

What the Bible Says About God

Has anyone ever been assigned a broader topic than this one? I doubt it. Nevertheless, we shall attempt to address the subject in a useful way. Although the Bible does not contain a formal definition of “God,” (as it also does not seek to prove His existence formally), yet His Being, attributes and characteristics are seen on every page. As far as formal definitions go, the Westminster Catechism says:

“God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”

While this is a good start, we need to make sure we measure our concepts against the Bible, and not create a God “according to our own image.”

How God Is Known

One inescapable fact the Bible presents is that, in contrast to pagan deities, God desires that man know Him. He walked with man in the Garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). He wants intimacy with man. Galatians 2:16 indicates that God so desired fellowship with man that He “helped” man rather than angels when they sinned. Consider Jeremiah 31:34: “And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me...” Hosea 4:6 pinpointed the problem that Judah was having: “My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge...” Knowledge here is not intellectual knowledge, but the knowledge of intimacy. Since God wants us to know Him, is it reasonable to conclude that He has revealed Himself to man?

God is known in three ways: by His acts, by His written revelation, and in fellowship. Romans 1:18-20 indicates that man can know something about God by looking at one of His acts—creation: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” While knowing that God is divine (supernatural), and that He is powerful are essential, this knowledge is only a fraction of what God desires that we know about Him.

The Bible is a compendium of the actions of God in the past in dealing with man; in fact it is the only reliable source of knowledge about what God has done for and with man. Most importantly, within the written word is the record of Jesus Christ. He is the supreme revelation of the nature and character of God. Jesus represents the revelation of God by God's action. Consider these Scriptures:

Heb. 1:1-3: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power..."

John 12:44 "Jesus cried and said, He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me."

John 14:7, 9, 23: "7 If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.... Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? ...Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him."

2 Peter 1:3-4: "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."

God can be known by His actions, and also by express statements in the Bible about His character. Another way that God can be known is by, or in fellowship. Fellowship with Him is both the result and the purpose of the other forms of revelation from God. God as acted, sent His Son, and told us about it in the Bible so that we can know Him more intimately in fellowship, both in this age and the age to come (Isaiah 55:3, 6-13; Psalm 27). This fellowship is expressed, enhanced and maintained through obedience and worship.

The Attributes and Characteristics of God

The attributes of God are those distinguishing characteristics of the divine nature which are 1) inseparable from the idea of God, and 2) constitute the basis and ground for His various manifestations to His creatures.

The Absolute Characteristics of God

Absolute characteristics are those which are always present to us in the same degree. Relative characteristics can be expressed in degrees. God is always spiritual, for example, but not always merciful, though He possesses perfect mercy.

God has at least these three absolute characteristics.

Spirituality — John 4:24; Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; Col. 1:15

God is not matter, He has no flesh and bones or material substance of any kind (Lk. 24:39). He is not dependent upon any other source for His spirituality or existence, as are we. We derive our spirituality from our Father (Acts 17:24-25). An essential characteristic of spirituality is life (Jer. 10:10; 1 Thes. 1:9; John 5:26; 14:6; Heb. 7:16). Personality also inheres in spirituality. God is self-conscious, He has the attribute of self-determination and purpose (Ex. 3:14; 1 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 1:9-11), and He is never capricious, aimless or whimsical, as are the heathen gods.

Infinity — Psa. 145:3; Job 11:7-9; Isa. 66:1; 1 Kings 8:27; Rom. 11:33

God is not “everything” as the Eastern religions maintain. His creation is external to Himself. (This is a crucial distinction.) God’s infinity involves His self-existence. He defined Himself to Moses and Israel by saying “I AM THAT I AM.” His infinity makes Him immutable. He possesses as apart of His nature a dynamic unchangeableness of character, motive, and being (Ps. 102:27; Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17). God is also a Being of unity. He is one in nature and substance; In God there is perfect unity (Dt. 6:4; Isa. 44:6; John 3:4; 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2:5; 6:15; Eph. 4:4-6; Mk. 12:29).

Perfection — Matthew 5:48; Romans 12:22

God is perfect in truth (John 17:3; 1 John 5:20; John 14:6). All truth has its foundation in the divine nature and the resulting creation. Mathematical, moral, logical, and religious truth do not exist apart from God. He is not subject to them in the same way we are; He is their source. They are attributes of His own character (2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2). There is no contradiction in this with the omnipotence of God. How much power would it take to make 2+2=5? Truth is not an object of power, but a result of reality, which is founded in nature, essence and character (personality).

God is perfect in veracity and faithfulness (John 3:33; Romans 3:4; 1 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 5:24). Man’s vacillation does not negate God’s truthfulness or faithfulness. It is impossible for God to lie. He exhibits lovingkindness to those he has covenanted with.

The Bible also says that God is perfect in love. (2 John 4:8; 3:36; John 17:24; Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 5:5-10; 15:30). God’s love is always complete, full, unchangeable and self-existent. Man’s love is partial and self-serving.

