



Week 6 - "The Nature of God"

God is Good!

Psalms 107:1 Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! 2 Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble 3 and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

The doctrine of God is the central point for much of the rest of theology. One's view of God might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which one's theology is constructed and life is lived. It lends a particular coloration to one's style of ministry and philosophy of life.¹

In his book *Your God Is Too Small*, J. B. Phillips has pointed out some common distorted understandings of God. Some people think of God as a kind of celestial police officer who looks for opportunities to pounce upon erring and straying persons. A popular country song enunciates this view: "God's gonna get you for that; God's gonna get you for that. Ain't no use to run and hide, 'cuz he knows where you're at!" Insurance companies, with their references to "acts of God"—always catastrophic occurrences—seem to have a powerful, malevolent being in mind. The opposite view, that God is grandfatherly, is also prevalent. Here God is conceived of as an indulgent, kindly old gentleman who would never want to detract from humans' enjoyment of life. These and many other false conceptions of God need to be corrected if our spiritual lives are to have any real meaning and depth. Problems on a more sophisticated level also point out the need for a correct view of God. The biblical understanding of God has often been problematic. In the early church, the doctrine of the Trinity created special tension and debate. While that particular topic has not totally ceased to present difficulty, other issues have become prominent in our day.

The Immanence and Transcendence of God

An important pair of emphases which we must make certain we preserve is the doctrines of God's immanence within his creation and his transcendence of it.

Both truths are taught in Scripture.

Jeremiah 23: 23 "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? 24 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.

For example, stresses God's presence everywhere within the universe,

In this very context, however, both immanence and transcendence appear together:

Jeremiah 23: 23 "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away?"

Paul told the philosophers on Mars' Hill in Athens: "*Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring. "*" (Acts 17: 27b–28).

On the other hand, in Isaiah 55: 8– 9 we read that God's thoughts and ways transcend ours: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

The meaning of immanence is that God is present and active within his creation, and within the human race, even those members of it that do not believe in or obey him. His influence is everywhere. He is at work in and through natural processes.

The meaning of transcendence is that God is not merely a quality of nature or of humanity; he is not simply the highest human being. He is not limited to our ability to understand him. His holiness and goodness go far beyond, infinitely beyond ours, and this is true of his knowledge and power as well.

It is important to keep these two doctrines together, but it is not always easy to do so, for there are problems in knowing how to view them.

The traditional way of thinking about God's transcendence has been spatial in nature: God is in heaven, high above the world. This is the picture found in the Bible, but we now realize that "up" and "down" do not really apply to a spirit, who is not located at some specific place within the universe.

God is present and active within his creation, yet he is also transcendent to it, for he is a totally different type of being. He is divine.

God uses miracles to fulfill His will in the earth but He is not restricted to miracles.

He even uses ordinary unbelieving humans such as Cyrus, whom he described as his “shepherd,” his “anointed” (Isa. 44: 28; 45: 1).

He uses technology and human skill and learning. Yet it is important to bear in mind the truth that God is transcendent. He is infinitely more than any natural or human event.

If we emphasize immanence too much, we may identify everything that happens as God’s will and working, as did some German Christians who in the 1930s regarded Adolf Hitler’s policies as God’s working in the world.

We must bear in mind that there is a separation between God’s holiness and much of what happens in the world.

If we emphasize transcendence too much, however, we may expect God to work miracles at all times, while he may purpose instead to work through our effort. We may tend to mistreat the creation, forgetting that he himself is present and active there. We may depreciate the value of what non-Christians do, or their possession of some degree of sensitivity to the message of the gospel, forgetting that God is at work in and in touch with them.

