a meaningless assertion. Consequently, God can do *everything*, for "round triangles" are not "things" subject to being done.

Let us apply the preceding to the age-old conundrum: ***can God create a stone too heavy for God to lift?***

"If God can create the stone too heavy for God to lift, there is something God cannot do (namely, lift the stone). And if God cannot create the stone too heavy for him to lift, there is still something he cannot do (in this case, create the stone). Either God can or cannot create such a stone. Therefore, in either case, there is something God cannot do; and in either case, we seem forced to conclude that God is not omnipotent" (Ronald Nash, 47).

But again, for this objection to hold, it must propose a "thing," a genuine "task" for God to do. But it does not. The request that "*the Being who can do anything, which includes creating and lifting all stones, create a stone too heavy to be lifted by the Being who can lift any created thing*" is incoherent. It proposes nothing. It is a pseudo-task. That is to say, *a stone too heavy to be lifted by him who can lift all stones* is contradictory. Likewise, for God to create something which is a nothing (namely, a stone too heavy to be lifted by him who can lift all stones), is contradictory. That God cannot create a stone which logically cannot be created is no more a threat to omnipotence than his alleged "inability" to create a round triangle. Thus, praise be to God who can do all things!

Divine Immutability

A. *Immutability as Consistency of Character*

The immutability of God is related to, but clearly distinct from, his eternity. In saying that God is eternal, in the sense of everlasting, we mean that he always has and always will exist. He was preceded by nothing and shall be succeeded by nothing. In saying that God is immutable we mean that he is consistently the same in his eternal being. The Being, who eternally is, never changes. This affirmation of unchangeableness, however, is not designed to deny *that there is change and development in God's relations to his creatures*.

- We who were once his enemies are now by the grace of Christ his friends (Rom. 5:6-11).
- The God who declared his intention to destroy Nineveh for its sin did not carry through with that decree when the people repented.
- Furthermore, this affirmation of immutability must not be interpreted in such a way that the reality of the "Word become flesh" is threatened (John 1:14). We must acknowledge (our salvation depends upon it) that he who is in his eternal being very God became, in space-time history, very man. Yet the Word who became flesh did not cease to be the Word (no transubstantiation here!). The second person of the Trinity has taken unto himself or assumed a human nature, yet without alteration or reduction of his essential deity. He is now what he has always been: very God. He is now what he once was not: very man. He is now and forever will be both: the God-man.

Thus, to say without qualification that God cannot change or that he can and often does change is at best unwise, at worst misleading. Our concept of immutability must be formulated in such a way that we do justice to every biblical assertion concerning both the "being" and "becoming" of God.

Clearly, then, to say that God is immutable is not to say that he is immobile or static, for whereas all change is activity, not all activity is change. It is simply to affirm that God always is and acts in perfect harmony with the revelation of himself and his will in Scripture.

- For example, Scripture tells us that God is good, just, and loving. Immutability, or constancy, simply asserts that when the circumstances in any situation call for goodness, justice, or love as the appropriate response on the part of the Deity, that is precisely what God will be (or do, as the case maybe). To say the same thing, but negatively, if God ought to be good, just, or loving as the circumstances may demand, or as his promises would require, he will by no means ever be evil, unfair, or hateful.
- Immutability means that the God who in Scripture is said to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, has not, is not, and never will be under any and all imaginable circumstances, localized, ignorant, or impotent. What he is, he always is.

To be more specific, God is immutable in respect to his: (1) *essential being* (God can neither gain nor lose attributes); (2) *life* (God neither became nor is becoming; his life never began nor will it ever end); (3) *moral character* (God can become neither better nor worse); and (4) *purpose or plan* (God's decree is unalterable).

B. *Constancy of Being, Life, Character, and Plan*

1. *The immutability of God's Being* - Immutability is a property which belongs to the divine essence in the sense that God can neither gain new attributes, which he didn't have before, nor lose those already his. To put it crudely, *God doesn't grow*. There is no increase or decrease in the Divine Being. If God increases (either quantitatively or qualitatively), he was, necessarily, incomplete prior to the change. If God decreases, he is, necessarily, incomplete after the change. The Deity, then, is incapable of development either positively or negatively. He neither evolves nor devolves. His attributes, considered individually, can never be greater or less than what they are and have always been. God will never be wiser, more loving, more powerful, or holier than he ever has been and ever must be.

"I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14)

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

"I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (Mal. 3:6).

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

2. *The immutability of God's Life* - When we talk about the immutability of God's life we are very close to the notion of eternity or everlastingness. We are saying that God never began to be nor will ever cease to be. His life simply is. He did not come into existence (for to become existent is a change from nothing to something), nor will he go out of existence (for to cease existing is a change from something to nothing). God is not young or old: he is. Thus, we read:

"In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Ps. 102:25-27).

"Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps. 90:2; cf. 93:2).

3. *The immutability of God's Character* - Immutability may also be predicated of God's moral character. He can become neither better (morally) nor worse than what he is. If God could change (or become) in respect to his moral character, it would be either for the better or the worse. If for the better, it would indicate that he had been morally imperfect or incomplete antecedent to the time of change, and hence never God. If for the worse, it would indicate that he is now morally less perfect or complete, i.e., subsequent to the time of change, and hence no longer God. It will not do to say that God might conceivably change from one perfect being into another equally perfect being. For one must then specify in what sense he has changed. What constitutes God as different in the second mode of being from what he was in the first? Does he have more attributes, fewer attributes, better or worse attributes? If God in the second mode of being has the same attributes (both quantitatively and qualitatively), in what sense is he different from what he was in the first mode of being?

4. *The immutability of God's Plan* - To deny immutability to God's purpose or plan would be no less an affront to the Deity than to predicate change of his being, life, and character. There are, as I understand, only two reasons why God would ever be forced or need to alter his purpose:

(a) if he lacked the necessary foresight or knowledge to anticipate any and all contingencies (in which case he would not be omniscient; contrary to the claims of open theism); or

(b) assuming he had the needed foresight, he lacked the power or ability to effect what he had planned (in which case he would not be omnipotent).

But since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no error or oversight in the conception of his purpose. Also, since he is infinite in power (omnipotent), there can be no failure or frustration in the accomplishment of his purpose.

The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to his creatures, as well as the more conspicuous events of redemptive history, are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God's being or purpose. They are, rather, *the execution in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God*. For example, the abolition of the Mosaic Covenant was no change in God's will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of his will, *an eternal will which decreed change* (i.e., change from the Mosaic to the New Covenant). Christ's coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the Old Testament scheme. They were but the realization (historical and concrete) of what God had from eternity decreed.

"The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:10-11; cf. 110:4).

"The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand'" (Isa. 14:24).

"I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose' . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Isa. 46:9-11).

"Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isa. 48:8-11).

"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails" (Prov. 19:21).

"But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases" (Job 23:13).

"I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath" (Heb. 6:17).

Discussion Questions

- (1) As you read through the many biblical texts that describe God's sovereignty over nature, what counsel would you give to someone who has recently lost all their possessions, and perhaps a family member, in a tornado or earthquake?
- (2) Does God's sovereignty mean that he is the author or direct cause of evil? If not, why not?
- (3) What do you think of Jonathan Edwards's attempt to account for why God ordained that there be "evil" in the universe? Are you convinced? If not, why not? Would it be more helpful if one used the word "allowed" or "permitted" rather than "ordained"? Does this help resolve the problem? If not, why not?
- (4) Does God know with absolute certainty all your future choices? If so, why does this not empty your choices of moral accountability?
- (5) Read through the material on immutability. Define the term. Are you comforted and encouraged by this attribute? If not, why not?