

God the Self-Existing

GENESIS 1:1

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In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

What is in a name? In our culture, the answer is often “not very much,” as names are commonly given simply because of the way that they sound. But 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’” (Ex. 3:14). 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. 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.”¹ In this divine sense, only God can name himself, “I AM.”

We have studied Genesis 1:1 being careful to learn what it tells us about the great God who is the subject of the Bible. In an earlier study, we considered God’s transcendence, personality, and omnipotence. Two of these – transcendence and omnipotence – are what theologians refer to as incommunicable attributes of God. This

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 2:73.

means they are characteristics that are unique to the Godhead and cannot be communicated to his creatures. Before we depart from the Bible's first verse, we should consider other attributes revealed here that are essential to deity and vital to a right understanding of God.

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. And 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 as holy ground, calling for humble praise from our hearts.

The Self-Existence of God

As you get older, you sometimes receive birthday cards that note the often-forgotten events of your now distant birth year. I was born in 1960, which saw numerous events that have likely impacted your life. The first Roman Catholic, John F. Kennedy, was elected as President of the United States after the first televised presidential debates. Dr. Seuss published *Green Eggs and Ham* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was also printed. On television, both *Rawhide* and *The Flintstones* first aired, while the movies *Ben Hur* and *Psycho* were released. An American spy plane was shot down over Russia, escalating Cold War tensions, and the Communist regime in Hanoi attacked South Vietnam, prompting the United States to send troops into that conflict. Clemson football beat South Carolina, but my alma mater, Michigan, fell in a close game to Ohio State.

If you were not alive when these events took place, then at the time you did not exist. There was a time when you were not, and then there was a time when you were, a date you recall as your birthday. Imagine, however, a being who does not have a birthday. There is no card that can be sent to him outlining the events of his first year.

There was no time when he was not. There was no moment when he became. This being is God. God did not come into existence, because he has always existed. As Moses exclaimed, “From everlasting to everlasting, you are God” (Ps. 90:2).

Little children often begin their journey in theology by asking the question, “Mommy, who made the world?” She likely answers, “Why, God made the world.” This only prompts a second question: “Then who made God?” The answer is one of the most important things we can know: “No one made God. God has always existed.” This is one of the most vital attributes of God, known as his *aseity*. The Latin *a* means *from*, and *se* means *self*. God is from himself; he is self-existing.

This statement does not mean that God created himself. It is a logical absurdity for something that did not exist to cause itself to exist. Rather, aseity means that God exists eternally in and of himself. Herman Bavinck writes: “All that God is, he is of himself.”² God has always existed and his existence does not arise from anything or anyone else. This is one of the great differences between you and God. You have parents. However mysterious the origin of life always is, there still were biological events that resulted in your being. But no such things can be said about God. James Henley Thornwell writes: “He leans upon nothing. He lives no borrowed life. He asks no leave to be. He is because He is.”³ This is precisely what is in the name that God gave to Moses: “I AM THAT I AM.”

The self-existence of God is a logical necessity to explain the existence of everything else. This point is known as the *cosmological argument* for God. Since it is an absurdity to believe that you can start with nothing and end with something, there must be a being who possesses self-existence. Since something which once did not exist could not have caused itself to exist, there must be a being which is uncaused and is thus the cause of all else. This is a question that Christians should ask atheists or agnostics, the latter being those who claim that we cannot know if there is a God. If there is not

² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 2:151.

³ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 3 vols. (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 1901, reprint 2004), 3:203.

necessarily a God – a being with self-existence – then where logically did existence come from? R. C. Sproul states the case:

If something exists, then something somewhere, somehow has to have the power of being within it, or nothing would be. . . . Why is there something rather than nothing? What or where is self-existent reality? The Scriptures answer that question on the very first page of the Old Testament: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The first affirmation of Christianity is that God is the Creator. That God alone is eternal. That God alone has *aseity*. God alone has self-existence. God alone has the power of being within himself. The difference between the human being and the Supreme Being is *being* rather than non-being.⁴

Christians admit that self-existence is beyond our ability to comprehend. But it is not illogical. Meanwhile, the atheist argument that there was existence without a cause is also mind-boggling but inherently irrational. Indeed, while philosophical arguments like this can never take the place of Scripture in proving Christianity, they can display the unreasonableness of atheistic unbelief. Difficult as self-existence is to understand, it is the implication of denying a self-existent God is logically absurd and thoroughly unreasonable.

In Romans 1, Paul taught that God reveals his divine attributes to everyone by means of creation: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (v. 20). The correct response, then, to the revelation of the self-existent God is to bow down and worship him. Those who suppress the awareness of God and refuse to worship him “are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). The necessity of God to explain creation calls for faith in him, and faith in him calls for praise. As the writer of Hebrews urged: “let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28-29).

The Self-Sufficiency of God

When we contemplate the Bible’s first sentence, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” we must realize not only his self-existence but also the important matter of God’s *self-sufficiency*. This means, since all things originate from

⁴ R. C. Sproul, “The Self-Existence of God,” *Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology*, audio recording, 1988.

God, that God has all things in himself and therefore has no need for anything outside of himself. Thornwell explains: “It means that God contains within Himself the fullness of perfection and blessedness – that nothing can be taken from Him and nothing added to Him.”⁵

The Westminster Confession expresses this truth in classic terms:

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things” (2.2).

This teaching may be hard to understand until we remember that all things originate from God, so that God has all things in himself. The burning bush, by which God illustrated his self-existence, also symbolizes his self-sufficiency: the fire did not depend on the bush for its fuel but burned by its own self-sufficient resources. Therefore, there was no lack in the bush that could dampen God’s fire; likewise, since God’s perfect sufficiency does not depend on anything that happens in his creation, there is nothing in all the universe that can add to his blessing or subtract from his fullness.

People will counter that the very fact that God created the heavens and the earth shows that God desires the things he has made. This is of course true, but not because God lacks anything in himself that he is seeking through matter, history, or us. Rather, God simply desired to manifest the perfections of his glorious attributes through creation and then through redemption. Yet this desire for glory does not arise from a need, as if God did not eternally possess infinite glory. Jesus said, “the Father has life in himself” (Jn. 5:26). Therefore, all that God needs he already possesses eternally.

Since God is self-sufficient, all of his relations with his creatures are purely voluntary. A. W. Tozer explains, “God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made, but He has no *necessary* relation to anything outside of Himself.”⁶ You and I have necessary relationships: we need air and food in order to survive; we need

⁵ Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 2:198.

⁶ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961, reprint 1992), 52.

shelter, companionship, and honest work in order to be healthy. Yet the God who created the universe does not have needs but eternally possesses infinite blessing in himself. It is certainly true that God desires to bring us into a personal relationship of love with himself, but this is not because God needs love. God eternally possesses the fullness of perfect love in the inner-relations of the trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Understanding God's self-sufficiency is important simply because our worship calls for a right and true understanding of God. There are, however, 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."⁷ 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 to play a blessed role in the salvation of those who become our family members and close friends in the household of God. Therefore, 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, 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.

⁷ Ibid., 54.

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 possess God through saving faith*, 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.”⁸

Third, the knowledge of God 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 not 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 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” (Ja. 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 there is nothing we can offer to bribe 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. 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.” God himself, out of his own fullness, provided in his Son the sacrifice to cleanse us from our sins (1 Jn. 1:7). In accepting the gospel and receiving his salvation, we are offering nothing to God but receiving all things from him.

⁸ Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 2:198.

