Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To list the attributes of God’s greatness—spirituality, personality, life, infinity, and constancy—and to express the essence of each.
2. To explain the ways in which God is infinite.
3. To foster confidence in the almighty God.

Chapter Summary

Certain attributes of God express his greatness. We will concentrate in this chapter on God as being personal, all-powerful, eternal, spirit, present everywhere within his creation, and unchanging in his perfection.

Study Questions

• Name and describe each of the attributes of God’s greatness.
• Why is God’s infinity in terms of space a tension between God’s immanence and transcendence?
• Explain the qualifications of the all-powerful character of God. Why are they significant?
• What does it mean when we say God is free?

Chapter Outline

Spirituality
Life
Personality
Infinity
   Space
   Time
   Knowledge
   Power
Constancy
**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. This is most clearly stated by Jesus in 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. This is implicit in Jesus’ statement, “The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (John 4:21). Consider also Paul’s statement in Acts 17:24: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man.” Furthermore, he is not destructible, as is material nature.

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. It seems best to take the clear statements about the spirituality and invisibility of God at face value and interpret the anthropomorphisms and theophanies in the light of them. Indeed, Jesus himself clearly indicated that a spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39).

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. That he is not restricted by geographical location also countered the idea that God could be contained and controlled. In our day, the Mormons maintain that not only God the Son, but also the Father has a physical body, although the Holy Spirit does not. Indeed, Mormonism contends that an immaterial body cannot exist. This is clearly contradicted by the Bible’s teaching on the spirituality of God.

**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 says that everyone who “would draw near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Thus, existence is considered a most basic aspect of his nature.

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. Jeremiah 10:10 refers to him as the true God, the living God, who controls nature. “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth,” on the other hand, “shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens” (v. 11). First Thessalonians 1:9 draws a similar contrast between the idols from which the Thessalonians had turned and the “living and true God.”

Not only does this God have life, but he has a kind of life different from that of every other living being. While all other beings have their life in God, he does not derive his life from any external source. He is never depicted as having been brought into being. John 5:26 says that he has life in himself. The adjective eternal is applied to him frequently, implying that there never was a time when he did not exist. Further, we are told that “in the beginning,” before anything
else came to be, God was already in existence (Gen. 1:1). Thus, he could not have derived his existence from anything else.

Moreover, the continuation of God’s existence does not depend upon anything outside of himself. All other beings, insofar as they are alive, need something—nourishment, warmth, protection—to sustain that life. With God, however, there is no indication of such a need. On the contrary, Paul denies that God needs anything or is served by human hands (Acts 17:25).

While God is independent in the sense of not needing anything else for his existence, this is not to say that he is aloof, indifferent, or unconcerned. God relates to us, but it is by his choice that he thus relates, not because he is compelled by some need. He has acted and continues to act out of agapē, unselfish love, rather than out of need.

Sometimes the life of God is described as self-caused. It is preferable to refer to him as the uncaused one. His very nature is to exist. It is not necessary for him to will his own existence. For God not to exist would be logically contradictory.

A proper understanding of this aspect of God’s nature should free us from the idea that God needs us. God has chosen to use us to accomplish his purposes, and in that sense he now needs us. He could, however, if he so chose, have bypassed us. It is to our gain that he permits us to know and serve him, and it is our loss if we reject that opportunity.

**Personality**

In addition to being spiritual and alive, God is personal. He is an individual being, with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings.

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. Nor is this name used merely to refer to God or to describe him. It is also used to address him. Genesis 4:26 indicates that humans began to call upon the name of the Lord. Psalm 20 speaks of boasting in the name of the Lord (v. 7) and calling upon him (v. 9). The name is to be spoken and treated respectfully, according to Exodus 20:7. The great respect accorded to the name is indicative of the personality of God.

