

This is our fourteenth study of the “Attributes of God.”

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Attributes of God

by A. W. Pink

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About the Author

Arthur W. Pink was born in Nottingham, England in 1886, and born again of the Spirit of God in 1908. He studied at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, USA for only six weeks before beginning his pastoral work in Colorado. From there he pastored churches in California, Kentucky and South Carolina before moving on to Sidney, Australia for a brief period, preaching and teaching. In 1934, He returned to his native land, England, and in 1940 took up permanent residence on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, remaining there until his death twelve years later in 1952. Most of his works, including *The Attributes Of God*, first appeared as articles in the monthly *Studies In The Scriptures* published from 1922 to 1953.

Lesson 12 *The Contemplation of God*

Chapter 19

The Contemplation of God

The divine nature

IN THE PREVIOUS STUDIES WE HAVE HAD IN REVIEW SOME of the wondrous and lovely perfections of the divine character. From this most feeble and faulty contemplation of His attributes, it should be evident to us all that God is—First, an *incomprehensible* Being, and, lost in wonder at His infinite greatness, we are constrained to adopt the words of Zophar, “Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea” (Job 11:7-9). When we turn our thoughts to God’s eternity, His immateriality, His omnipresence, His almightiness, our minds are overwhelmed.

The study of the Deity

But the incomprehensibility of the divine nature is not a reason why we should desist from reverent inquiry and prayerful strivings to apprehend what He has so graciously revealed of Himself in His Word. Because we are unable to acquire perfect knowledge, it would be folly to say we will therefore make no efforts to attain to *any* degree of it. It has been well said:

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. The most excellent study for expanding the soul is the science of Christ and Him crucified and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity (C.H. Spurgeon).

Let us quote a little further from this prince of preachers:

The proper study of the Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can engage the attention of a child of God is the name, the nature, the person, the doings, and the existence of the great God which 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. Other subjects we can comprehend and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-contentment, and go on our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, “I am but of yesterday and know nothing” (Sermon on Mal 3:6).

Yes, the incomprehensibility of the divine nature should teach us *humility, caution, and reverence*. After all our searchings and meditations we have to say with Job, “Lo, these are parts of His ways: but how little a portion is heard of him?” (26:14). When Moses besought Jehovah for a sight of His glory, He answered him, “I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee” (Exo 33:19), and, as another has said: “The name is the collection of His attributes.” Rightly did the Puritan John Howe declare:

The notion therefore we can hence form of His glory, is only such as we may have of a large volume by a brief synopsis, or of a spacious country by a little landscape. He hath here given us a true report of Himself, but not a full; such as will secure our apprehensions—being guided thereby—from error, but not from ignorance. We can apply our minds to contemplate the several perfections whereby the blessed God discovers to us His being, and can in our thoughts attribute them all to Him, though we have still but low and defective conceptions of each one. Yet so far as our apprehensions can correspond to the discovery that He affords us of His several excellencies, we have a present view of His glory.

As the difference is indeed great between the knowledge of God which His saints have in this life and that which they shall have in Heaven, yet, as the former should not be undervalued because it is imperfect, so the latter is not to be magnified above its reality. True, the Scripture declares that we shall see “face to face” and “know” even as we are known (1 Cor 13:12). But to infer from this that we shall then know God as fully as He knows us is to be misled by the mere sound of words, and to disregard the restriction of that knowledge that our finiteness necessarily requires. There is a vast difference between the saints being glorified and their being made divine. In their glorified state, Christians will still be finite creatures, and therefore, never able to fully comprehend the infinite God.

The saints in heaven will see God with the eye of the mind, for He will be always invisible to the bodily eye. They will see Him more clearly than they could see Him by reason and faith, and more extensively than all His works and dispensations had hitherto revealed Him. But their minds will not be so enlarged as to be capable of contemplating at once, or in detail, the whole excellence of His nature. To comprehend infinite perfection, they must become infinite themselves. Even in heaven, their knowledge will be partial, but at the same time their happiness will be complete, because their knowledge will be perfect in this sense, that it will be adequate to the capacity of the subject, although it will not exhaust the fullness of the object. We believe that it will be progressive, and that as their views expand, their blessedness will increase. But it will never reach a limit beyond which there is nothing to be discovered, and when ages after ages have passed away, He will still be the incomprehensible God (John Dick, 1840).

