

Incommunicable Attributes of God – Summer Elective Lesson Three

What do we believe in the EFCA?

God

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

Introduction

Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, who on January 21st gave a sermon at President Trump's inauguration prayer service was recently asked by USA TODAY.

What do you say to Christians who have left the church because of things politicians have done in God's name?

I understand the grief and pain of that. I wish I could assure them that if the image of God that they're carrying as a result of that is of a cruel and judgmental and angry God, that that is not the God that I believe in or worship, and that there is always love and mercy and goodness at the heart of God.

Is there anything in her statement that you agree with?

Is there anything in her statement that you disagree with or question?

What questions would you like to ask the bishop?

How is God different from us?

When we come to talk about the character of God, we realize that we cannot say everything the Bible teaches us about God's character at once. In other words, we need some way to categorize the attributes of God.

BUT, we must do so with great caution since we would not want to adopt a misleading order of attributes or emphasize some attributes so much that others would not be presented properly. Several different methods of have been used. The most commonly used method of classifying God's attributes is:

- The ***incommunicable attributes*** of God (that is, those attributes that God does not share or "communicate" to others)
 - o Examples of the incommunicable attributes would be
 - God's eternity (God has existed for all eternity, but we have not),
 - unchangeableness (God does not change, but we do), or
 - omnipresence (God is everywhere present, but we are present only in one place at one time).

- The ***communicable attributes*** of God (those God shares or “communicates” with us).
 - o Examples of the communicable attributes would be
 - love (God is love, and we are able to love as well),
 - knowledge (God has knowledge, and we are able to have knowledge as well),
 - mercy (God is merciful, and we are able to be merciful too), or
 - justice (God is just and we, too, are able to be just).

Although the classification of God’s attributes into two major categories is helpful, it is not perfect. That is because there is no attribute of God that is *completely* communicable, and there is no attribute of God that is *completely* incommunicable! For example:

- **God’s wisdom** would usually be called a communicable attribute, because we also can be wise. But we will never be infinitely wise as God is. His wisdom is *to some extent* shared with us, but it is never *fully* shared with us. It is better to say that those attributes we call “communicable” are those that are *more shared* with us.

Those attributes we call “incommunicable” are better defined by saying that they are attributes of God that are *less shared* by us. Not one of the incommunicable attributes of God is completely without some likeness in the character of human beings. For example:

- God is eternal, and we are subject to the limitations of time. However, we see *some* reflection of God’s eternity in the fact that we will live with him forever and enjoy eternal life, as well as in the fact that we have the ability to remember the past and to have a strong sense of awareness of the future (unlike much of God’s creation; cf. Eccl. 3:11).

The incommunicable attributes of God (our subject for today) are perhaps the most easily misunderstood, probably because they represent aspects of God’s character that are least familiar to our experience.

Today, with the help of Wayne Grudem and his Systematic Theology book, we will look at some of the incommunicable attributes of God, which will be defined with a two-part sentence.

- The first part defines the attribute under discussion, and
- The second part guards against misunderstanding the attribute by stating a balancing or opposite aspect that relates to that attribute.

The Incommunicable Attributes of God

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.
- Scripture in several places teaches that God does not need any part of creation in order to exist or for any other reason. God is absolutely independent and self-sufficient. Paul proclaims to the men of Athens,

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24–25).

God asks Job, *"Who has given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine"* (Job 41:11).

- No one has ever contributed to God anything that did not first come from God who created all things.
- Similarly, we read God's word in Psalm 50, *"every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine"* (Ps. 50:10–12).

Have you ever heard this statement: *God created human beings because he was lonely and needed fellowship with other persons.* ***Are there any questions you would ask the person who made this statement to challenge their statement?***

- If this were true, it would certainly mean that God is not completely independent of creation.
- It would mean that God would *need* to create persons in order to be completely happy or completely fulfilled in his personal existence.
- There are some specific indications in Jesus' words that show this idea to be inaccurate.
 - In John 17:5, Jesus prays, *"Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made."* Here is an indication that there was a sharing of glory between the Father and the Son before creation.
 - Then in John 17:24, Jesus speaks to the Father of *"my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world."* There was love and communication between the Father and the Son before creation.
 - 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.