A further indication of the personal nature of God is the activity in which he engages. He is depicted in the Bible as knowing and communing with human persons. In the earliest picture of his relationship with them (Gen. 3), God comes to and talks with Adam and Eve; the impression is given that this had been a regular practice. Although this representation of God is undoubtedly anthropomorphic, it nonetheless teaches that he is a person who related to persons as such. He is depicted as having all of the capacities associated with personality: he knows, he feels, he wills, he acts.
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 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. The rationale for the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3), is given in the preceding verse: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” We misread the passage if we interpret it as meaning that the Israelites were to put God first because of what he had done—that out of gratitude they were to make him their only God. Rather, what he had done was the proof of what he is; it is because of what he is that he is to be loved and served, not only supremely but exclusively. God as a person is to be loved for who he is, not for what he can do for us.

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. Energy at an earlier time seemed inexhaustible. We have in recent years become aware that the types of energy with which we are particularly familiar have rather sharp limitations, and we are approaching those limits considerably more rapidly than we imagined. The infinity of God, however, speaks of a limitless being.

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. By this we do not mean merely the limitation of being in a particular place—if an object is in one place it cannot be in another. Rather, it is improper to think of God as present in space at all. All finite objects have a location. They are somewhere. This necessarily prevents their being somewhere else. With God, however, the question of whereness or location is not applicable. God is the one who brought space (and time) into being. He was before there was space. He cannot be localized at a particular point. Consider here Paul’s statement that God does not dwell in manmade shrines, because he is the Lord of heaven and earth; he made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24–25).

Another aspect of God’s infinity in terms of space is that there is no place where he cannot be found. We are here facing the tension between the immanence of God (he is everywhere) and the transcendence (he is not anywhere). The point here is that nowhere within the creation is God inaccessible. Jeremiah quotes God as saying, “Am I a God at hand, … and not a God afar off?” (Jer. 23:23). The implication seems to be that being a God at hand does not preclude his being afar off as well. He fills the whole heaven and earth (v. 24). Thus, we cannot hide “in secret places” so that we cannot be seen. The psalmist found that he could not flee from the presence of
God—wherever the psalmist went, God would be there (Ps. 139:7–12). Jesus himself carried this concept a step further. In giving the Great Commission, he commanded his disciples to go as witnesses everywhere, even to the end of the earth, and he would be with them to the end of the age (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). Thus, he in effect indicated that he is not limited either by space or by time.

**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. Psalm 90:1–2 says, “LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” Jude 25 says, “To the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever.” A similar thought is found in Ephesians 3:21. The use of expressions such as “the first and the last” and the “Alpha and Omega” serve to convey the same idea (Isa. 44:6; Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

The fact that God is not bound by time does not mean that he is not conscious of the succession of points of time. He is aware that events occur in a particular order. Yet he is equally aware of all points of that order simultaneously. This transcendence over time has been likened to a person who sits on a tall building while he watches a parade. He sees all parts of the parade at the different points on the route rather than only what is going past him at the moment. He is aware of what is passing each point of the route. So God also is aware of what is happening, has happened, and will happen at each point in time. Yet at any given point within time he is also conscious of the distinction between what is now occurring, what has been, and what 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!” The psalmist describes God’s works as having all been made in wisdom (Ps. 104:24).

God has access to all information. So his judgments are made wisely. He never has to revise his estimation of something because of additional information. He sees all things in their proper perspective; thus he does not give anything a higher or lower value than what it ought to have. One can therefore pray confidently, knowing that God will not grant something that is not good.

**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. This is taught in Scripture in several ways. There is evidence of God’s unlimited power in one of his names, ʾel Shaddai. When God appeared to Abraham to reaffirm his covenant, he identified himself by saying, “I am God Almighty” (Gen. 17:1). We also see God’s omnipotence in his overcoming apparently insurmountable problems. The promise in Jeremiah 32:15 that fields will once again be bought and sold in Judah seems incredible in view of the impending fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Jeremiah’s faith, however, is strong: “Ah Lord GOD!… Nothing is too hard for thee” (v. 17). And after speaking of how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus responds to his disciples’ question as to who can then be saved: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

This power of God is manifested in several different ways. References to the power of God over nature are common, especially in the Psalms, often with an accompanying statement about God’s having created the whole universe. God’s power is also evident in his control of the course of history. Paul spoke of God’s “having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation” for all peoples (Acts 17:26). Perhaps most amazing in many ways is God’s power in human life and personality. The real measure of divine power is not the ability of God to create or to lift a large rock. In many ways, changing human personality, turning sinners to salvation, is far more difficult.

