

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD – JOEL BIDDERMAN

Prelude:

“If, at mid-day, we either look down to the ground, or on the surrounding objects which lie open to our view, we think ourselves endued with a very strong and piercing eyesight; but when we look up to the sun, and gaze at it unveiled, the sight which did excellently well for the earth is instantly so dazzled and confounded by the refulgence, as to oblige us to confess that our acuteness in discerning terrestrial objects is mere dimness when applied to the sun.” (John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. Book 1, Chapter 1)

I. OUR GREATEST DESIRE

- A. Whether we know it or not, each of us has deep within us a longing to know God. We were created to know Him (Col 1:16). The deep places within us call out to the deep places in God, to behold Him and to know Him.
- B. **Phi 3:8** What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of *knowing Christ* Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...
- C. **“The child, the philosopher, and the religionist have all one question, ‘What is God like?’ ...it cannot be answered except to say that God is not like anything; that is, He is not exactly like anything or anybody.”** (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 6)
 - 1. The story of the blind men and the elephant illustrates our predicament. As soon as we say that God is *like* something, we are mistaken, because God is not like any other. He is completely and totally holy, completely and totally “other than.” When we gaze on Him the issue is not that God’s being is subjective, but rather that our ability to comprehend Him is weak and flawed.
 - 2. **Isaiah 40:18** To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?
 - 3. **Psalms 89:6** For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD ? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings?
 - 4. **Isaiah 46:5** "To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?"

II. BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING

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- A. **Transcendence (tran-scen-dent)** Surpassing others; preeminent or supreme. Lying beyond the ordinary range of perception.
- B. **“There is a vast gulf, an all but infinite gulf, fixed between that which is God and that which is not God-between the great I AM and all created things, from the archangel down to the tiniest virus that cannot be seen with the naked eye. God made all that and is just as high above one as the other. God’s uncreated quality of life causes Him to be transcendent, to rise high above all creatures.”** (A.W.Tozer, *The Attributes of God: volume 2*, Wing Spread Publishers, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, 2001. p. 37)
- C. Mankind has a problem
1. **Job 36:26** "Behold, God is great, and *we do not know Him...*"
 - a. Elihu is correcting the misconception of both Job and his friends in assuming that they had an accurate picture of God and who He is.
 - b. Elihu points out that their doctrine is wrong because their theology (study of who God is) is wrong...they hold misconceptions of who God really is.
 - c. God confirms that Elihu had correctly identified the root of the problem when He addresses Job: **Job 38:1-2** Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: (2) “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words *without knowledge?*”
 2. The problem is even bigger than a lack of proper knowledge, because not only is Elihu pointing out that we do not know God, he is also pointing out that God *cannot be known*: **Job 36:26** *How great is God--beyond our understanding!* The number of his years is past finding out.
- D. As Matthew Henry points out in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, **“We know that He is, but not what He is. We know what He is not, but not what He is.”**
- E. This is what it means that God is transcendent. Our finite minds are incapable of understanding the infinite God. If we worshipped a God that we fully understood, then we would be worshipping a finite God. The fact that God is infinite demands that we will never fully understand Him or know Him with our finite minds.

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- F. **“God is spirit, and to Him magnitude and distance have no meaning. To us they are useful as analogies and illustrations, so God refers to them constantly when speaking down to our limited understanding. The words of God as found in Isaiah, ‘Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity,’ give a distinct impression of altitude, but that is because we who dwell in a world of matter, space, and time tend to think in material terms and can grasp abstract ideas only when they are identified in some way with material things. In its struggle to free itself from the tyranny of the natural world, the human heart must learn to translate upward the language the Spirit uses to instruct us.”** (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 69)
- G. There is a reverent fear as we approach God. Proper knowledge of God stirs awe as well as Holy dread, and as we abandon ourselves to God, we will find ourselves in love with One who is terribly wonderful, and Who is awe-fully good.
1. **“When we meet God we also have a sense of weakness. I don’t think you will ever be strong until you know how utterly weak you are. And you will never know how utterly weak you are until you have stood in the presence of that great plentitude of strength, that great fullness of infinite power that we call God. When for an awful, happy, terrible, wonderful moment the eyes of our heart have gazed upon the transcendent God, high and lifted up with His train filling the temple, then we will know how weak we are.”** (A.W.Tozer, *The Attributes of God: volume 2*, Wing Spread Publishers, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, 2001. p. 46)
 2. **Isaiah 6:1-5** In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:
"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."
- At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.
- "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."**