Implications of Immanence

Divine immanence of the limited degree taught in Scripture carries several implications:

1. God is not limited to working directly to accomplish his purposes. While it is very obviously a work of God when his people pray and a miraculous healing occurs, it is also God’s work when through the application of medical knowledge and skill a physician is successful in bringing a patient back to health. Medicine is part of God’s general revelation, and the work of the doctor is a channel of God’s activity.
2. God may use persons and organizations that are not avowedly Christian. In biblical times, God did not limit himself to working through the covenant nation of Israel or through the church. He even used Assyria, a pagan nation, to bring chastening upon Israel. He is able to use secular or nominally Christian organizations. Even non-Christians do some genuinely good and commendable things.
3. We should have an appreciation for all that God has created. The world is God’s, and he is present and active within it. While it has been given to humankind to be used to satisfy their legitimate needs, they ought not to exploit it for their own pleasure or out of greed. The doctrine of divine immanence therefore has ecological application. It also has implications regarding our attitudes to other people. God is genuinely present within everyone (although not in the special sense in which he indwells Christians). Therefore, no one is to be despised or treated disrespectfully.

4. We can learn something about God from his creation. All that is has been brought into being by God and, further, is actively indwelt by him. We may therefore detect clues about what God is like by observing the behavior of the created universe. For example, a definite pattern of logic seems to apply within the creation. There is an orderliness, a regularity, about it. Those who believe that God is sporadic, arbitrary, or whimsical by nature and that his actions are characterized by paradox and even contradiction either have not taken a close look at the behavior of the world or have assumed that God is in no sense operating there. God's holiness and goodness go far beyond, infinitely beyond ours, and this is true of his knowledge and power as well.

5. God's immanence means that there are points at which the gospel can make contact with the unbeliever. If God is to some extent present and active within the whole of the created world, he is present and active within humans who have not made a personal commitment of their lives to him. Thus, there are points at which they will be sensitive to the truth of the gospel message, places where they are already in touch with God's working. Evangelism aims to find those points and direct the message to them.

Implications of Transcendence

The doctrine of transcendence has several implications which will affect our other beliefs and practices:

1. There is something higher than human beings. Good, truth, and value are not determined by the shifting flux of this world and human opinion. There is something which gives value to humankind from above.

2. God can never be completely captured in human concepts. This means that all of our doctrinal ideas, helpful and basically correct though they may be, cannot fully exhaust God's nature. He is not limited to our understanding of him.

3. Our salvation is not our achievement. We are not able to raise ourselves to God's level by fulfilling his standards for us. Even if we were able to do so, it still would not be our accomplishment. The very fact that we know what he expects of us is a matter of his self-revelation, not our discovery. Even apart from the additional problem of sin, then, fellowship with God would be strictly a matter of his gift to us.

4. There will always be a difference between God and human beings. The gap between us is not merely a moral and spiritual disparity which originated with the fall. It is metaphysical, stemming from creation. Even when redeemed and glorified, we will still be his human creatures. We will never become God.

5. Reverence is appropriate in our relationship with God. Some worship, rightfully stressing the joy and confidence that the believer has in relationship to a loving heavenly Father, goes beyond that point to an excessive familiarity treating him as an equal, or worse yet, as a servant. If we have grasped the fact of the divine transcendence, however, this will not happen. While there is room and need for enthusiasm of expression, and perhaps even an exuberance, that should never lead to a loss of respect. Our prayers will also be characterized by reverence. Rather than making demands, we will pray as Jesus did, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

6. We will look for genuinely transcendent working by God. Thus we will not expect that only those things which can be accomplished by natural means will come to pass. While we will use every available technique of modern learning to accomplish God's ends, we will never cease to be dependent upon his working. We will not neglect prayer for his guidance or for his special intervention. As with the matter of God's immanence, so also with transcendence we must guard against the dangers of excessive emphasis. We will not look for God merely in the religious or devotional; we will also look for him in the "secular" aspects of life. We will not look for miracles exclusively, but we will not disregard them either. Some of the divine attributes, such as holiness, eternity, and omnipotence, are expressive of the transcendent character of God. Others, such as omnipresence, are expressive of the immanent. If all these aspects of God's nature are given the emphasis and attention that the Bible assigns to them, a fully rounded understanding of God will be the result. While God is never fully within our grasp since he goes far beyond our ideas and forms, yet he is always available to us when we turn to him.

The Attributes of God

While our understanding of God is undoubtedly filtered through our own mental framework, his attributes are not our conceptions projected upon him.

