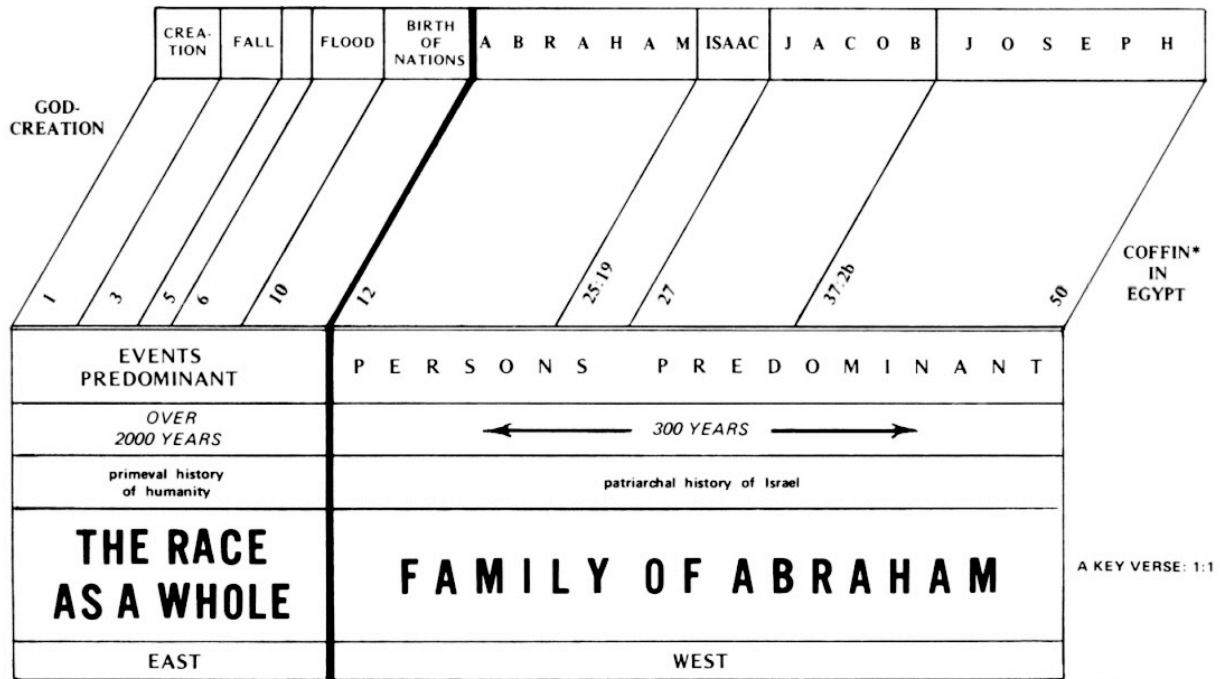


Genesis 1:1...The Majesty of God



- "Beginnings" in GENESIS:
1. world 1:1-25
 2. human race 1:26-2:25
 3. sin in the world 3:1-7
 4. promise of redemption 3:8-24
 5. family life 4:1-15
 6. civilization 4:16ff.
 7. nations of the world chs. 10, 11
 8. Hebrew race ch. 12ff.

The coffin suggested DELIVERANCE from bondage (see 50:25)

A KEY PHRASE: "these are the generations of"



In the beginning...Implications

Knowing that God was "in the beginning" provides the greatest comfort to the Christian, especially when praying to God in time of need. God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing by his own declaration. At the same time, God is exalted above the creation. He who was before is also after and above. His will, which formed the universe, is not constrained by any created power. **This realization grounded the hope of Psalm 121:1–2: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." The Creator's help cannot be thwarted by anything in this world.**

The apostle Paul likewise grounded his assurance in God's supremacy over all creation: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, **nor anything else in all creation**, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39).

