

## Chapter 11: The Character of God: “Incommunicable” Attributes How is God different from us?

### A) Introduction to the Study of God’s Character (156-160)

#### 1) Classifying God’s Attributes

a) Most common classification system: communicable v. incommunicable attributes

i) This system is imperfect because even the communicable attributes (e.g. love, joy, mercy) are possessed by humans imperfectly; and we possess the incommunicable attributes to a certain degree.

#### 2) The Names of God in Scripture

a) In the Bible a person’s name is a description of his or her character; so in a broad sense God’s “name” is equal to all that the Bible and creation tell us about God.

b) All of creation reveals something about God to us.

#### ■ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*:

God is compared to a lion (Isa. 31:4), an eagle (Deut. 32:11), a lamb (Isa. 53:7), a hen (Matt. 23:37), the sun (Ps. 84:11), the morning star (Rev. 22:16), a light (Ps. 27:1), a torch (Rev. 21:23), a fire (Heb. 12:29), a fountain (Ps. 36:9), a rock (Deut. 32:4), a hiding place (Ps. 199:114), a tower (Prov. 18:10), a shadow (Ps. 91:1), a shield (Ps. 84:11), a temple (Rev. 21:22), and so forth.

God is called bridegroom (Isa. 61:10), husband (Isa. 54:5), father (Deut. 32:6), judge, and king (Isa. 33:22), man of war (Exod. 15:3), builder and maker (Heb. 11:10), shepherd (Ps. 23:1), physician (Exod. 15:26), and so forth. Furthermore, God is spoken of in terms of human actions such as knowing (Gen. 18:21), remembering (Gen. 8:1; Exod. 2:24), seeing (Gen. 1:10), hearing (Exod. 2:24), smelling (Gen. 8:21), tasting (Ps. 11:4-5), sitting (Ps. 9:7), rising (Ps. 68:1), walking (Lev. 26:12), wiping away tears (Isa. 25:8), and so forth.

c) All that Scripture says about God uses *anthropomorphic* language—that is, language that speaks of God in human terms.

d) God made the universe so that it would show forth the excellence of his character.

Psalm 148:1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars!

7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, 8 fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! 9 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! 10 Beasts and all livestock, creeping things

and flying birds! 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Psalm 148:13 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven.

Isaiah 43:7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Revelation 4:11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

- c) All that Scripture says about God uses *anthropomorphic* language — that is, language that speaks of God in human terms.
- d) God made the universe so that it would show forth the excellence of his character.
  - e) Though all that Scripture tells us is true, it does not give us an exhaustive picture of God's character, therefore we will never know God's full or complete "name."

## B) The Incommunicable Attributes of God (160-180)

- 1) Independence (aseity/ self-existence) (160-163)  
(Latin: *a se* = "from himself")

Definition: God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify him and bring him joy.

Acts 17:24-25: The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Job 41:11: Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.

Ps. 50:10-12: For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

- i) God did not create human beings in order to make up for a deficiency in himself.

John 17:5, 24: And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Application: → God did not need to create you!

ii) God exists by virtue of his very nature; he was never created and never came into being.

→ nothing else in the universe has ever had this characteristic, or ever will ("necessary existence")

Rev. 4:11: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

Ps. 90:2: Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Ex. 3:14: God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.' "

iii) Although God is totally content in himself, he nonetheless does receive glory and have joy as a result of his creation.

Isa. 43:7: everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

1 Cor. 10:31: do all for the glory of God

Isa. 62:3-5: You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Zeph. 3:17-18: The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach.

If God is absolutely independent, and has no need of any of us or of the creation, then what gives you significance?

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→ God decided that you would be important to him!

Isa. 43:7: everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

## 2) Unchangeableness (immutability) (163-168)

a) God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.

### i) Being and Perfections

Ps. 102:25-27: Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.

Mal. 3:6: For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children 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 there is no variation or shadow due to change.

### ii) Purposes

Ps. 33:11: The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

Eph. 1:4: even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love

Isa. 46:9-11: remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; 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,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

### iii) Promises

Num. 23:19: God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

1 Sam. 15:29: And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.

### b) Does God sometimes change his mind?

Jonah 3:4, 10: Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"  
10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

→ What changed in the situation?

→ God does respond differently to different situations!

(What if he didn't?)

b) Does God sometimes change his mind?

Exodus 32:9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you." 11 But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

→ What changed in the situation?