- With regard to God's existence, this doctrine also reminds us that only God exists by virtue of his very nature, and that he was never created and never came into being. He always was.
 - o This is seen from the fact that all things that exist were made by him (*"For you created all things and by your will they existed and were created"* [Rev. 4:11]; this is also affirmed in John 1:3; Rom. 11:35–36; 1 Cor. 8:6).
 - o Moses tells us that God existed before there was any creation: *"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God"* (Ps. 90:2).
- The difference between the creature and the Creator is that God exists in a fundamentally different order of being. It is not just that we exist and God has always existed; it is also that God *necessarily* exists in an infinitely better, stronger, more excellent way.

The balancing consideration with respect to this doctrine (God's independence) is the fact that *we and the rest of creation can glorify God and bring him joy.*

How would you respond to the following questions:

- ***Does God's independence make us meaningless?***
- ***Someone might wonder, if God does not need us for anything, then are we important at all?***
- ***Is there any significance to our existence or to the existence of the rest of creation?***
- In response it must be said that we are in fact very meaningful because God has created us and he has determined that we would be *meaningful to him*. That is the final definition of genuine significance.

God speaks of his sons and daughters from the ends of the earth as "every one who is called by my name, whom I created *for my glory* whom I formed and made" (Isa. 43:7). Although God did not have to create us, he chose to do so in a totally free choice.

- He decided that he would create us to glorify him (cf. Eph. 1:11–12; Rev. 4:11).
- It is also true that we are able to bring real joy and delight to God. It is one of the most amazing facts in Scripture that God actually delights in his people and rejoices over them.
- Zephaniah prophesies that the Lord *"will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival"* (Zeph. 3:17–18).

God does not need us for anything, yet it is the amazing fact of our existence that he chooses to delight in us and to allow us to bring joy to his heart. This is **the basis for personal significance** in the lives of all God's people: to be significant to God is to be significant in the most ultimate sense. No greater personal significance can be imagined.

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. This attribute of God is also called God's immutability.***

- Evidence in Scripture: In **Psalm 102** we find a contrast between things that we may think to be permanent such as the earth or the heavens, on the one hand, and God, on the other hand. The psalmist says:

*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

They will perish, but you endure;

they will all wear out like a garment.

You change them like raiment, and they pass away;

but you are the same, and your years have no end.

(Ps. 102:25–27)

God existed before the heavens and earth were made, and he will exist long after they have been destroyed. God causes the universe to change, but in contrast to this change he is “the same.”

- Referring to his own qualities of patience, long-suffering, and mercy, God says, “*For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed*” (Mal. 3:6). Here God uses a general statement of his unchangeableness to refer to some specific ways in which he does not change.
- James reminds his readers that all good gifts come ultimately from God “*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*” (James 1:17). His argument is that since good gifts have always come from God, we can be confident that only good gifts will come from him in the future, because his character never changes in the slightest degree.

The definition given above specifies that God is unchanging—not in every way that we might imagine, but only in ways that Scripture itself affirms. The Scripture passages already cited refer either to God’s own being or to some attribute of his character. From these we can conclude that God is unchanging, at least with respect to his “***being***,” and with respect to his “***perfections***” (that is, his attributes or the various aspects of his character).

The definition also affirms God’s unchangeableness or immutability with respect to his ***purposes***.

- “*The counsel of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations*” (Ps. 33:11).
- Once God has determined that he will assuredly bring something about, his purpose is unchanging, and it will be achieved.

I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” ... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:9–11)

Furthermore, God is unchanging in his **promises**. Once he has promised something, he will not be unfaithful to that promise: “*God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?*” (Num. 23:19; cf. 1 Sam. 15:29).

Does God Sometimes Change His Mind?

Yet when we talk about God being unchanging in his purposes, we may wonder about places in Scripture where God said he would judge his people and then because of prayer or the people’s repentance (or both) God relented and did not bring judgment as he had said he would.

Examples of such withdrawing from threatened judgment include:

- The successful intervention of Moses in prayer to prevent the destruction of the people of Israel (Ex. 32:9–14),
- The adding of another fifteen years to the life of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1–6), or
- The failure to bring promised judgment upon Nineveh when the people repented (Jonah 3:4, 10).
- Then there are other passages where God is said to be sorry that he had carried out some previous action.
 - o One thinks of God being sorry that he had made man upon the earth (Gen. 6:6)
 - o Sorry that he had made Saul king (1 Sam. 15:10).
 - o ***Did not God’s purposes change in these cases?***

These instances should all be understood as true expressions of God’s *present* attitude or intention *with respect to the situation as it exists at that moment*. If the situation changes, then of course God’s attitude or expression of intention will also change. This is just saying that *God responds differently to different situations*.