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.

Another aspect of the power of God is that he is free. While God is bound to keep his promises, he was not initially under any compulsion to make those promises. On the contrary, it is common to attribute his decisions and actions to the “good pleasure of his will.” God’s decisions and actions are not determined by consideration of any factors outside himself. They are simply a matter of his own free choice.

**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: “They will perish, but thou dost endure; … they pass away; but thou art the same, and thy years have no end” (vv. 26–27). God himself says that although his people have turned aside from his statutes, “I the LORD do not change” (Mal. 3:6). James says that with God “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

This divine constancy involves several aspects. There is first no quantitative change. God cannot increase in anything, because he is already perfection. Nor can he decrease, for if he were
to, he would cease to be God. There also is no qualitative change. The nature of God does not undergo modification. Therefore, God does not change his mind, plans, or actions, for these rest upon his nature, which remains unchanged no matter what occurs. Indeed, in Numbers 23:19 the argument is that since God is not human, his actions must be unalterable. Further, 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:

1. Some of them are to be understood as anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. They are simply descriptions of God’s actions and feelings in human terms, and from a human perspective. Included here are representations of God as experiencing pain or regret.
2. 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.
3. 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.

Some interpretations of the doctrine of divine constancy, expressed as immutability, have actually drawn heavily upon the Greek idea of immobility and sterility. This makes God inactive. But the biblical view is not that God is static but stable. He is active and dynamic, but in a way which is stable and consistent with his nature. 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 fulfill his commitments. The believer can rely upon that (Lam. 3:22–23; 1 John 1:9).

God is a great God. The realization of this fact stirred biblical writers such as the psalmists. And this realization stirs believers today, causing them to join with the songwriter in proclaiming:

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed!
    Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
    How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!*

(Stuart K. Hine, 1953)
The Goodness of God

Chapter Objectives

At the conclusion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To recall and describe each of the attributes of God that make up his moral purity, integrity, and love.
2. To understand the relationship between the moral qualities of God and the harmony that exists among these qualities.
3. To accurately assess the relationship between God’s love and justice and to show how both attributes are in harmony with each other.
4. To foster understanding that will lead to increased trust, love, and commitment toward a benevolent and loving God.

Chapter Summary

The goodness of God may be discovered in all of his relationships with his creatures. It is most effectively demonstrated in his moral attributes of purity and integrity, and in the entire complex of characteristics that are identified as his love. Sometimes these attributes are viewed as conflicting with each other, as in the case of justice and love. When correctly viewed, however, this is not the case.

Study Questions

- What are the moral attributes of God, and why are they necessary to an adequate understanding of his true nature?
- What is the importance of the holiness of God, and why is it so difficult for humans to understand this aspect of God’s nature?
- How does our understanding of Jesus help us especially to understand the love of God?
- Some have contended that there is tension between God’s justice and his love. How would you respond to such a charge?

Chapter Outline

Moral Qualities
- Moral Purity
  - Holiness
  - Righteousness
  - Justice
- Integrity
  - Genuineness
  - Veracity
  - Faithfulness
Moral Qualities

If the qualities of greatness we described in the preceding chapter were God’s only attributes, he might conceivably be an immoral or amoral being, exercising his power and knowledge in a capricious or even cruel fashion. But what we are dealing with is a good God, one who can be trusted and loved. He has attributes of goodness as well as greatness. In this chapter we will consider his moral qualities, that is, the characteristics of God as a moral being. For convenient study, we will classify his basic moral attributes as purity, integrity, and love.

Moral Purity

By moral purity we are referring to God’s absolute freedom from anything wicked or evil. His moral purity includes the dimensions of (1) holiness, (2) righteousness, and (3) justice.