III. UNSEARCHABLE IN GREATNESS

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- A. **Psalm 145:3** Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; *His greatness no one can fathom.*
1. A fathom is a measure approximating the span of a man's arms. To say that no one can fathom God's greatness means that we cannot measure His greatness or get our arms around it.
 2. To fathom also means "to try in depth." No matter how far we drop the anchor into the sea of the greatness of God, the anchor will never touch bottom.
- B. **Psalm 145:3** Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; And *His greatness is unsearchable.* (NKJV)
1. When we endeavor to comprehend and search out the greatness of God, we immediately run into a brick wall, because we find ourselves trying to fathom that which is above created order, while having only created order to use as our frame of reference. It is like trying to measure a five-dimensional object using only a ruler.
 2. Tozer says, "**...the Holy Scriptures... (are) often a revelation of a world above nature, and the minds for which they were written... (are) a part of nature**" and continues, "**It is not possible for the mind to crash suddenly past the familiar into the totally unfamiliar.**" (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 6)
 3. It is akin to trying to explain the color green to a blind man or explain the smell of roses to the one with no sense of smell.
- C. Ezekiel ran into this very problem in trying to describe his encounter with the God of the Universe. As you read Ezekiel 1, you notice the awkward language that he uses in trying to describe the heavenly realm which came crashing into his world. The closer that Ezekiel comes to the throne, the more difficulty he has describing what he sees.

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1. Ezekiel 1:26-28 And above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; ***on the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it.*** (27) Also from the appearance of His waist and upward I saw, as it were, the color of amber with the appearance of fire all around within it; and from the appearance of His waist and downward I saw, ***as it were, the appearance*** of fire with brightness all around. (28) ***Like the appearance*** of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day, ***so was the appearance of the brightness*** all around it. This was ***the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.*** So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.
2. “...the wall (is) infinitely high, that separates That-which-is-God from that-which-is-not-God. To think of creature and Creator as alike in essential being is to rob God of most of His attributes and reduce Him to the status of a creature. ... When we try to imagine what God is like we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God.” (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 7 & 8)

IV. UNSEARCHABLE IN POWER

A. **Job 26:7-14** He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing. (8) He wraps up the waters in his clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight. (9) He covers the face of the full moon, spreading his clouds over it. (10) He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters for a boundary between light and darkness. (11) The pillars of the heavens quake, aghast at his rebuke. (12) By his power he churned up the sea; by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces. (13) By his breath the skies became fair; his hand pierced the gliding serpent. (14) And ***these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?***”

1. If the created universe is what His faintest whisper looks like, what will the thunder of His power look like???? If His faintest whisper inspires profound awe within us, what will be the result of His thundering in power?
2. It is as if we are standing on the edge of a great, magnificent, awe-inspiring canyon that has no bottom to it, so no matter how awesome is the appearance of what we see, we know that there is infinitely more that we do not see.

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3. It is much like peering into the farthest reaches of the universe. We are overwhelmed with beauty, yet we know that beyond the edges of the universe, there is infinitely more that we cannot hope to know or understand in this life.
 4. The hurricane, tsunami, earthquake, and volcano are only the faintest whisper of His power!! What we call thunder, which shakes the foundations of the earth, is actually only a whisper.
 5. God could emit the power of a billion Hiroshimas without even starting to put a strain on His power grid. If all of the nuclear weapons in existence were detonated today, the earth would still remain, yet if God were to stop holding the planet together, it would immediately cease to exist. How could we ever grasp the greatness of His power?
 6. Before the Universe was ever created, God was infinite and had existed for eternity. The Universe is in no way the extent of the working of His power, but only the faintest whisper.
- B. Matthew Henry observes in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, “**What we know of God is nothing in comparison with what is in God and what God is.**”
- C. Because God is infinite, no matter how much we learn and know of Him, there is always *more* of Him that we have *not* learned and do *not* know of Him than that which we do know. In fact, there is always *infinitely more* to know of Him!

V. UNSEARCHABLE IN UNDERSTANDING

- A. **Isa 40:26-28** Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. (27) Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? (28) Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and *his understanding no one can fathom*.
- B. Isaiah is saying, “How in the world can you think that your way is hidden from God? He created everything that exists, He’s been around from eternity past, and He never gets tired or runs out of energy. The problem is not that God has forgotten about you, the problem is that your limited mind cannot possibly grasp the vastness of God’s understanding.”

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- C. God understands everything in creation because He created it through His own understanding. There is not a puzzle that He cannot solve. There is no dilemma so great that He doesn't know the solution. He never replies to our inquiries, "I'm not quite following you." His wisdom and understanding are unlimited.
- D. God's insight is unlimited. He understands us better than we understand ourselves.