- The **example of Jonah** preaching to Nineveh is helpful here. God sees the wickedness of Nineveh and sends Jonah to proclaim, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4). The possibility that God would withhold judgment if the people repented is not explicitly mentioned in Jonah’s proclamation as recorded in Scripture, but it is of course *implicit* in that warning: the *purpose* for proclaiming a warning is to bring about repentance. Once the people repented, the situation was different, and God responded differently to that changed situation: “*When God saw what they did how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it*” (Jonah 3:10).
- **In the cases of God being sorry that he had made man, or that he had made Saul king**, these too can be understood as *expressions of God’s present displeasure* toward the sinfulness of man. In neither case is the language strong enough to require us to think that if God could start again and act differently, he would in fact not create man or not make Saul king. It can instead imply that God’s previous action led to events that, in the short term, caused him sorrow, but that nonetheless in the long term would ultimately achieve his good purposes.

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.

- Process theologians dislike the doctrine of God's immutability because they think it implies that nothing we do can really matter to God.
- 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?***
 - o Process theologians reject the doctrine of God's immutability and tell us that our actions are so significant that they have an influence on the very being of God himself!
 - o As we act, and as the universe changes, God is *truly* affected by these actions and the being of God changes—God *becomes* something other than what he was.
- Scripture is clear that our ultimate significance comes not from being able to change the being of God, but from the fact that God has created us for his glory and that *he* counts us as significant. God alone gives the ultimate definition of what is significant and what is not significant in the universe, and if he counts us significant, then we are!
- The other fundamental error in process theology is in assuming that God must be changeable like the universe he created. This is what Scripture explicitly denies: "*You, Lord, did found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all grow old like a garment ... they will be changed. But you are the same and your years will never end*" (Heb. 1:10–12, quoting Ps. 102:25–27).

God Is Both Infinite and Personal: Our discussion of process theology illustrates a common difference between biblical Christianity and all other systems of theology. In the teaching of the Bible, God is both *infinite* and *personal*:

- He is infinite in that he is not subject to any of the limitations of humanity, or of creation in general.
- He is far greater than everything he has made, far greater than anything else that exists.
- But he is also personal: he interacts with us as a person, and we can relate to him as persons.
- We can pray to him, worship him, obey him, and love him, and he can speak to us, rejoice in us, and love us.

Apart from the true religion found in the Bible, no system of religion has a God who is both infinite and personal. For example:

- The gods of ancient Greek and Roman mythology were *personal* (they interacted frequently with people), but they were not infinite: they had weaknesses and frequent moral failures, even petty rivalries.
- Deism portrays a God who is *infinite* but far too removed from the world to be personally involved in it.
- Pantheism holds that God is infinite (since the whole universe is thought to be God), but such a God can certainly not be personal or relate to us as persons.
- The Bible teaches that God is both infinite and personal. We must affirm both that God is infinite (or unlimited) with respect to change that occurs in the universe (nothing will change God's being, perfections, purposes, or promises), that God is *also* personal, and that he relates to us personally and counts us valuable.

The Importance of God's Unchangeableness: At first it may not seem very important to us to affirm God's unchangeableness. The idea is so abstract that we may not immediately realize its significance. But if we stop for a moment to imagine ***what it would be like if God could change***, the importance of this doctrine becomes more clear. For example, if God *could* change (in his being, perfections, purposes, or promises), then any change would be either for the better or for the worse.

- But if God changed for the better, then he was not the best possible being when we first trusted him. And how could we be sure that he is the best possible being now?
- But if God could change for the worse (in his very *being*), then what kind of God might he become? Might he become, for instance, a little bit evil rather than wholly good? And if he could become a little bit evil, then how do we know he could not change to become largely evil—or *wholly* evil? And there would be not one thing we could do about it, for he is so much more powerful than we are.