Secondly, from a review of the perfections of God, it appears that He is an *all-sufficient Being*. He is all-sufficient in Himself and to Himself. As the First of beings, He could receive nothing from another, nor be limited by the power of another. Being infinite, He is possessed of all possible perfection. When the Triune God existed all alone, He was all to Himself. His understanding, His love, His energies, found an adequate object in Himself. Had He stood in need of anything external He would not have been *independent*, and therefore He would not have been God. He created all things, and that *for Himself* (Col 1:16), yet it was not in order to supply a lack, but that He might communicate life and happiness to angels and men, and admit them to the vision of His glory. True, He demands the allegiance and services of His intelligent creatures, yet *He* derives no benefit from their offices; all the advantage redounds to themselves (Job 22:2-3). He makes use of means and instruments to accomplish His ends, yet not from a deficiency of power, but oftentimes to more strikingly display His power through the feebleness of the instruments.

His lovingkindness better than life

The all-sufficiency of God makes Him to be the Supreme Object which is ever to be sought unto. True happiness consists only in the enjoyment of God. His favor is life, and His lovingkindness is better than life. “The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him” (Lam 3:24). His love, His grace, and His glory are the chief objects of the saints’ desire and the springs of their highest satisfaction.

There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased (Psa 4:6-7).

Yea, the Christian, when in his right mind, is able to say:

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation (Hab 3:17-18).

The God of creation

Thirdly, from a review of the perfections of God, it appears that He is the *Supreme Sovereign of the universe*. It has been rightly said:

No dominion is so absolute as that which is founded on creation. He who might not have made any thing, had a right to make all things according to His own pleasure. In the exercise of His uncontrolled power, He has made some parts of the creation mere inanimate matter, of grosser or more refined texture, and distinguished by different qualities, but all inert and unconscious. He has given organization to other parts, and made them susceptible of growth and expansion, but still without life in the proper sense of the term. To others He has given not only organization, but conscious existence, organs of sense and self-motive power. To these He has added in man the gift of reason, and an immortal spirit, by which he is allied to a higher order of beings who are placed in the superior regions.

Over the world which He has created, He sways the scepter of omnipotence. “I praised and honored him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: and all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”— Daniel 4:34-35 (John Dick).

Study Questions: Lesson 12

First please read chapter 19 in the text.

RESPONSE

The divine nature

1. a. When we contemplate all God's attributes, what should be evident to us about Him?
- b. What does Scripture say about this?

The study of the Deity

2. In your own words, explain why we should earnestly pursue a greater knowledge and understanding of God, even though our thoughts become lost in His immensity.
3. What should be the primary study of the Christian and what does this study involve?
4. Why does the contemplation of the Divinity improve the mind?
5. In their glorified state, will Christians know God as fully as He knows them? Explain.
6. What is the second aspect of God's Being which we can conclude from a review of His perfections? Explain it briefly, and include Scripture references and key points.

His lovingkindness is better than life

7. What does true happiness consist of? Include Scripture references and key points.
8. What does Hab. 3:17-18 say about the Christian who thinks rightly?

The God of creation

9. What is the third conclusion we can make about God from a review of His perfections? Explain in your own words how this perfection is manifested. Please include the Scripture provided.
10. Does the creature have rights? Explain
11. List the ways in which God exercises His sovereignty according to His own imperial and righteous pleasure.