The Immutability of God

There is one last attribute of God which we must consider as we stand on the doorstep of biblical revelation and gaze on the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth. This is 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. This is why fewer and fewer people connect with the events that took place in 1960, the year I was born, because it is increasingly long ago and things have changed so much since. 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 contingent beings who experience time as a succession of events, our lives like a boat that careens down a rapid-filled river, one harrowing twist after another. But God is the absolute being who looks down on the entirety of history all at once. God sees the entire river 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 bound eventually 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

God further 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

⁹ A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 37.

he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” In God’s will, James says, “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Ja. 1:17).

People object and say that the Bible itself shows God’s attitude and actions changing with respect to people. But it is not God and his will that have changed; it is the people who have changed through faith or unbelief. Philip Ryken comments: “The fact that God is immutable does not mean that he is immobile. Although his attributes do not change, God is active in possessing and exercising them. He always acts in a way that is consistent with himself.”¹⁰ This is equally true of God’s will, which though unchanging is nonetheless dynamic and active. Therefore amidst all the turbulent changes of life and history, 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.”¹¹

At the same that God’s unchangeableness is the great hope of the believer it should also be the great terror of the unbelieving and rebellious. For it also means that the dire threats of God’s impending judgment will come to pass and that a life spent in rejecting God and his will is certain to end in the lake of fire at the final judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). Wilhelmus a’ Brakel thus makes the immutability of God a strong plea for all who hear the gospel of Jesus Christ to repent and believe: “Since God is immutable, how you should fear, unconverted sinner! For all the threatenings and judgments, both temporal and

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken: *Discovering God in Stories from the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 70.

¹¹ Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 2:202.

eternal, with which you have been threatened, will certainly and unavoidably come upon you if you do not repent.”¹²

The Great “I Am”

In his great chapter on faith, the writer of Hebrews began by noting that Christian faith begins at Genesis 1:1: “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). Having understood that God exists and that all things are from him, faith “must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6). The great issue of life, therefore, is to believe in God and seek a relationship with him. We look up at the stars, so vast and far away – how can tiny specks like us meet and know our Creator?

The answer to this greatest of questions is given in the Bible, as it tells us that the Creator himself has stepped across the boundary between heaven and earth in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the great Christian declaration. When Moses stood before the burning bush and received the command to go redeem Israel from Egypt, could he ever have imagined that the great “I AM” would himself take up flesh in order to be the Redeemer who frees us from our sin?

It is precisely Jesus’ claim that he is the “I AM” of the Old Testament, the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth. Once he was teaching at the temple and said, “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day” (Jn. 8:56). His skeptical hearers scoffed that he was less than fifty years old and yet he spoke of seeing Abraham! (Jn. 8:57). Jesus answered: “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!” When they tried to stone him Jesus walked away unscathed. Jesus later revealed his identity as the self-existent God to soldiers who had been sent to arrest him. “Whom do you seek?” he ask, and they answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus looked at them and declared, “I am,” and “they drew back and fell to the ground,” quaking in the presence of the self-existent Creator.

Yet when we think of Jesus taking up God’s holy name, it is mainly his gracious invitation to needy sinners that comes to mind. John’s

¹² Wilhelmus a’ Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 1992), 1:101.

Gospel is famous for Jesus' great "I Am" statements. In them, he not only reveals his self-existent glory and his self-sufficient resources, but he offers them to any who will receive him in humble faith. "I am the bread of life," he said. "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn. 6:35). "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (Jn. 11:25). "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus declared. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6). By taking up this great name, "I AM," Jesus declared his own nature as the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, the God who possesses all life and sufficiency in himself, and who offers to bless those who come to him in faith. He is sufficient even to remove the guilt of your sin, saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11).

Perhaps the best news is that the Savior Jesus is not only the self-existent, self-sufficient God, but like the Father is also immutable. Hebrews 13:8 says: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Therefore, he will treat with you as he did with needy sinners in the Bible. If you seek the favor of God through the Son whom he has sent, you will not only find your meaning in the self-existent God, gain your fulfillment in the self-sufficient Creator, but when you receive the forgiveness of your sins at the cross of Jesus Christ you will know that your acceptance into the love and life of God will never change.