The Name for God in Genesis 1:1

The name for God in Genesis 1:1 is the Hebrew Elohim. It is the name associated with God the Father as Creator. It is a name that the first readers of Genesis 1 had already heard—the name of the loving, faithful, personal God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ***He is the true and living God, who dwells in majesty and glory.*** Many Christian writers have noted that Elohim is a plural name for a singular God, and have taken this as proof for the doctrine of the Trinity. Genesis does reveal God's triune being, but it is probably not sound to base the doctrine on this plural name. ***The word God (Elohim) is plural probably as an expression of majesty and power, as befitting the Creator. Moreover, as John Calvin points out, Elohim is used as a name for the Father, in distinction from the Spirit, who appears in verse 2. Elohim is thus used here not as encompassing the Trinity but to refer to the Creator Father.***

Created

The particular word used for “create” (Hebrew, bara) is a seldom-used term that always refers to God’s activity in making things from nothing. Alec Motyer writes that “when this verb to create has a subject, it is always God; when it has a presumed subject, it is always God.”

In Genesis chapter 1, this word is used three times: in verse 1 for the creation of all things, in verse 21 when God created the living creatures, and in verse 27 when God created man in his own image.

Genesis thus describes what theologians refer to as creation “ex nihilo”, that is, creation out of nothing....We believe that God, who has always been, created all things, whereas there had previously been nothing but himself. Only God can create in this way, never man.

The distinction is between making things out of existing material as, for instance, a carpenter makes a chair and creating the wood itself that will become the chair.

The writer of Hebrews identifies creation by God out of nothing as a fundamental article of Christian faith: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Heb. 11:3).”

The heavens and the earth...a “merism”

Genesis 1:1 states that God created “the heavens and the earth.” It is often asserted that this statement constitutes a “merism”. This literary device uses polar extremes as a way of gathering together everything in between. To say that God created “the heavens and the earth,” then, is simply a way of saying that he created everything—that is, the universe. Alasdair Paine writes: “The heavens and the earth is deliberately all-inclusive...God made it all!”

It is undoubtedly true that God created the whole universe, but it is unlikely that the expression “the heavens and the earth” is making this point alone. In addition to functioning as a merism, it identifies the two great realms of creation: the material and the immaterial. ... In addition to the physical, there is the unseen, heavenly world that was also created by God. In this way, Genesis 1:1 rejects materialism, the view that matter is all that there is.

David Atkinson writes that “heaven refers to a higher world, of angels, of God’s throne, of God’s glory. . . . There may be much within the created world which we cannot sense, cannot weigh and measure, cannot put in a test tube; there may be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy; but the Lord God made them all. **There is a created spiritual world, just as there is a created material world”**

This was evidently the view of the early church Council of Nicaea, which began the Nicene Creed by saying, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”

Genesis 1 will detail the creation and forming of the material universe, which is why verse 2 focuses on “the earth” separately from the heavens. But from the beginning, God created all that is, including the spiritual realms. No doubt, from the perspective of the original hearers of Genesis, “the heavens and the earth” encompassed both the material and spiritual realms.

The Story Begins...and is continued in John 1:1

There is a trajectory and a story that Genesis 1:1 announces. The great question to ask is “What is that story?” If we wonder, we should ask the original audience to which the book of Genesis was written.

The Bible tells us that Genesis was written by Moses during the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt (see Ex. 24:4; John 5:45–47, among many other examples). Therefore, when we read the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," we should imagine the people of Israel as walking on the desert earth, gazing up at the million shining lights of the blazing heavens that God had made. God created all the glory shining down on them, as well as the good earth of the land to which they were sojourning. ***If we ask those Israelite readers, "What is your story?" we will gain a clue to what began in Genesis 1:1. We know their answer...the story that begins with God's creation is the great story of redemption.***

The Israelites were living the story of deliverance from bondage to evil and salvation in a land of promise that God intended from the Bible's first verse. Their story looked back to God's creation and then to man's sin and the misery and death that it produced. But their story looked forward as well to a Savior, who was also part of God's original design, to the Lamb slain "before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:19–20).

