
Title: What is God Like?

Series: Speaking of God

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Introduction Just as Scripture is the highest source of information about itself, God is the highest source of **information** about himself. Why is that? It's much like we talked about last week when we said that if an appeal to some higher authority were used to prove that Christ is who He says He is, or that the Bible is God's Word, then the Bible itself would not be our highest or absolute authority: it would be subordinate in authority to whatever or whoever to which we make our appeal to prove He is Christ or that it is God's Word.

The same is true about God. If there was a higher source of information about God, then God wouldn't be God.

God Exists

Scripture simply **assumes** God exists. What does Genesis 1:1 say? "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth". Does Genesis 1:1 attempt to prove that there is a God? Proving that God exists takes a backseat to presuming God exists. There is a large segment of our evangelicalism that doesn't believe this. There is a belief that in order to legitimize Christianity as a belief system one must prove that God exists. While it is true that we must be able to answer questions for those who are searching, it is also true that we need not agonize over whether or not we can prove that God exists. The scriptures don't even attempt to prove the existence of God.

Not only do the scriptures presume the existence of God, so does human nature. Scripture tells us that all persons everywhere have an inner sense that God **exists**, that they are his creatures, and that he is their Creator. Romans 1:18-22 tells us that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**.¹⁹ For **what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them**.²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been **clearly perceived**, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So **they are without excuse**.²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator..."

There are those who do not acknowledge that God exists because they have exchanged the truth about God for a lie. They are self-absorbed, worshipping and serving the creature. Nothing the Bible says about a lack of belief is more controversial than the implications of what it is saying about atheists in this passage. This passage tells us that there's

no such thing as an atheist. There are only self-declared atheists. This passage tells us that all men innately know there is a God. Thus, a person who says he is an atheist, ultimately, is delusional. It isn't true. He has exchanged the truth for a lie. Now, in our relationship building and our conversations, we don't have to necessarily begin there with them. Paul didn't walk onto the Mars Hill platform and declare his audience delusional for having a multiplicity of gods. But one can engage the atheist in confidence, knowing full well that the atheist does believe there's a God, even though he doesn't acknowledge it.

Not only does every creature have an innate sense that God exists, every created thing gives evidence of God and his character. The image of God in man evidences to man himself not only that God exists, thus affirming what he innately knows, but it also evidences what God is like. Some of the characteristics of God that we study this week are known as communicable attributes. These are attributes that God has communicated to or has given to the creature. The creature shows what the Creator is like.

God Is Independent

God's independence means he doesn't actually **need** us or anything else in creation for anything. Every once in awhile, you'll hear someone suggest that God needed us because he wanted someone with whom he could have fellowship or communion. Or some are more blatant when they suggest that God made man because he was lonely. This is simply false. God did not create us because he was lonely or needed fellowship with other people. God always has been perfectly and completely **happy** and fulfilled in his personal existence. When Paul was in the Areopagus on Mars Hill, in Acts 17:24 he said this:

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.”

God is not a needy God. He is not dependent on anyone for anything. Because he is God, he cannot be dependent on anyone or anything. What would happen if he were dependent on anyone or anything? If God were dependent on anyone or anything for anything, including communion and happiness, the object of that dependence would then be “God” and God would cease to be God. God answers to no one. God is not **subject** to any of the creature or creation's limitations or wills.