REFLECTION

12. To those who know Jesus Christ as Lord, God is a tender Father. Take some time to reflect upon what this means to you personally, and then write your thoughts.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

13. Take some time briefly to review the 12 lessons of this study. Consider the new understanding you may have gained about the most Holy God and the heart changes you may have experienced through the work of the Holy Spirit. Please write your thoughts.
14. If you have never turned from sin to turn to God, *please read* the following article by J. C. Ryle (British pastor and author, 1817 - 1900). What is your response?

We will conclude this study with a brief review of the chief attributes of God:

The Solitariness of God

Before all else

“In the beginning God” (Gen 1:1). There was a time, if “time” it could be called, when God, in the unity of His nature (though subsisting equally in three divine persons), dwelt all alone. “In the beginning God.” There was no heaven, where His glory is now particularly manifested. There was no earth to engage His attention. There were no angels to hymn His praises; no universe to be upheld by the word of His power. There was nothing, no one, but God; and *that*, not for a day, a year, or an age, but “from everlasting.” During eternity past, God was alone: self-contained, self-sufficient, self-satisfied; in need of nothing. Had a universe, had angels, had human beings been necessary to Him in any way, they also had been called into existence from all eternity. The creating of them when He did, added nothing to God essentially. He changes not (Mal 3:6), therefore His essential glory can be neither augmented nor diminished.

The Decrees of God

THE DECREE OF GOD IS HIS PURPOSE OR DETERMINATION with respect to future things. We have used the singular number as Scripture does (Rom 8:28; Eph 3:11), because there was only one act of His infinite mind about future things. But *we* speak as if there had been many, because our minds are only capable of thinking of *successive* revolutions, as thoughts and occasions arise, or in reference to the various *objects* of His decree, which being many seem to us to require a distinct purpose for each one. But an infinite understanding does not proceed by steps, from one stage to another: “Known unto God are *all* His works from the beginning of the world” (Act 15:18).

The Knowledge of God

God’s omniscience

GOD IS OMNISCIENT. HE KNOWS EVERYTHING: EVERYTHING possible, everything actual; all events and all creatures, of the past, the present, and the future. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven, in earth, and in hell. “He knoweth what is in the darkness” (Dan 2:22). Nothing escapes His notice, nothing can be hidden from Him, nothing is forgotten by Him. Well may we say with the Psalmist, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (Psa 139:6). His knowledge is perfect. He never errs, never changes, never overlooks anything. “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:13). Yes, such is the God “with whom we have to do”!

The Foreknowledge of God

Foreknowledge defined

Now the word “foreknowledge” as it is used in the New Testament is less ambiguous than in its simple form “to know.” If every passage in which it occurs is carefully studied, it will be discovered that it is a moot point whether it ever has reference to the mere perception of events which are yet to take place. The fact is that “foreknowledge” is *never* used in Scripture in connection with events or actions; instead, it always has reference to *persons*. It is persons God is said to “foreknow,” not the actions of those persons.

The Supremacy of God

King of kings and Lord of lords

The supremacy of the true and living God might well be argued from the infinite distance which separates the mightiest creatures from the almighty Creator. He is the Potter, they are but the clay in His hands, to be molded into vessels of honour, or to be dashed into pieces (Psa 2:9) as He pleases. Were all the denizens of heaven and all the inhabitants of the earth to combine in revolt against Him, it would occasion Him no uneasiness, and would have less effect upon His eternal and unassailable Throne than has the spray of Mediterranean’s waves upon the towering rocks of Gibraltar. So puerile [silly and immature] and powerless is the creature to affect the Most High. Scripture itself tells us that when the Gentile heads unite with apostate Israel to defy Jehovah and His Christ, “He that sitteth in the heavens shall *laugh*” (Psa 2:4).

The Sovereignty of God

God’s sovereignty defined

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD MAY BE DEFINED AS THE exercise of His supremacy—see preceding chapter. Being infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth. Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. So His own Word expressly declares: “My counsel shall stand, and *I will do* all My pleasure” (Isa 46:10); “He doeth according to *His* will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand” (Dan 4:35). divine sovereignty means that God is God in fact, as well as in name, that He is on the Throne of the universe, directing all things, working all things “after the counsel of His own will” (Eph 1:11).