The New Testament gospel message begins in language that deliberately echoes Genesis 1:1. Moses began the story of creation, from which the tale of sin and redemption would emerge, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The apostle John, centuries later, opened his Gospel with a deliberate echo of Genesis 1:1, speaking of Jesus Christ: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). In these words, we are reminded that to begin the Bible is to relish the story it tells, the terrible problem it defines, and the marvelous solution it offers from God.

The character of God...a focal emphasis in Genesis

There are two vital points about the knowledge of God. The first point is that knowing God is the highest endeavor of mankind. We can see this when we open our Bible and turn to its first words: "In the beginning, God."

Set before us is the great subject of the entire Bible and all of life. Jesus affirmed the centrality of the knowledge of God in his great High Priestly Prayer..."this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God" (John 17:3). When the Scriptures take us back to the beginning, we find that God is there. In the first thing that happens in all history, God is the sole actor.

Throughout history, faithful church leaders have emphasized the priority of theology proper, that is, the study of God. For instance, in 1854, Charles Spurgeon began his historic thirty-eight-year pulpit ministry at the New Park Street Chapel in London, which produced sixty-three volumes of printed sermons. **In his very first sermon, the nineteen-year-old Spurgeon began by declaring the central importance of knowing God:**

“The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. . . . But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. . . . Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity”

It is little wonder that, springing from these opening words, Spurgeon’s ministry would be so remarkably blessed by God’s power.

While Spurgeon points out the value of studying God, theologian J. I. Packer notes the peril to those who neglect to know God:

“The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business...*Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.*”

In addition to noting the importance of knowing God, the Westminster divines made a second vital point. As they turned to God in prayer, they also noted that God himself is the only true source of the knowledge of himself. The chief reason for the Bible’s existence is God’s own revelation of his being, person, will, and works.

Therefore, whenever we study the Bible, whether in the church, in a small group, or privately, the one question that we must always ask is, “What does this teaching tell me about God?”

As we begin to study the book of Genesis, it is therefore most fitting for us to ask this question about Genesis 1:1.

God Is Transcendent

When we begin thinking about God, our first thought should concern the infinite distance between the Creator and the creation. We refer to this distance as the transcendence of God...God is categorically and infinitely above all his creation.

God is transcendent over everything else in terms of his nature. The Song of Moses asked, “Who is like you, O LORD . . . ? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (Ex. 15:11). ***There is nothing to which we may suitably compare God, and for this reason theology often relies on negative statements. Unable to adequately declare what God is, we resort to stating what he is not...God is infinite, not finite; independent, not dependent; immutable, not capable of change. The reason for this transcendence of nature is evident in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God.” God existed before and wholly apart from his creation, so nothing in the creation can encompass who and what he is.***

John Calvin devoted the first book of his Institutes of the Christian Religion to the knowledge of God, pointing out that while we cannot know God perfectly, we can know true things about his nature by studying the creation. Yet the first thing for us to learn about God is that for all that he reveals about himself,...***“His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought.”***

It is because of this divine transcendence that we use a variety of terms to express God’s surpassing nature, calling him great and majestic. Paul extols God as the One “who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16).”

God is transcendent not only in nature but also in time. Genesis 1:1 declares that in the beginning God already was, which presents him as an eternal being. Peter Lewis writes: “Before there was matter, time and space there was God. ***God has no succession of moments in his own Being. God alone is infinite and eternal, the uncreated Creator, unique in his eternity and all-sufficient in the infinite resources of his Being, the fullness of light, love, joy and meaning. Moses, the author of Genesis and the entire Pentateuch writes “From everlasting to everlasting you are God’ (Ps. 90:2).”***

Contemplating such a God, believers find awe in worship and comfort in faith. Abraham, in the midst of his otherwise perplexing journeys, “called . . . on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God” (Gen. 21:33).