1. Holiness

There are two basic aspects to God’s holiness. The first is his uniqueness. He is totally separate from all of creation. This is what Louis Berkhof called the “majesty-holiness” of God. The uniqueness of God is affirmed in Exodus 15:11: “Who is like thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” Isaiah saw the Lord “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.” The foundations of the thresholds shook, and the house was filled with smoke. The seraphs cried out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 6:1–4). The Hebrew word for “holy” (qādōsh) means “marked off” or “withdrawn from common, ordinary use.” The verb from which it is derived suggests “to cut off” or “to separate.” Whereas in the religions of the peoples around Israel the adjective holy was freely applied to objects, actions, and personnel involved in the worship, in Israel’s covenant the people themselves are also to be holy. God not only is personally free from any moral wickedness or evil. He is unable to tolerate the presence of evil. He is, as it were, allergic to sin and evil. Isaiah, upon seeing God, became very much aware of his own impurity. He despaired, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5). Similarly, Peter, on the occasion of the miraculous catch of fish, realizing who and what Jesus was, said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). When one measures one’s holiness, not against the standard of oneself or of other humans, but against God, the need for a complete change of moral and spiritual condition becomes apparent.

2. Righteousness
The second dimension of God’s moral purity is his righteousness. This is, as it were, the holiness of God applied to his relationships to other beings. The righteousness of God means, first of all, that the law of God, being a true expression of his nature, is as perfect as he is. Psalm 19:7–9 puts it this way: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.” In other words, God commands only what is right, and what will therefore have a positive effect upon the believer who obeys.

The righteousness of God also means that his actions are in accord with the law which he himself has established. Thus, God in his actions is described as doing right. For example, Abraham says to Jehovah, “Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Because God is righteous, measuring up to the standard of his law, we can trust him. He is honest in his dealings.

A question which has been a topic of debate down through the history of Christian thought is, What makes certain actions right and others wrong? In medieval times one school of thought, the realists, maintained that God chooses the right because it is right. What he calls good could not have been designated otherwise, for there is an intrinsic good in kindness and an inherent evil in cruelty. Another school of thought, the nominalists, asserted that it is God’s choice which makes an action right. God does not choose an action because of some intrinsic value in it. Rather, it is his sovereign choice of that action which makes it right. He could have chosen otherwise; if he had done so, the good would be quite different from what it is. Actually, the biblical position falls between realism and nominalism. The right is not something arbitrary, so that cruelty and murder would have been good if God had so declared. In making decisions, God does follow an objective standard of right and wrong, a standard which is part of the very structure of reality. But that standard to which God adheres is not external to God—it is his own nature. He decides in accordance with reality, and that reality is himself.

3. Justice

We have noted that God himself acts in conformity with his law. He also administers his kingdom in accordance with his law. That is, he requires that others conform to it. The righteousness described in the preceding section is God’s personal or individual righteousness. His justice is his official righteousness, his requirement that other moral agents adhere to the standards as well. God is, in other words, like a judge who as a private individual adheres to the law of society, and in his official capacity administers that same law, applying it to others.

The Scripture makes clear that sin has definite consequences. These consequences must eventually come to pass, whether sooner or later. In Genesis 2:17 we read God’s warning to Adam and Eve: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Similar warnings recur throughout the Scripture, including Paul’s statement that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). God will eventually punish sin, for sin intrinsically deserves to be punished.

The justice of God means that he is fair in the administration of his law. He does not show favoritism or partiality. Who we are is not significant. What we have done or not done is the only consideration in the assigning of consequences or rewards. Evidence of God’s fairness is that he condemned those judges in biblical times who, while charged to serve as his representatives,
accepted bribes to alter their judgments (e.g., 1 Sam. 8:3; Amos 5:12). The reason for their condemnation was that God himself, being just, expected the same sort of behavior from those who were to administer his law.

As was the case regarding holiness, God expects his followers to emulate his righteousness and justice. We are to adopt as our standard his law and precepts. We are to treat others fairly and justly (Amos 5:15, 24; James 2:9) because that is what God himself does.¹

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