The Immutability of God

God is distinguished from His creatures.

IMMUTABILITY IS ONE OF THE DIVINE PERFECTIONS WHICH is not sufficiently pondered. It is one of the excellencies of the Creator which distinguishes Him from all His creatures. God is perpetually the same: subject to no change in His being, attributes, or determinations. Therefore God is compared to a “*Rock*” (Deu 32:4, etc.) which remains immovable, when the entire ocean surrounding it is continually in a fluctuating state; even so, though all creatures are subject to change, God is immutable. Because God has no beginning and no ending, He can know no change. He is everlastingly “the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jam 1:17).

The Holiness of God

Only God is holy.

“WHO SHALL NOT FEAR THEE, O LORD, AND GLORIFY THY name? for thou only art holy” (Rev 15:4). He only is independently, infinitely, immutably holy. In Scripture He is frequently styled “The Holy One”: He is so because the sum of all moral excellency is found in Him. He is absolute Purity, unsullied even by the shadow of sin. “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1Jo 1:5). Holiness is the very excellency of the divine nature: the great God is “glorious in holiness” (Exo 15:11). Therefore do we read, “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Hab 1:13). As God’s power is the opposite of the native weakness of the creature, as His wisdom is in complete contrast from the least defect of understanding or folly, so His holiness is the very antithesis of all moral blemish or defilement. Of old God appointed singers in Israel “that should praise the beauty of holiness” (2Ch 20:21). “Power is God’s hand or arm, omniscience His eye, mercy His bowels, eternity His duration, but holiness is His beauty” (S. Charnock). It is this, supremely, which renders Him lovely to those who are delivered from sin’s dominion.

T

The Power of God

Establishing a correct concept of God's power

WE CANNOT HAVE A RIGHT CONCEPTION OF GOD UNLESS we think of Him as all-powerful, as well as all-wise. 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.

The power of God is that ability and strength whereby He can bring to pass whatsoever He pleases, whatsoever His infinite wisdom may direct, and whatsoever the infinite purity of His will may resolve...As holiness is the beauty of all God's attributes, so power is that which gives life and action to all the perfections of the divine nature. 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 (Stephen Charnock).

The Faithfulness of God

Faithful in all things, at all times

UNFAITHFULNESS IS ONE OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING sins of these evil days. In the business world, a man's word is, with exceedingly rare exceptions, no longer his bond. In the social world, marital infidelity abounds on every hand, the sacred bonds of wedlock being broken with as little regard as the discarding of an old garment. In the ecclesiastical realm, thousands who have solemnly covenanted to preach the truth make no scruple to attack and deny it. Nor can reader or writer claim complete immunity from this fearful sin. In how many ways have we been unfaithful to Christ, and to the light and privileges which God has entrusted to us! How refreshing, then, how unspeakably blessed, to lift our eyes above this scene of ruin, and behold One who *is* faithful—faithful in all things, faithful at all times.

The Goodness of God

God's goodness revealed

“THE GOODNESS OF GOD ENDURETH CONTINUALLY” (Psa 52:1). The goodness of God refers to the perfection of His nature: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1Jo 1:5). There is such an absolute perfection in God’s nature and being that nothing is wanting to it or defective in it and nothing can be added to it to make it better.

He is originally good, good of Himself, which nothing else is; for all creatures are good only by participation and communication from God. He is essentially good; not only good, but goodness itself: the creature’s good is a super-added quality, in God it is His essence. He is infinitely good; the creature’s good is but a drop, but in God there in an infinite ocean or gathering together of good. He is eternally and immutably good, for He cannot be less good than He is; as there can be no addition made to Him, so no subtraction from Him (Thomas Manton).