Moreover, if God could change with regard to his ***purposes*** then even though when the Bible was written he promised that Jesus would come back to rule over a new heaven and new earth, he has perhaps abandoned that plan now, and thus our hope in Jesus' return is in vain.

Or, if God could change in regard to his ***promises*** then how could we trust him completely for eternal life? Or for anything else the Bible says? Maybe when the Bible was written he promised forgiveness of sins and eternal life to those who trust in Christ, but (if God can change) perhaps he has changed his mind on those promises now—how could we be sure?

A little reflection like this shows how absolutely important the doctrine of God's unchangeableness is. If God is not unchanging, then the whole basis of our faith begins to fall apart, and our understanding of the universe begins to unravel. This is because our faith and hope and knowledge all ultimately depend on a *person* who is *infinitely worthy of trust*—because he is *absolutely* and *eternally* unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises.

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.
- This doctrine is also related to God's unchangeableness. If it is true that God does not change, then we must say that *time* does not change God: it has no effect on his being, perfections, purposes, or promises.
 - o But that means that time has no effect on God's knowledge, for instance. God never learns new things or forgets things, for that would mean a change in his perfect knowledge.
 - o This implies also that the passing of time does not add to or detract from God's knowledge: he knows all things past, present, and future, and knows them all equally vividly.

God Is Timeless in His Own Being:

- The fact that God has no beginning or end is seen again in Psalm 90:2: *"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."* Similarly, in Job 36:26, Elihu says of God, *"the number of his years is unsearchable."*
- God's eternity is also suggested by passages that talk about the fact that God always is or always exists. *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*" (Rev. 1:8; cf. 4:8).
- Before God created the universe, there was no "time," at least not in the sense of a succession of moments one after another. Therefore, when God created the universe, he also created time. When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another. But before there was a universe, and before there was time, God always existed, without beginning, and without being influenced by time. And time, therefore, does not have existence in itself, but, like the rest of creation, depends on God's eternal being and power to keep it existing.

The foregoing Scripture passages and the fact that God always existed before there was any time combine to indicate to us that God's own being does not have a succession of moments or any progress from one state of existence to another. To God himself, all of his existence is always somehow "present," though admittedly that idea is difficult for us to understand, for it is a kind of existence different from that which we experience.

God Sees All Time Equally Vividly: It is somewhat easier for us to understand that God sees all time equally vividly. We read in **Psalm 90:4**, ***“For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”***

- It is sometimes difficult for us to remember events that occurred several weeks ago, or several months ago, or several years ago. Here Scripture tells us that God views a thousand years “as yesterday.” He can remember all the detailed events of a thousand years at least as clearly as we can remember the events of “yesterday.”
- When we realize that the phrase “a thousand years” expresses as long a time as one might imagine, it becomes evident that *all of past history* is viewed by God with great clarity and vividness: all of time since the creation is to God as if it just happened. And it will always remain just that clear in his consciousness, throughout millions of years of eternity future.
- In the New Testament, **Peter tells us, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8)**. The second half of this statement had already been made in Psalm 90, but the first half introduces an additional consideration, “One day is as a thousand years”; that is, any one day from God’s perspective seems to last for “a thousand years”: it is as if that day never ends, but is always being experienced. Again, since “a thousand years” is a figurative expression for “as long a time as we can imagine,” or “all history,” we can say from this verse that any one day seems to God to be present to his consciousness forever.

Taking these two considerations together, we can say the following:

- God sees and knows all events past, present, and future with equal vividness. This should never cause us to think that God does not see events *in time* and act *in time*, but just the opposite: God is the eternal Lord and Sovereign over history, and he sees it more clearly and acts in it more decisively than any other.
- But, once we have said that, we still must affirm that these verses speak of God’s relationship to time in a way that we do not and cannot experience: God’s experience of time is not just a patient endurance through eons of endless duration, but he has a *qualitatively different* experience of time than we do.
- With regard to the future, God frequently claims through the Old Testament prophets that *he alone is the one who knows and can declare future events*:

For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.”