God Is Immanent and Personal

Genesis 1:1 not only pulls our thoughts infinitely far away in contemplating God’s transcendence, but also draws our hearts near to a personal God who is immanent. The very fact that “in the beginning, God created” indicates that he wills to be known and to share a relationship with those outside himself. The reason for this intimacy is that God is personal as well as transcendent. Being personal, God is known not merely in terms of impersonal characteristics, the way that an object is measured, but in personal attributes.

In opposing the knowledge of God, unbelieving thinkers labor to support the idea of an impersonal origin for all things, such as the big bang theory. The reason for this futile quest is that a personal Creator implies that there is a divine will and purpose. ***We must relate to the God of the Bible on personal terms, and since he is our Creator, this requires worship, submission, and obedience—the very things that our rebellious world desires to avoid.*** Paul perfectly described this situation in Romans 1:21: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” A personal God is honored and thanked for the great and good things he has provided, and this precludes us from acting as our own gods. But by denying God’s personal existence, Paul adds, mankind “became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21).

God Is Almighty

A third characteristic of the God revealed in Genesis 1:1 is seen in his ability to create all things out of nothing. God is, therefore omnipotent. He is the Lord Almighty. These words mean that God possesses infinite power to do whatsoever he pleases. As the creation story unfolds, we find God’s power glorified both in the difficulty and scale of what he accomplishes and in the ease with which he does it, namely, by means of his mere word. The psalmist marvels: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps. 33:6, 9).

God's power is infinite

God's power, like God himself, is infinite. There is literally nothing that he desires to do that he is not able to do. This omnipotence is essential to his divine nature.

A. W. Pink writes: "He who cannot do what he will and perform all his pleasure cannot be God. As God hath a will to resolve what He deems good, so has He power to execute His will."

Christians rely utterly on the infinite power of God the Creator to fulfill all that he has promised and achieve everything according to his Word.

This attribute was on the mind of Jerusalem's King Jehoshaphat when he gathered the Israelite nation to pray for God's help when a horde of invaders appeared out of the east: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you" (2 Chron. 20:6). God responded to the king's prayer of faith by wiping out the entire Moabite and Ammonite armies by his own might alone.

Without God's infinite power, none of his other attributes could succeed in expression. Stephen Charnock writes:

"How vain would be the eternal counsels, if power did not step in to execute them. Without power His mercy would be but feeble pity, His promises an empty sound, His threatenings a mere scarecrow. God's power is like Himself: infinite, eternal, incomprehensible: it can neither be checked, restrained, nor frustrated by the creature."

No wonder, then, that Christians praise God especially for his power. Moses and Israel acclaimed the power of God in his sovereignty and transcendence after Israel passed through the Red Sea: "The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. . . . Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy" (Ex. 15:2, 6).

God's power is sovereign

God's power is not only infinite, but also sovereign. This means that God's eternal will, empowered by his infinite might, is the ultimate cause and reason for everything that is.

People sometimes recoil against the idea of God's being absolutely sovereign over all things. But consider the God of Genesis 1:1, who made all things according to his own will and infinite power.

A. W. Tozer writes: ***“Sovereignty and omnipotence must go together. One cannot exist without the other.*** To reign, God must have power, and to reign sovereignly, He must have all power. And that is what omnipotent means, having all power.”

A potent biblical illustration of God's sovereignty is Paul's description of God as the Potter and the individual person as his clay: “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?” (Rom. 9:21; cf. Jer. 18:6). Paul used this illustration to reinforce his teaching of God's predestinating will. ***Many people reject the idea that we are but clay in the hands of the divine Potter. But Genesis 1 declares this to be exactly the case, making the opening verse of the Bible one of the strongest declarations of God's absolute sovereignty: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”***

God's power is redemptive

Finally, the Bible goes on to show that God's power is redemptive. God glorifies his power in the highest extent not only in the scope of his creative genius but in his saving power to overthrow sin in the lives of those whom he would save. God's omnipotence declares him able to do all things according to his will. ***What if God's will is to love and restore rebellious and guilty sinners to himself, while still honoring his perfect justice? Is God able to do that? The answer is that God's power to overcome sin is glorified in the marvel of redemption through Jesus Christ.***

In an achievement that boggles our minds far more than the greatest and most distant galaxy, God sent his Son to become a man, in order to pay the penalty of our sin on the cross. Paul writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). God's saving power is seen in Paul's remarkable formula: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20).