VI. UNSEARCHABLE IN HIS JUDGMENTS AND HIS WAYS

- A. **Rom 11:33-36** Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! *How unsearchable* his judgments, and his paths *beyond tracing out!* (34) "*Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?*" (35) "*Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?*" (36) For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.
- B. **Job 37:5** God's voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things *beyond our understanding*.
- C. **Ecc 3:11** He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet *they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end*.
- D. All of these verses point out that we are incapable of understanding the ways of God. We are unable to predict His next move. We know that He is motivated by perfect love and perfect justice, but since we do not know perfect love and perfect justice ourselves, we cannot predict God's actions in a given situation.

VII. HIDDEN FROM OUR SIGHT

- A. **Job 34:29** But if he remains silent, who can condemn him? *If he hides his face, who can see him?*
 - 1. **Psa 97:2** *Clouds and thick darkness surround him*; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
 - 2. **Psa 77:19** Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, *though your footprints were not seen*.
 - 3. **1Ti 1:17** Now to the King eternal, immortal, *invisible*, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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4. God is invisible. If He hides Himself, we have no chance of finding Him. Though He were to walk in our very midst, we could not follow His footsteps.
 5. How can we pretend that we have gotten a firm grasp of God when we cannot even find Him when He hides Himself?
- B. **Col 1:16** For *by him* all things *were created: things* in heaven and on earth, visible and *invisible*, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.
1. Not only is God invisible, but He has created an entire realm that is invisible. God has created a dimension that we are completely incapable of measuring, comprehending, or even viewing.
 2. Albert Barnes puts it this way in his *Notes on the Bible*, “**With all the advances which have been made in science, it is still true that we see but a small part of his works. What we are enabled to trace with all the aids of science, compared with what is unseen and unknown, may be like the analysis of a single drop of water compared with the ocean.**”
 3. If we cannot even search out the created invisible realm, how can we ever search out the invisible Creator?

VIII. BEYOND OUR REACH

- A. **Job 37:23** *The Almighty is beyond our reach* and exalted in power...
- B. **1Ti 6:15-16** ...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, (16) *who alone is immortal* and who *lives in unapproachable light*, whom *no one has seen or can see*.
- C. Even if God were always visible, we would not be able to apprehend Him, for He is beyond our reach. Even if our arms were long enough to reach Him, we would be unable to take hold of Him, for He dwells in unapproachable light.
- D. The fact that God cannot be apprehended causes uneasiness within us. As Tozer says, “**Left to ourselves, we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him.**” (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 8)

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- E. In our efforts to have a God that we can use, we minimize God in every attribute. We must renew our minds with the understanding that God is beyond the reach of mankind. When we rightly understand the unapproachable nature of God, we will once again be worshipping a God who cannot be bribed or extorted.

IX. KNOWING THE UNKNOWNABLE AND SEEING THE INVISIBLE

- A. **Eph 3:17-19** ... I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, (18) may have power, together with all the saints, *to grasp* how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, (19) and *to know* this love that *surpasses knowledge--* that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.
1. Paul here points out a great paradox of faith. Though the love of God surpasses knowledge, though we cannot apprehend God, Paul prays that the Ephesians would never-the-less grasp, take hold of, and know this love of God.
 2. God can supernaturally enable us to take hold of that which cannot be held and to know that which surpasses knowledge.
- B. **Col 2:2-3** that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, *to the knowledge of the mystery of God*, both of the Father and of Christ, (3) *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*.
1. All wisdom and knowledge are hidden in God. If we want knowledge of God, the only source of that knowledge is God Himself.
 2. When we want to know an inanimate object, we go to a source other than the object itself in order to get to know it. When we want to know a living creature that cannot communicate, we go to other sources in order to get to know it. When we want to know a person, we go to that person to get to know them, yet we may not be able to trust everything that the person reveals about himself. We may still seek out other sources to get to understand the person better. But there is no better source of information about God than God Himself. There *is* no other source of information about God than that which comes from God Himself, for He holds all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

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C. **1Co 2:9-12** However, as it is written: "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him*"-- (10) but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. *The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.* (11) For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (12) *We have* not received the spirit of the world but *the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand* what God has freely given us.

1. What the eye cannot see, what the ear cannot hear, what the mind cannot conceive, the Spirit of God within us *will* reveal to us.
2. Even the deepest mysteries of who God is are available to us...but only through the Spirit. There is a seeking in the Spirit, a searching in the Spirit, that allows us to find that which cannot be found and understand that which cannot be understood.

