

What Is God

Session Two: The Incommunicable Attributes of God

I. Thinking About God in Two Ways

Incommunicable = attributes (or characteristics) of God not shared (less shared) with humans. Incommunicable is a category of attributes or a way of describing and identifying a certain type of attributes. **Communicable attributes** are attributes more shared with people.

- We say “less shared” and “more shared”
- Transcendence and Immanence
- God Is Both Infinite and Personal:

II. The Names of God

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921 – Dutch Reformed), The Doctrine of God (translated in 1951)

Isaiah 6:3 ESV

3 And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

Psalm 148 ESV

III. Incommunicable Attributes

A. Independence. God's independence is defined as follows: *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.* This attribute of God is sometimes called his self-existence or his *aseity* (from the Latin words *a se* which mean "from himself")¹

Acts 17:24-25 ESV

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.

Psalms 50:10-12 ESV

10 For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.

11 I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine.

12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

John 17:5 ESV

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

John 17:24 ESV

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.

These passages indicate explicitly what we can learn elsewhere from the doctrine of the Trinity, namely, that among the persons of the Trinity there has been perfect love and fellowship and communication for all eternity. The fact that God is three persons yet one God means that there was no loneliness or lack of personal fellowship on God's part before creation. In fact, the love and interpersonal fellowship, and the sharing of glory, have always been and will always be far more perfect than any communion we as finite human beings will ever have with God. And as the second verse quoted above speaks of the glory the Father gave to the Son, we should also realize that there is a giving of glory by the members of the Trinity to one another that far surpasses any bestowal of glory that could ever be given to God by all creation.²

¹Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (160). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

²Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (161). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

Exodus 3:14 ESV

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.' "

God's independence is also seen in his self-designation in Exodus 3:14: "God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." It is also possible to translate this statement "I will be what I will be," but in both cases the implication is that God's existence and character are determined by himself alone and are not dependent on anyone or anything else. This means that God's being has always been and will always be exactly what it is. God is not dependent upon any part of creation for his existence or his nature. Without creation, God would still be infinitely loving, infinitely just, eternal, omniscient, trinitarian, and so forth.³

B. Unchangeableness. We can define the unchangeableness of God as follows:

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.⁵ This attribute of God is also called God's immutability.⁴

Malachi 3:6 ESV

6 "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

James 1:17 ESV

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.

Psalms 33:11 ESV

11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

Ephesians 1:4 ESV

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

³Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (161). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

⁵The four key words (*being, perfections, purposes, promises*) used as a summary of the ways in which God is unchanging are taken from Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), p. 58.

⁴Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (163). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

Numbers 23:19 ESV

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 Samuel 15:29 ESV

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

Does it appear sometimes that God in Scripture changed his mind?

Exodus 32:9-14 ESV

Is God impassible (without emotions)?

The Challenge From Process Theology:

God’s unchangeableness has been denied frequently in recent years by the advocates of process theology a theological position that says 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.⁵

If God is really unchangeable, process theologians will say, then nothing we do—in fact, nothing that happens in the universe—has any real effect on God, because God can never change. So what difference do we make? How can we have any ultimate meaning?⁶

C. Eternity. God’s eternity may be defined as follows: *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.* Sometimes this doctrine is called the doctrine of God’s infinity with respect to time. To be “infinite” is to be unlimited, and this doctrine teaches that time does not limit God.⁷

⁵Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (166). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

⁶Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (166). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

⁷Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (168). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

Revelation 1:8 ESV

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Psalms 90:2 ESV

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

Psalms 90:4 ESV

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

2 Peter 3:8 ESV

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.

Will there be time in heaven?

D. Omnipresence. Just as God is unlimited or infinite with respect to time, so God is unlimited with respect to space. This characteristic of God’s nature is called God’s omnipresence (the Latin prefix *omni-* means “all”). God’s omnipresence may be defined as follows: *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.*⁸

Psalms 139:7-10 ESV

7 Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

9 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

Jeremiah 23:23-24 ESV

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.

⁸Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (173). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

God is present with his whole being in every part of space

Colossians 1:17 ESV

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

Acts 17:28 ESV

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.’

But God is not contained by space or limited by space

Isaiah 66:1-2 ESV

1 Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?

2 All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Acts 17:28 ESV

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.’

God Can Be Present to Punish, to Sustain, or to Bless:

- **To Punish – Amos 9:1-4**
- **To Sustain – Hebrews 1:3**
- **To Bless – Psalm 16:11**

E. Unity. The unity of God may be defined as follows: *God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times.* This attribute of God has also been called *God’s simplicity* using *simple* in the less common sense of “not complex” or “not composed of parts.” But since the word *simple* today has the more common sense of “easy to understand” and “unintelligent or foolish,” it is more helpful now to speak of God’s “unity” rather than his “simplicity.”⁹

⁹Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (177). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.