In his book *The Pleasures of God*, John Piper says this in a way only John Piper could say it: “God is not constrained by any inner deficiency or unhappiness to do anything he does not want to do. If God were unhappy, if he were in some way deficient, then he might indeed be constrained from outside in some way to do what he does not want to do, in order to make up his deficiency and finally to be happy...He has been complete and overflowing with satisfaction from all eternity. He needs no education. No one can offer anything to him that doesn't already come from him. For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be re-

paid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11:34–36) So no one can bribe God or coerce him in any way.” (John Piper, “The Pleasures of God”, pp. 48,49)

However, though God is completely independent, he also chooses to give us **value** and **significance**. Our value is not “in us”. Our value is completely external to us. We do not create our own value. We must have our value and significance given to us. And we do not exist for ourselves, but we exist for God’s glory. Isaiah 43:7 says “⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

God Is Omniscient

God, infallibly and exhaustively, knows **everything** (1 John 3:20) in all times, from all eternity, and his knowledge neither increases nor decreases. He knows all things that exist and all that happens. Hebrews 4:13 tells us, “no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

God knows all things **actual** and **possible**, including the thoughts and actions of His conscious creatures, past, present, and future. Not only does God know all the events that have actually happened, God also knows all of the events that could have happened.

It is increasingly important, in a day when this is being denied, for us to point out that this infallible and exhaustive knowledge of everything in the future includes our decision-making. Nothing surprises God, including the decisions of His creatures. When the council of Jerusalem met in the early church to figure out what to do with the Gentiles who were embracing Jesus Christ, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, James (who also happened to be Jesus’ half-brother) points back to the Old Testament prophecies that talk about the emergence of Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation. And he quotes a passage out of Isaiah 45. And this is what he says, “¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸known from of old.’ ¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:14-19). The Gentile decisions being made to embrace Christ were determined and known long before Isaiah and long before James and the early church. If God has declared all things from the beginning to the end, he knows all of those things.

There is an error that has been creeping into our American churches called “open theism”. Open theism says God is in a process of learning. God can be surprised. God doesn’t know all things about the future. It’s an idea that has been around in liberal Christianity for a long time. Some there believe that God is in the process of becoming God. But over the last few years, the idea that God can learn and doesn’t know everything about the future, especially decisions made by creatures who are *independent* of God, has found its way into conservative Christianity. The testimony of these passages

and others like them tell us that the decisions of the creature cannot be separated out from the rest of what God knows.

God Is Good

God is the final standard of good. All that God does is and does is good and **worthy** of approval. There is no higher standard of goodness than God's own character and his approval of whatever is consistent with that character. We see this from the very beginning of Creation when God "saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Because God is the ultimate standard of goodness, he is also the ultimate **source** of all goodness. James tells us, "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" (James 1:17). It's interesting that that verse ties God's goodness to his unchangeableness. God is unchangeably good.

The two main ways that God's goodness has been manifested to us as creatures, especially in the way that the Bible tells us about it, is in God's **mercy** and **grace**. Mercy is God's goodness that is given to those who deserve otherwise or not getting what I deserve. Grace is God's goodness given to those who don't deserve that goodness or getting what I don't deserve.

Mercy and grace are God's goodness granted to the fallen creature through His love. God's relationship with Adam in the garden did not include grace or mercy because Adam was not yet fallen. God displayed his goodness to Adam, but it wasn't grace or mercy. We experience grace and mercy from God in his goodness to us because we are fallen creatures that deserve hell and punishment for our rebellion and don't deserve communion with God and eternal glory with Him. God's love is inseparable from His goodness and we experience that love through his goodness to us in mercy and grace.

God Is Holy

What does it mean to be holy? When we speak of God's holiness we speak of the fact that he is totally "other". He is *not* a creature. He is separated from the creature in his being, in his perfection, in his glory, and in his righteousness. We as creatures tend to emphasize God's separateness from sin because that is how we *experience* God's holiness. God's holiness means that he is **separated** from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor. God tells Moses to tell the Israelites in Leviticus 19, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." God's holiness carries with it the expectation that we too are to be holy in the sense of being separate from sin. John writes about this lack of any hint of sin when he says "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

God Is Righteous and Just

Deuteronomy 32:4 tells us that God's "...work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Because God is the final

standard of what is true and right, God always acts in accordance with what is **right**. God is not only a God of love, but He is also a God of justice. God is our Ultimate Judge in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ always does what is right as our ruler and judge.