Moreover, God has the power through the Holy Spirit to change the hardened heart (Ezek. 36:26), giving life to the spirit that was dead in sin and unbelief, so that we believe and enter into eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. You experience the power of the Creator in his highest work—redemption—if through his Spirit you believe his gospel message and gain the forgiveness of your sins through faith in Jesus Christ.

A God to Be Adored and Praised

Already we have learned so much about God in just the Bible's first verse. He is transcendent, personal, and almighty.

Having met God in Genesis 1:1, how should his creatures respond? Bruce Milne writes that the Bible's teaching of God clearly calls "for a deep self-abasement of ourselves before his awesome majesty, and highlight[s] our obligation to offer him an adoring, submissive worship."

Truly, 'Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise' (Ps. 96:4)." In one of our most beloved hymns, Christians sing praise to God for his creation:

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!

When we get to the end of the Bible, we find that this impulse to worship God as Creator is further fulfilled by the heavenly beings in glory: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11). This heavenly chorus shows that our calling to worship is grounded in the fact of God as our Creator. For while Christians have abundant reasons to praise God for our redemption, everyone has every reason to glorify God as our Maker. Pink exclaims: "The wondrous and infinite perfections of such a Being call for fervent worship. If men of might and renown claim the admiration of the world, how much more should the power of the Almighty fill us with wonderment and homage."

Self Existence

What's in a name? In our culture, the answer is often "not very much," because names are commonly given simply because of the way they sound. ***In the Bible, there is very much to a name.*** Moses knew this. Therefore, as he received his commission to deliver Israel out of Egypt, he asked God for his name: "Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' " (Ex. 3:13). The answer was of the greatest significance. "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" ' " (v. 14). This name is expressed in Hebrew by four letters: YHWH. The King James Version translated it as "Jehovah," but it is probably more accurate to pronounce it as "Yahweh." (***Moses introduces this special name for God in Genesis 2:4***)

John Calvin comments, "God attributes to himself alone divine glory, because he is self-existent and therefore eternal; and thus gives being and existence to every creature."

We remember that when Moses began writing Genesis, he had already met God at the burning bush. Moses had been tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when he saw a bush that "was burning, yet it was not consumed" (Ex. 3:2). ***There are no analogies for the being of God in nature, so God presented a supernatural analogy in the bush that burned but was not consumed. Just like the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, the blazing fire did not have an evident source and was not dependent on created materials. God's nature, likewise, is self-existing and self-sufficient.***

Just as God told Moses to approach with reverence, taking the sandals off his feet, ***we also should appreciate that the study of God's divine attributes is holy ground, calling for humble praise from our hearts.***

Understanding God's self-sufficiency is important simply because our worship calls for a right and true understanding of God. There are at least three practical implications for us.

The first is that God does not need our help. We are never helping God meet his needs even as he helps us meet ours. Tozer writes, "We commonly represent Him as a busy, eager, somewhat frustrated Father hurrying about seeking help to carry out His benevolent plan to bring peace and salvation to the world."