(Isa. 46:9–10)

THE RELATIONSHIP OF GOD TO TIME

God Sees Events in Time and Acts in Time: Yet once all this has been said it is necessary to guard against misunderstanding by completing the definition of God's eternity: "**yet God sees events in time and acts in time.**"

- Paul writes, "*when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law*" (Gal. 4:4–5).
- God observed clearly and knew exactly what was happening with events in his creation as they occurred over time. We might say that God watched the progress of time as various events occurred within his creation. Then at the right time, "when the time had fully come," God sent forth his Son into the world.
- It is evident throughout Scripture that God acts within time and acts differently at different points in time. For example,
 - o Paul tells the men of Athens, "*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed ...*" (Acts 17:30–31).
 - o This statement includes a description of a previous way in which God acted, God's present way of acting, and a future activity that he will carry out, all in time.
- The entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation is God's own record of the way he has acted over time to bring redemption to his people.
- In short, he is the Lord who created time and who rules over it and uses it for his own purposes. God can act in time *because* he is Lord of time. He uses it to display his glory.
- In fact, it is often God's good pleasure to fulfill his promises and carry out his works of redemption over a period of time so that we might more readily see and appreciate his great wisdom, his patience, his faithfulness, his lordship over all events, and even his unchangeableness and eternity.

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. 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.***

The fact that God is Lord of space and cannot be limited by space is evident first from the fact that he created it, for the creation of the material world (Gen. 1:1) implies the creation of space as well. Moses reminded the people of God's lordship over space: "*Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it*" (Deut. 10:14).

God Is Present Everywhere: Yet there are also specific passages that speak of God's presence in every part of space. We read in Jeremiah, "*Am I a God at hand, says the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord*" (Jer. 23:23–24). God is here rebuking the prophets who think their words or thoughts are hidden from God. He is everywhere and fills heaven and earth.

God's omnipresence is beautifully expressed by David:

*Whither shall I go from your Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.*

(Ps. 139:7–10)

There is nowhere where one can flee from God's presence.

We should note also that there is no indication that simply a *part* of God is in one place and a part of him in another. It is *God himself* who is present wherever David might go. We cannot say that some of God or just part of God is present, for that would be to think of his being in spatial terms, as if he were limited somehow by space. It seems more appropriate to say that God is present *with his whole being* in every part of space (cf. also Acts 17:28 where Paul affirms the correctness of the words, "In him we live and move and have our being," and Col. 1:17, which says of Christ, "in him all things hold together").

God Does Not Have Spatial Dimensions: While it seems necessary for us to say that God's whole being is present in every part of space, or at every point in space, it is also necessary to say that *God cannot be contained by any space* no matter how large. Solomon says in his prayer to God, "*But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built!*" (1 Kings 8:27). Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain God; indeed, he cannot be contained by the largest space imaginable (cf. Isa. 66:1–2; Acts 7:48).

How should this encourage us, say, in the area of prayer?

While the thought that God is everywhere present with his whole being ought to encourage us greatly in prayer no matter where we are, the fact that no one place can be said to contain God should also discourage us from thinking that there is some special place of worship that gives people special access to God: he cannot be contained in any one place.

- We should try to avoid thinking of God in terms of size or spatial dimensions. God is a being who exists *without* size or dimensions in space. In fact, before God created the universe, there was no matter or material so there was no space either. Yet God still existed. Where was God? He was not in a place that we could call a “where,” for there was no “where” or space. But God still was!
- This fact makes us realize that God relates to space in a far different way than we do or than any created thing does. He exists as a kind of being that is far different and far greater than we can imagine.
- We must also be careful not to think that God himself is equivalent to any part of creation or to all of it.
 - o A pantheist believes that everything is God, or that God is everything that exists.
 - o The biblical perspective is rather that God is *present* everywhere in his creation, but that he is also distinct from his creation.

God Can Be Present to Punish, to Sustain, or to Bless: The idea of God’s omnipresence has sometimes troubled people who wonder how God can be present, for example, in hell. In fact, isn’t hell the opposite of God’s presence, or the absence of God? This difficulty can be resolved by realizing that *God is present in different ways in different places* or that God acts differently in different places in his creation.

- Sometimes God is ***present to punish***. A terrifying passage in Amos vividly portrays this presence of God in judgment:

*Not one of them shall flee away,
not one of them shall escape.
Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.
Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them.
And though they go into captivity before their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall slay them;
and I will set my eyes upon them for evil and not for good.*

(Amos 9:1–4)

- Sometimes God is merely **present to sustain** or to keep the universe existing and functioning in the way he intended it to function. In this sense the divine nature of Christ is everywhere present: *“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”* (Col. 1:17). The author of Hebrews says of God the Son that he is (continually) *“upholding the universe by his word of power”* (Heb. 1:3).
- Sometimes **God is present to bless**. David says, *“in your presence there is fulness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore”* (Ps. 16:11). Here David is speaking not of God’s presence to punish or merely to sustain, but of God’s presence to bless.