Holiness is also part of God's perfection (Ex. 15:11; 19:10-16; Isa. 6:3; Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). When the Bible says that God is holy (or love), it means that His character is the very definition of holiness. We can have holiness, but we are not holy in the same way God is holy. Our holiness is based on our imitation of His character. Out of God's truth, holiness, and love spring God's desire to give us laws and demand our obedience (2 Pet. 1:1-4).

The Relative Characteristics of God

As stated above, these characteristics are those which may be shown to us in differing degrees according to God's purpose and wisdom.

With Respect to Time and Space

Eternity is part of God's character (Dt. 32:40; Ps. 90:2; 102:23-27; Isa. 41:4; Eph. 1:4; 1 Tim. 1:17). Eternity is relative to us because in order for us to define this concept we must relate it to time and space. God existed before time and space, they are His creations (Gen. 1:1, 8, 14), and He will exist independently of them after they are destroyed (Heb. 1:10-13).

Immensity is related to but not the same as omnipresence. How big is God? He is not physically or measurably big; that's why He could not be contained in a physical Temple ("But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?" -1 Kings 8:27).

With Respect to Creation

Omnipresence

is the concept that God is everywhere at once, whether this power is actual or potential. "Everything everywhere is immediately in His presence." Can God choose not to be somewhere? Will He be in hell, for example? Finite creatures like man can act instantaneously in a limited area. Everything within our sight or reach is immediately in our presence, in the sense that distance is no problem. Time is not a problem for God; He acts across time, both in providence and in prophecy. In an absolutely perfect sense, then, everything in or out of the universe is immediately in the presence of God (Ps. 139:7; Acts 17:27; Jer. 23:23-24- God is both infinite and personal). Omnipresence has special meaning as it relates to God's work in His creation.

Omniscience

means that God has knowledge of all things, whether actual or potential. (The question arises, 'Can God choose not to know something?' -Jer. 19:5.) God's knowledge includes the past, present and future, all in relation to time and space (Ps. 147:4; Mt. 10:29; Ps. 33:13-15; Acts 15:9; Matt. 6:8; Mal. 3:16).

Omnipotence

describes God's power. He has all power by His nature (Gen. 17:1; Heb. 1:3; Eph. 1:19; Matt. 3:9). If He doesn't, then whatever does is God. If power is shared, then more than

one God exists. (Shared power is not the same as delegated authority (Matt. 18:19-20). God is able to carry out His will, predict the future and determine the outcome of history (Eph. 1:9-12; Isa. 40:9-31; 41; Rom. 4:17).

As noted above, God is external to His creation (Heb. 11:3). The universe is not a part of God, but was made from nothing by Him, outside of and apart from Himself. It is inanimate and impersonal, and He has absolute power over it.

The Relative Characteristics of God Toward Moral Beings **Mercy, Grace, and Goodness**

are shown by God in relation to our faith and obedience. God always loves man (John 3:16; Rom. 5:5-10), but His mercy extends finally to those who obey (Rom. 2:4; 8:32; Ex. 33:9; 34:6; Ps. 28:6). The disobedient will receive wrath and vengeance (Rom. 3:5; 12:19; 2 Thes 1:8; Heb 10:30). This mercy and grace is shown supremely in the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. Yet, Jesus is also the instrument of God's wrath and judgement.

Justice and Jealousy are characteristics that are shown to man circumstantially. By this I do not mean that God is sometimes unjust, but that He does not always give man what He deserves. His grace may intervene as He remembers our nature (Ps. 103). Look up Gen. 18:25; Dt 32:4; Psalm 7:9-12; Rom. 2:6; Zeph. 3:5; Rev. 15:3; John 17:25. These attributes are often shown in varying degrees and manners, and for different purposes (Rom. 11:22).

Transcendence vs. immanence (Jer. 23:23-24)

Because of our human limitation, two qualities of God as revealed in the Bible conflict in the human mind—transcendence and Immanence. Notice the apparent paradox in Isaiah 55:6-9: “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Transcendence is the distance and “otherness” of God; immanence is God's closeness and similarity to God.

When one of these attributes predominates in our thinking, then we suffer a great loss—a loss of the true knowledge of God. It has been rightly said that no man can rise above his concept of God. As people, we tend to move toward our concept of God. What comes into your mind when you think of God will tell your spiritual future.

Ignoring either side of the paradox will lead to the same place; God will be dishonored or ignored. If we think He is too far away to care we will ignore Him. If we think He is just like us we will dishonor Him. God is vastly different than man, but not wholly so. A low

concept of God produces a man with no religious awe, vain worship from self-confident worshippers, and religion that emphasizes the external over the internal.

Conclusion

The greatest and gravest question before us is always God Himself. By nature, man tends toward nothingness. Since we came out of nothing in one sense, nothing sustains us from annihilation but the will and power of God. We cannot sustain ourselves a single moment. So, let us drink deep of the Scriptures, and especially look at the portrait of God seen in Jesus. We must know God intimately.

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

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Michael J. Schmidt  
771 E 300N Rd  
Gibson City, IL 60936-7167  
217-749-2331  
MJSchmidt@aol.com