They are objective characteristics of his nature. The attributes are inseparable from the being or essence of God. Some earlier theologies thought of the attributes as somehow adhering to or being at least in some way distinguishable from the underlying substance or being or essence.

When we speak of the incomprehensibility of God, then, we do not mean that there is an unknown being or essence beyond or behind his attributes. Rather, we mean that we do not know his qualities or his nature completely and exhaustively. We know God only as he has revealed himself.

While his self-revelation is doubtless consistent with his full nature and accurate, it is not an exhaustive revelation. Further, we do not totally understand or know comprehensively that which he has revealed to us of himself. Thus there is, and always will be, an element of mystery regarding God. Classifications of Attributes In attempts to better understand God, various systems of classifying his attributes have been devised.

With some modifications, the classification adopted for this study is that of natural and moral attributes. The moral attributes are those which in the human context would relate to the

concept of rightness (as opposed to wrongness). Holiness, love, mercy, and faithfulness are examples. Natural attributes are the nonmetal superlatives of God, such as his knowledge and power. Instead of natural and moral, however, we will speak of attributes of **greatness** and attributes of **goodness**.

The Greatness of God

Spirituality

Among the most basic of God's attributes of greatness is the fact that he is spirit; that is, he is not composed of matter and does not possess a physical nature.

John 4: 24 "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

It is also implied in various references to his invisibility (John 1: 18; 1 Tim. 1: 17; 6: 15– 16).

One consequence of God's spirituality is that he does not have the limitations involved with a physical body. For one thing, he is not limited to a particular geographical or spatial location.

Consider also Paul's statement:

Acts 17:24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man

There are, of course, numerous passages which suggest that God has physical features such as hands or feet. How are we to regard these references? It seems most helpful to treat them as anthropomorphisms, attempts to express the truth about God through human analogies. There also are cases where God appeared in physical form, particularly in the Old Testament. These should be understood as theophanies, or temporary manifestations of God.

In biblical times, the doctrine of God's spirituality was a counter to the practice of idolatry and of nature worship. God, being spirit, could not be represented by any physical object or likeness.

Life

Another attribute of greatness is the fact that God is alive. He is characterized by life.

This is affirmed in Scripture in several different ways. It is found in the assertion that he is.

His very name "I AM" (Exod. 3: 14) indicates that he is a living God. It is also significant that Scripture does not argue for his existence. It simply affirms it or, more often, merely assumes it.

Hebrews 11: 6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

This characteristic of God is prominent in the contrast frequently drawn between him and other gods. He is depicted as the living God, as contrasted with inanimate objects of metal or stone.

1 Thessalonians 1: 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God

Personality

In addition to being spiritual and alive, God is personal.

He is an individual That God has personality is indicated in several ways in Scripture.

One is the fact that God has a name. He has a name which he assigns to himself and by which he reveals himself.

In biblical times names were not mere labels to distinguish one person from another.

In our impersonal society, this may seem to be the case. Names are seldom chosen for their meaning; rather, parents choose a name because they happen to like it, or it is currently popular. The Hebrew approach was quite different, however. A name was chosen very carefully, and with attention to its significance.

When Moses wonders how he should respond when the Israelites will ask the name of the God who has sent him, God identifies himself as "I AM" or "I WILL BE" (Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord— Exod. 3: 14). By this he demonstrates that he is not an abstract, unknowable being, or a nameless force.

There are a number of resulting implications.

Because God is a person, the relationship we have with him has a dimension of warmth and understanding.

God is not a machine or a computer that automatically supplies the needs of people. He is a knowing, loving, good Father.

Further, our relationship with God is not merely a one-way street. God is, to be sure, an object of respect and reverence. But he does not simply receive and accept what we offer. He is a living, reciprocating being. He is not merely one of whom we hear, but one whom we meet and know.

Accordingly, God is to be treated as a being, not an object or force. He is not something to be used or manipulated.

God is unlimited and unlimitable in terms of space, time, knowledge, and power. God is an end in himself, not a means to an end. He is of value to us for who he is in himself, not merely for what he does.