In summary, God is present in every part of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.

Herman Bavinck, in *The Doctrine of God* quotes a beautiful paragraph illustrating the practical application of the doctrine of God’s omnipresence:

When you wish to do something evil, you retire from the public into your house where no enemy may see you; from those places of your house which are open and visible to the eyes of men you remove yourself into your room; even in your room you fear some witness from another quarter; you retire into your heart, there you meditate: he is more inward than your heart. Wherever, therefore, you shall have fled, there he is. From yourself, whither will you flee? Will you not follow yourself wherever you shall flee? But since there is One more inward even than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from God angry but to God reconciled. There is no place at all whither you may flee. Will you flee from him? Flee unto him.

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.***

When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than all the rest. There is an assumption that every attribute is completely true of God and is true of all of God's character. For example:

- John can say that "God is light" (1 John 1:5) and then a little later say also that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).
- There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love.
- Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light.
- Rather it is *God himself* who is light, and it is *God himself* who is also love.

The same is true of other descriptions of God's character, such as that in Exodus 34:6–7: The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*"

We would not want to say that these attributes are only characteristic of some part of God, but rather that they are characteristic of God himself and therefore characteristic of all of God. These considerations indicate that we should not think of God as some kind of collection of various attributes added together as in figure 11:2.

- **GOD'S BEING IS NOT A COLLECTION OF ATTRIBUTES ADDED TOGETHER**
 - Nor should we think of the attributes of God as something external from God's real being or real self, something added on to who God really is.
 - Rather, we must remember that God's *whole being* includes all of his attributes: he is *entirely* loving, *entirely* merciful, *entirely* just, and so forth. Every attribute of God that we find in Scripture is true of *all* of God's being, and we therefore can say that *every attribute of God also qualifies every other attribute.*
- **GOD'S ATTRIBUTES ARE NOT ADDITIONS TO HIS REAL BEING**
- **GOD'S LOVE, JUSTICE, HOLINESS, AND WISDOM**
 - We could of course go on with different sorts of lines for each of the different attributes of God. But it should be clear that each attribute is simply a way of describing one aspect of God's total character or being.
 - God himself is a *unity* a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in *all* of these attributes.

Why then does Scripture speak of these different attributes of God? It is probably because we are unable to grasp all of God's character at one time, and we need to learn of it from different perspectives over a period of time. Yet these perspectives should never be set in opposition to one another, for they are just different ways of looking at the totality of God's character.

In terms of practical application, this means that we should never think, for example, that God is a loving God at one point in history and a just or wrathful God at another point in history. He is the same God always, and everything he says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes.

How do we often hear this today? "God is a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New Testament."

God is and always has been infinitely just and infinitely loving as well, and everything he does in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is completely consistent with both of those attributes.

Now it is true that some actions of God show certain of his attributes more prominently.

- Creation demonstrates his power and wisdom,
- The atonement demonstrates his love and justice
- The radiance of heaven demonstrates his glory and beauty.
- But all of these in some way or other *also* demonstrate his knowledge and holiness and mercy and truthfulness and patience and sovereignty, and so forth.
- It would be difficult indeed to find some attribute of God that is not reflected at least to some degree in any one of his acts of redemption. This is due to the fact mentioned above: God is a unity and everything he does is an act of the whole person of God.

Moreover, the doctrine of the unity of God should caution us against attempting to single out any one attribute of God as more important than all the others. ***Can you think of an example in today's world where one attribute of God seems to dominate over others?***

- At various times people have attempted to see God's holiness, or his love, or his self-existence, or his righteousness, or some other attribute as the most important attribute of his being.
- But all such attempts seem to misconceive of God as a combination of various parts, with some parts being somehow larger or more influential than others.
- It is *God himself in his whole being* who is supremely important, and it is God himself in his whole being whom we are to seek to know and to love.

Explain how each of the five incommunicable attributes of God discussed in this chapter can be a help in your own prayer life.