Paul refuted this way of thinking in the great doxology of Romans 11:

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen. (Rom. 11:34–36)”

The God who made all things out of his own eternal resources does not need our help but yet graciously invites us to participate in his glorious work in history. God does not need our witness to convert the lost, but he graciously welcomes us in playing a blessed role in the salvation of those who become our family members and close friends in the household of God. ***Rather than being paralyzed by God’s self-sufficiency, Christians will be emboldened by the certainty of his will and humbly motivated because he graciously stooped to work by and through his obedient people.***

It was to this end that God revealed his self-sufficiency to Moses as he was sending him on a daunting mission to Egypt. “I AM WHO I AM,” God declared (Ex. 3:14), so that Moses would know that the resources of a self-existent and self-sufficient God were available to him as he acted boldly in obedience and faith. The same is true for us in serving the gospel today.

A second implication of divine self-sufficiency is that since God possesses in himself an infinite fullness of blessing, the greatest aim of every creature is to truly know God through saving faith (John 17:3), becoming his beloved children and heirs. God is himself our greatest end, treasure, resource, and hope.

Thornwell writes: “Poor in ourselves, without strength, without resources, feeble as a reed, and easily crushed before the moth, we are yet rich and valiant and mighty in God. We have treasures which can never be consumed, resources which can never be exhausted, and strength which can never fail.”

Third, the knowledge of God’s self-sufficiency should humble us so that we often pray with a true sense of our great need. How great is our need of the blessings that only God can provide out of his infinite fullness!

Our endurance fails, so we should call on him who upholds all things with his own power. Isaiah rejoiced:

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength. . . .
They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength. (Isa. 40:28–31)

The same is true of our wisdom, which often falls so far short of the needs of life and difficulty. But God is all-sufficient in a store of perfect wisdom joined with infinite knowledge. James therefore writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5).

How much greater is our need when it comes to righteousness as we stand before God’s perfect justice. What can we offer to God that will cause him to violate his own holy standards in forgiving our sin? The answer is that we can offer nothing to the all-sufficient God. But in his abounding grace, for the glory of his infinite mercy, God has provided a sacrifice to us in order that we might be cleansed of our sins, while honoring his own justice. Romans 3:24–25 speaks of “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

The Immutability of God

We must consider one last attribute of God as we read Genesis and gaze on the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth...the attribute known as God’s immutability. God, being self-existent and self-sufficient, does not and cannot in his own being experience change. For us, life involves constant change, often for the worse....Yet God is an eternal being, so that he does not and cannot change. He is immutable.

One reason that God does not change is that change implies a succession of events, whereas God dwells in an eternal present in which there is no succession. He thus existed prior to creation and named himself to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). ***We are the beings who experience time as a succession of events. God is the absolute being who looks down on the entirety of history all at once.***

God sees the entire flow of history, knowing what for us is past and future all at the same time.

Divine immutability means that God never changes in his being. God always has been and always will be precisely as he is now. The attributes of God revealed in the Bible, including his holiness, truth, goodness, justice, and love, will never alter. This means that while every human source of trust is eventually bound to fail, God himself will never fail. A. W. Pink writes:

God has neither evolved, grown, nor improved. All that He is today, He has ever been, and ever will be. "I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal. 3:16) is His own unqualified affirmation. He cannot change for He is already perfect; and "being perfect, He cannot change for the worse. Altogether unaffected by anything outside Himself, improvement or deterioration is impossible. He is perpetually the same. He only can say, "I am that I am" (Ex. 3:14).⁹

Further, God never changes in his will and purpose. Numbers 23:19 declares: "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?" In God's will, James notes, "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17)...He always acts in a way that is consistent with himself.

This is equally true of God's will...amid all the turbulent changes in our world, God's will is perfectly fulfilled as it has been from all eternity. He declares, "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 immutability of God, like his self-existence and self-sufficiency, is full of comfort for the believer in Christ. Thornwell writes:

"The immutability of God is the foundation of all our hopes. It is here that the heirs of the promise have strong consolation. He can never deceive us in the expectations which He excites. He never falls short of, but often goes immeasurably beyond, what He had led us to expect. Here is the pledge of His faithfulness—He can never change; His counsel shall stand, and He will do all His pleasure."

Adapted from Genesis by Richard Phillips (Edited)