Gen. 6:6: And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

→ God's previous actions led to events that in the short term (in the present) caused him sorrow – but in the long term would accomplish his good purposes.

→ These instances should all be understood as true expressions of God's present attitude or intention with respect to the situation as it exists at the moment.

c) The Question of God's "Impassibility"

i) Some theologians have denied that God has passions or emotions.

ii) However, the Bible seems to consistently affirm that God has emotions.

Isa. 62:5: For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Ps. 78:40: How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!

Ex. 32:10: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

Ps. 103:13: As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

Isa. 54:8: In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer.

d) The challenge from process theology

Process theology asserts that process and change are essential aspects of genuine existence, and that therefore God must be changing over time also, just like everything else that exists.

Charles Hartshome (1897-2000): U Chicago, Emory, U Texas: God is continually adding to himself all the experiences in the universe, and thus God is constantly changing in his being.

Process theology gains appeal from its answer to the question of how we can have ultimate meaning: we change the being of God!

Two wrong assumptions:

(1) That significance comes from changing God, rather than from God's counting us significant

(2) That God has to be like the universe:

Heb. 1:10-12: And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end."

e) The God of the Bible is both infinite and personal

→ all other religions have one or the other: a personal god who is weak and finite (Greek mythology; tribal religions; and now, process theology) or an infinite god who is not personal (pantheism)

No evangelicals have advocated process theology, but → "open theism" has some similarities because it says that God changes in his knowledge (he learns what will happen when it happens)

f) The importance of God's unchangeableness

→ What would it be like if God could change?

-- in his being? (better? worse?) (evil?)

-- in his purposes? (what will happen in the future?)

-- in his promises? (can really trust him for eternal life?)

→ God's unchangeableness is absolutely important for everything we believe about him, for all our faith

IMMORTAL, INVISIBLE, GOD ONLY WISE,  
IN LIGHT INACCESSIBLE HID FROM OUR EYES,  
MOST BLESSED, MOST GLORIOUS, THE ANCIENT OF DAYS,  
ALMIGHTY, VICTORIOUS, THY GREAT NAME WE PRAISE.

UNRESTING, UNHASTING, AND SILENT AS LIGHT,  
NOR WANTING, NOR WASTING, THOU RULEST IN MIGHT;  
THY JUSTICE LIKE MOUNTAINS HIGH SOARING ABOVE  
THY CLOUDS WHICH ARE FOUNTAINS OF GOODNESS AND LOVE.

GREAT FATHER OF GLORY, PURE FATHER OF LIGHT,  
THINE ANGELS ADORE THEE, ALL VEILING THEIR SIGHT;  
ALL PRAISE WE WOULD RENDER; O HELP US TO SEE  
'TIS ONLY THE SPLENDOR OF LIGHT HIDETH THEE!

AUTHOR: WALTER CHALMERS SMITH, 1824-1908

### 3) Eternity (168-173)

a) God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time.

b) God is timeless in his own being.

Ps 90:2: Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Job 36:26: Behold, God is great, and we know him not; the number of his years is unsearchable.

John 8:58: Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

Col. 1:16: For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

c) God see all time equally vividly.

Ps. 90:4: For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as , a watch in the night.

2 Pet. 3:8: But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Isa. 46:9-10: remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; 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,'

d) God sees events in time and acts in time.

Gal. 4:4-5: But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Acts 17:30-31: The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

e) We will always exist in time.

Rev. 22:2, 5: through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

4) Omnipresence (173-177)

a) God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.

b) God is present everywhere.

Ps. 139:7-10: Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

Jer. 23:23-24: "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord.

c) God does not have spatial dimensions.

1 Kings 8:27: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

Acts 7:48: Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

d) God can be present to punish, to sustain, or to bless.

Amos 9:1-4: I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said: "Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword; not one of them shall flee away; not one of them shall escape. "If they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Camel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them; and I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good."



Col. 1:17: And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Heb. 1:3: He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

1 Sam. 4:4: So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

Rev. 21:3: And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

2 Cor. 3:17: Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Rom. 8:9-10: You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

#### 5) Unity (Simplicity) (177-180)

a) God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times.

i) When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than all the rest.

1 John 1:5: This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

1 John 4:8: Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Ex. 34:6-7: The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

ii) God's being is not a collection of attributes added together.

iii) God's attributes are not additions to his real being.

iv) Every attribute of God also qualifies every other attribute.