Infinity

God is infinite. This means not only that God is unlimited, but that he is unlimitable.

In this respect, God is unlike anything we experience. Even those things that common sense once told us are infinite or boundless are now seen to have limits.

Space

The infinity of God may be thought of from several angles. We think first in terms of space. Here we have what has traditionally been referred to as immensity and omnipresence. God is not subject to limitations of space.

Time

That God is not limited by time means that time does not apply to him. He was before time began. The question, How old is God? is simply inappropriate. He is no older now than a year ago, for infinity plus one is no more than infinity. God is the one who always is. He was, he is, he will be.

Knowledge

The infinity of God may also be considered with respect to objects of knowledge. His understanding is immeasurable (Ps. 147: 5). Jesus said that not a sparrow can fall to the ground without the Father's will (Matt. 10: 29), and that even the hairs of the disciples' heads are all numbered (v. 30). We are all completely transparent before God (Heb. 4: 13). He sees and knows us totally. And he knows all genuine possibilities, even when they seem limitless in number.

A further factor, in the light of this knowledge, is the wisdom of God. By this is meant that when God acts, he takes all of the facts and correct values into consideration. Knowing all things, God knows what is good. In Romans 11: 33 Paul eloquently assesses God's knowledge and wisdom: *"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"*

Power

Finally, God's infinity may also be considered in relationship to what is traditionally referred to as the omnipotence of God. By this we mean that God is able to do all things which are proper objects of his power.

There are, however, certain qualifications of this all-powerful character of God. He cannot arbitrarily do anything whatsoever that we may conceive of. He can do only those things which are proper objects of his power.

Thus, he cannot do the logically absurd or contradictory. He cannot make square circles or triangles with four corners. He cannot undo what happened in the past, although he may wipe out its effects or even the memory of it. He cannot act contrary to his nature— he cannot be

cruel or unconcerned. He cannot fail to do what he has promised. In reference to God's having made a promise and having confirmed it with an oath, the writer to the Hebrews says: "So that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we . . . might have strong encouragement" (Heb. 6: 18).

All of these "inabilities," however, are not weaknesses, but strengths. The inability to do evil or to lie or to fail is a mark of positive strength rather than of failure.

Constancy

In several places in Scripture, God is described as unchanging. In Psalm 102, the psalmist contrasts God's nature with the heavens and the earth:

Psalm 102: 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, 27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.

God's intentions as well as his plans are always consistent, simply because his will does not change. Thus, God is ever faithful to his promises, for example, his covenant with Abraham.

What, then, are we to make of those passages where God seems to change his mind, or to repent over what he has done? These passages can be explained in several ways:

What may seem to be changes of mind may actually be new stages in the working out of God's plan. An example of this is the offering of salvation to the Gentiles. Although a part of God's original plan, it represented a rather sharp break with what had preceded.

Some apparent changes of mind are changes of orientation that result when humans move into a different relationship with God. God did not change when Adam sinned; rather, humankind had moved into God's disfavor. This works the other way as well. Take the case of Nineveh. God said, "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed, unless they repent." Nineveh repented and was spared. It was humans who had changed, not God's plan.

What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God.

He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised. He will fulfil his commitments. The believer can rely upon this.

Lamentations 3:22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

1 John 1: 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Things to Mull

1. Why is the doctrine of God the central point for much of the rest of theology?
2. What is an anthropomorphism? How does it help us to understand God?
3. Describe how the doctrine of “God’s spirituality” was counter to the practice of idolatry and of nature worship.
4. What are the implications and ramifications to God being “personal”?
5. Explain how God can be everywhere at once and still know the number of hairs on your head.
6. Why is it important that He is “infinite”?
7. Would it be a problem if God was not constant? Why?
8. Has God been “constant” in your life? How? Or How not?
9. If there has been inconsistency, whose fault is it?

Bibliography

1. Erickson, Millard J. (2001-04-01). *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (p. 86-97). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

To Learn More About It: (Recommended Further Reading) *[New feature!!]*

“The Knowledge of the Holy” A.W. Tozer ISBN: 978-1-61979-015-5