

Lesson 2

The Attributes of God

I. Definition of an Attribute

The essence of God is His basic *substance*, an attribute is an essential *characteristic* that makes God a unique Being. It is an inherent quality of God that helps define who He is. For example, we say God is love, holy, eternal, and unchangeable. All of these describe qualities about Him, therefore, they are called attributes.

Although substance and attributes are distinct, they are inseparable and harsh lines of distinction should not be drawn.

The attributes of God have been categorized in many different ways. In this study we will divide them into *Incommunicable* and *Communicable* attributes.

"Communicable" means that something is capable of being transmitted or "shared". We speak of communicable diseases in this way. *Communicable* attributes are characteristics of God that can be shared with man to some degree. *Incommunicable* attributes are those characteristics of God that cannot be shared with man.

II. Incommunicable Attributes

A. Omnipresence

Basic Idea: God is present everywhere at the same time.
(This has already been discussed in lesson 1 under "Infinity")

B. Omniscience

Basic Idea: God knows everything perfectly. The past, present, and future are all present to Him.

Infinity with respect to knowledge is called omniscience. This means that God's knowledge is unlimited. It is all encompassing. He knows all things as they are; being as being, phenomena as phenomena, the possible as possible, the actual as actual, the necessary as necessary, the free as free, the past as past, the present as present, the future as future. Although all things are ever present in His view, yet He sees them as successive in time. The vast procession of events, thoughts, feelings, and acts, stands open to his view.

The omniscience of God follows from his omnipresence. Since God fills heaven and earth, all things occur in his presence. He knows our thoughts far better than they are

Basic Doctrine - God

(L2) - The Attributes of God

(Grace Fellowship - revised 3/31/12)

known to ourselves. This vastness of God's knowledge is taken for granted in all acts of worship. We pray to a God who, we believe, knows our condition and wants, who hears what we say, and who is able to meet all our needs. If God wasn't all-knowing, He could not adequately respond to our prayers or judge the world in righteousness.¹

READING:

Adapted from "The Omniscience of God"²

"Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. (Psalm. 147:5)

God's Knowledge and Ours

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, meaning 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.
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.

"If he [God] should wish to tell us the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the number of stars in the sky, he would not have to count them all quickly like some kind of giant computer, nor would he have to call the number to mind because it was something he had not thought about for a time. Rather, he knows all things at once. All of these facts and all other things that he knows are always fully present in his consciousness".³

3. *God's knowledge is independent, not dependent* - He does not receive his knowledge from anyone or anything outside of 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?" (Isaiah. 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". God is always correct in what he knows.

Basic Doctrine - God

(L2) - The Attributes of God

(Grace Fellowship - revised 3/31/12)

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.

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

"O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all."

- "Searching" is an anthropomorphic image (an image that gives human attributes to God). Searching ordinarily implies a measure of ignorance which is removed by observation; of course this is not the case with the Lord; but the meaning of the Psalmist is, that the Lord knows us thoroughly as if he had examined us minutely, and had pried into the most secret corners of our being".⁴
- David's choice of words is designed to encompass the totality of life's activities. God's knowledge extends to every posture, gesture, exercise, pursuit, state, and condition possible. "When I am active and when I am passive and everything in between . . . You know it all! My most common and casual acts, my most needful, and trivial moments . . . none escape Your eye!"
- Every emotion, feeling, idea, thought, conception, resolve, aim, doubt, motive, perplexity, and anxious moment lies before You like an open book. And You know all this "from afar"! The distance between heaven and earth by which men imagine God's knowledge to be hindered offers no obstacle.
- "All my ways", the idea that every step, every move, every journey, all are under His gaze. What possible hope of concealment is there when God knows what we will say before we do?
- Note especially the implications of verse 4 for divine foreknowledge: before we utter a word, God knows it all (thoroughly, completely, and accurately).

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" (Hebrews. 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 Chronicles. 28:9a).
- "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Proverbs. 15:3).
- "You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you" (Psalm. 69:5).
- "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'" (Jeremiah. 17:9-10; see also Jeremiah. 16:17; 1 Kings 8:39).
- "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew. 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!" (Proverbs. 15:11).
- "And they prayed, and said, 'You, Lord, who knows the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have 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'" (Ezekiel. 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" (Isaiah. 40:27-28).

As for God's knowledge of the inner man, see also:

John 2:25; 21:17; Jeremiah. 11:20; 32:19; Luke 16:15; Romans. 8:27
Psalm. 94:9-11; 1 Corinthians. 3:20; 1 Thessalonians. 2:4; Revelation. 2:23
1 Samuel. 16:7; Isaiah. 66:18; Deuteronomy 31:21; Matthew. 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 ; Psalm. 1:6; 33:13-15; 37:18; 119:168; Isaiah. 29:15; 1 Samuel. 2:3; Matthew. 10:30

Divine Foreknowledge

The foreknowledge of God means that God knows all things before they happen.

Among the objects of the divine knowledge are the free acts of men. The Scriptures abundantly teach that such acts are foreknown. If God is ignorant of how men will act, his knowledge must be limited, and it must be constantly increasing, which is altogether inconsistent with the true idea of his nature. His government of the world also, in that case, must be precarious, dependent, as it would be determined by the unforeseen conduct of men.⁵

The Wisdom of God

Wisdom and knowledge are intimately related. Wisdom is seen in the selection of proper ends, and of proper means for the accomplishment of those ends. As there is abundant evidence of design in the works of nature, so all the works of God declare his wisdom. They show, from the most minute to the greatest the manifestation of His own glory. So also, in the whole course of history, we see evidence of the controlling power of God making all things work together for the best interests of his people, and the promotion of His kingdom upon earth.⁶

Practical Implications

1. The omniscience of God should cause us to bow down in adoration.

A proper understanding of this divine attribute ought also to have a profound impact on our humility.

Consider how great it would be to know the thoughts and intentions, and works of one man from the beginning to the end of his life, and to foreknow it all before he was even born. How much greater is it to foreknow and know the thoughts and works of three or four men, or of a whole village or a neighborhood! It is greater still to know the imaginations and actions of many millions in all quarters of the world, every one of them having millions of thoughts, desires, designs, affections, and actions!

Let this attribute, then, make the blessed God honorable in our eyes and adorable in all our affections. . . . *Adore God for this wonderful perfection!*⁷

2. Secondly, omniscience ought also to have a profound impact on our holiness.

Knowing that God sees our every move and knows our every thought should cause us to fear sin. But what is even more glorious is that this doctrine which makes us fearful of sin is also the foundation of comfort and assurance. If God is omniscient, then he knows the worst about us, but loves us notwithstanding! The apostle John writes: "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything" (1 John 3:19-20).

Basic Doctrine - God

(L2) - The Attributes of God

(Grace Fellowship - revised 3/31/12)

¹ adapted from Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, volume 1

² Sam Storms, Dec 24, 2006, *Series: Attributes of God*

³ (Grudem, 191)

⁴ (Spurgeon, 258)

⁵ Adapted from Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, volume 1

⁶ Adapted from Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, volume 1

⁷ (Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, pp. 239-40)