This tends to be an understated characteristic of God's relationship with His creatures. God doesn't just deal with men out of a position of love. This was true in the garden. God's justice was a part of God's mandate to not eat of the tree. From the beginning of time, justice and love are parallel themes coursing through scripture and most of the time, they are in view *together*. Where there is one, there is the other. Two sides of the same coin.

Because God is righteous and just, he must treat people as they **deserve**. God's justice demands that sin be punished. This is why we tend to understate God's justice. We, the fallen creatures, do not like to think about its implications. No sin ever goes unpunished. The fact that creatures experience God's mercy and grace comes at the expense of Christ's having taken the punishment on our behalf. Someone will be punished for our sin... either we will be punished, or Christ has been punished for us as the recipient of God's justice.

Because God is all powerful, and because he is perfectly just, eventually all things will be made right. He will bring about justice. In the end, there will be justice. If there is no ultimate justice, God ceases to be God. We cannot accuse God of being unfair. Our sense of fairness is tied to our viewpoint of *time*. But God's understanding of time (as its owner) and our understanding of time are not necessarily the same thing. There are things that look unjust and look unfair. There is a point in the future where the seeming unjustness of life will be made right.

God Wills What He Will

Ephesians 1 tells us that God is always working to bring about his purposes according to His will (Ephesians 1:11). Isaiah 46:8-13 is a passage that is quoted by James in the book of Acts: ⁸“Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹ remember the former things of old; for **I am God, and there is no other**; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ **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,**’ ¹¹ 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.** ¹² “Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness: ¹³ I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.”

Nothing happens outside of God's will. If something happens, it was God's will that it happened. God's will is the ultimate **reason** for everything that happens. God's will is the way that God approves, **determines**, and declares to bring about every action necessary for the existence of and activity of himself and all his creation. God's will is how he chooses to do what he does and doesn't do. And God's will will not be thwarted.

This is a difficult area for us to consider because of how we, as fallen creatures, tend to interpret what we see of that Will in our world. There are a lot of not so nice things that happen in our world. How is it that a good God could find a place in His Will for 9-11? The Bible does not fully explain the answer to that question. Christ tells us that when these questions arise from trying to understand God's Will, it is God's Will for us to "repent" of our sin (Luke 13:1-4).

At the same time, this understanding of God's Will is a comfort to those of us who are the recipients of God's grace and mercy. Jesus Christ is the focal point of God's will for us. And it is in Christ that we find God's Will at work on our behalf. This is the gist of that last verse in Isaiah 46 that we read: ¹³ "I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory."

God Is Omnipotent

When God visits Abraham in his tent by the oaks at Mamre to tell him of the imminent conception and birth of his son Isaac, the big question is how this will happen since Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 89. God nips the speculation in the bud with this not so rhetorical question: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Genesis 18:14). Interestingly, Jeremiah, hundreds of years later answers the question in Jeremiah 32:17 when he says "Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you."

What do we mean by God's "omnipotence"? We mean that He is all **powerful**. God can do anything that He wants. And it means that he has the ability to carry out every last detail of His will that he has declared from the end to the beginning. There are no limits on what he decides to do. Christ tells about salvation that "with God, all things are possible", and the reason Christ says that in Matthew 19, is that He is the One that will bring it to pass.

This also has implications for us that we tend to want to bury under the rug. Not only can God do whatever He please, God does do whatever he pleases. God does whatever **pleases** himself for His own glory (Ephesians 1:13; Psalm 135:6). This just might be a summary of everything that we have discussed, especially as it relates to God's will and what he is working to bring about to pass, even in our lives. God answers to no one. God is out for whatever glorifies Himself. The reason we have such a hard time with this is because we are fallen creatures in which self-centeredness is the result of our sin. It is not sin with God. The ultimate meaning for our lives is to glorify God through His Son, Jesus Christ, because it is God's own pursuit of His own glory through His Son, Jesus Christ.