X. SEARCHING OUT THE UNSEARCHABLE – THE RELATIONAL ALMIGHTY

A. **Jer 33:3** '*Call to me and I will* answer you and *tell you* great and *unsearchable things* you do not know.'

B. **Proverbs 2:1-6** My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, (2) turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, (3) and if you *call out* for insight and *cry aloud* for understanding, (4) and if you *look for it* as for silver and *search for it* as for hidden treasure, (5) then you will understand *the fear of the LORD* and find *the knowledge of God*. (6) For *the LORD gives wisdom*, and *from his mouth come knowledge* and understanding.

C. God has given us an astounding promise: we *will* find the un-findable knowledge of God, we *will* be enabled to search out the unsearchable things, *if* we call out, cry aloud, look, and search as ones desperate for treasure.

1. **Acts 17:27-28** God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, *though he is not far from each one of us*. (28) '*For in him we live and move and have our being...*'
2. The One who is completely beyond our reach places Himself within our reach because He desires to be found. He longs to be pursued and apprehended. He desires to be known.

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XI. DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

- A. “‘What is God like?’ If by that question we mean ‘What is God like *in Himself?*’ there is no answer. If we mean ‘What has God disclosed *about Himself* that the reverent reason can comprehend?’ there is, I believe, an answer both full and satisfying. ... He in condescending love has by revelation declared certain things to be true of Himself. These we call His attributes.” (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 11)
- B. “By (the word attribute) is meant simply whatever may be correctly ascribed to God. ...an attribute is whatever God has in any way revealed as being true of Himself.” (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 12)
- C. God gives us several avenues for ascertaining His attributes:
1. Through Creation: **Rom 1:20** For since the creation of the world *God's invisible qualities*--his *eternal power* and *divine nature*--*have been* clearly seen, being *understood from what has been made*, so that men are without excuse.
 2. Through the character and nature of Jesus: **Col 1:15** *He is the image of the invisible God*, the firstborn over all creation *and 2Co 4:6-7* For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*. (7) But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is *from God and not from us*.
 3. Through Revelation in the Spirit: **Revelation 4:1-2** After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here..." (2) *At once I was in the Spirit*, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.
 4. Through His written Word: **2 Timothy 3:16** All Scripture is *God-breathed*...

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- D. “God exists in and of Himself. His being He owes to no one. His substance is indivisible. He has no parts but is single in His unitary being. ... The harmony of His being is the result not of a perfect balance of parts but of the absence of parts. Between His attributes no contradiction can exist. He need not suspend one to exercise another, for in Him all attributes are one. All of God does all that God does; He does not divide Himself to perform a work... An attribute, then, is not a part of God. It is *how* God is...and it is *what* God is, though...exactly what He is He cannot tell us. ... He does not possess (attributes) as qualities... Love, for instance, is not something that God has and which may grow or diminish or cease to be. His love is the way God is, and when He loves He is simply being Himself. And so with His other attributes. (A.W.Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, New York, 1961. p. 15 & 16)

XII.KNOWING FULLY

- A. **1Co 13:9-12** For *we know in part* and we prophesy in part, (10) but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. (11) When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. (12) *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror*; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; *then I shall know fully*, even as I am fully known.
- B. The phrase "then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" does not mean that we will completely know the infinite God, even as He completely knows us. It means that we shall perceive Him clearly, even as He clearly perceives us.
- C. We now see but a poor reflection, as in a metal mirror. Then we shall see Him face to face.
- D. It is not as though we instantly achieve 100% knowledge of the unlimited God. The point is that whatever part of the infinite God we look at, we will now see clearly, rather than through a veil. However, for the rest of eternity, there will always be infinitely more of God to behold and admire.

XIII. OF REVERENCE AND RECKLESSNESS

- A. The shocking conclusion is that the Creator of the Universe, Who is great beyond anything we can comprehend, who created the universe(s), Who spun planets into orbit as well as the intricate fibers of a flower, Who made the ocean abyss as well as the arid desert, Who made the Lioness and the gnat, the sovereign One Who made the Milky Way has also made each of us with all of our unique senses, affections, passions and quirks.

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B. The God Who could so easily stand far off and rule in unapproachable-ness, has created us for Himself. Not like a person who may collect knick-knacks, but as a father who is actively involved in his child's life, or as a bridegroom who greatly desires his bride.

“A great gulf lies between me and the transcendent God, who is so high I cannot think of Him, so lofty that I cannot speak of Him, before whom I must fall down in trembling fear and adoration. I can't climb up to Him; I can't soar in any man-made vehicle to Him. I can't pray my way up to Him. There is only one way: 'Near, near thee, my son, is that old wayside cross.' And the cross bridges the gulf that separates God from man. That cross!” (A.W.Tozer, *The Attributes of God: volume 2*, Wing Spread Publishers, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, 2001. p. 49)