The Patience of God

God's patience prevails

Stephen Charnock, the Puritan, defines God’s patience, in part, thus:

It is part of the divine goodness and mercy, yet differs from both. God being the greatest goodness, hath the greatest mildness; mildness is always the companion of true goodness, and the greater the goodness, the greater the mildness. Who so holy as Christ, and who so meek? God’s slowness to anger is a branch...from His mercy: “The Lord is full of compassion, slow to anger” (Psa 145:8). It differs from mercy in the formal consideration of the object: mercy respects the creature as miserable, patience respects the creature as criminal; mercy pities him in his misery, and patience bears with the sin which engendered the misery, and is giving birth to more.

The Grace of God

GRACE IS A PERFECTION OF THE DIVINE CHARACTER WHICH is exercised only toward the elect. Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New is the grace of God ever mentioned in connection with mankind generally, still less with the lower orders of His creatures. In this it is distinguished from “mercy,” for the mercy of God is “over all His works” (Psa 145:9). Grace is the sole source from which flows the goodwill, love, and salvation of God unto His chosen people.

The Mercy of God

God's mercy originates in His goodness.

“O GIVE THANKS UNTO THE LORD: FOR HE IS GOOD: FOR His mercy endureth for ever” (Psa 136:1). For this perfection of the divine character God is greatly to be praised. Three times over in as many verses does the Psalmist here call upon the saints to give thanks unto the Lord for this adorable attribute. And surely this is the least that can be asked for from those who have been recipients of such bounty. When we contemplate the characteristics of this divine excellency, we cannot do otherwise than bless God for it. His mercy is “great” (1Ki 3:6), “plenteous” (Psa 86:5), “tender” (Luk 1:78), “abundant” (1Pe 1:3); it is “from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him” (Psa 103:17). Well may we say with the Psalmist, “I will sing aloud of thy mercy” (59:16).

The Lovingkindness of God

WE PROPOSE TO ENGAGE THE READER WITH ANOTHER OF His excellencies—of which every Christian receives innumerable proofs. We turn to a consideration of God's lovingkindness because our aim is to maintain a due proportion in treating of the divine perfections, for all of us are apt to entertain one-sided views of them. A balance must be preserved here (as everywhere), as it appears in those two statements of the divine attributes, “God is light” (1Jo 1:5), “God is love” (1Jo 4:8). The sterner, more awe-inspiring aspects of the divine character are offset by the gentler, more winsome ones. It is to our irreparable loss if we dwell exclusively on God's sovereignty and majesty, or His holiness and justice; we need to meditate frequently, though not exclusively, on His goodness and mercy. Nothing short of a full-orbed view of the divine perfections—as revealed in Holy Writ—should satisfy us.

The Love of God

The nature of God

THERE ARE THREE THINGS TOLD US IN SCRIPTURE concerning the *nature* of God. First, “God is spirit” (Joh 4:24). In the Greek there is no indefinite article, and to say “God is a spirit” is most objectionable, for it places Him in a class with others. God is “spirit” in the highest sense. Because He is “spirit” He is incorporeal, having no visible substance. Had God a tangible body, He would not be omnipresent, He would be limited to one place; because He is “spirit” He fills heaven and earth. Secondly, “God is light” (1Jo 1:5), which is the opposite of darkness. In Scripture “darkness” stands for sin, evil, death, and “light” for holiness, goodness, life. “God is light” means that He is the *sum* of all excellency. Thirdly, “God is love” (1Jo 4:8). It is not simply that God “loves,” but that He *is* Love itself. Love is not merely one of His attributes, but His very nature.

The Love of God to Us

BY “US” WE MEAN HIS PEOPLE. ALTHOUGH WE READ OF THE love “which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39), Holy Writ knows nothing of a love of God *outside* of Christ. “The LORD is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Psa 145:9), so that He provides the ravens with food. “He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:35), and His providence ministers unto the just and the unjust (Mat 5:45). But His *love* is reserved for His elect. That is unequivocally established by its characteristics, for the attributes of His love are identical with Himself. Necessarily so, for “God *is* love.”

The Wrath of God

IT IS SAD INDEED TO FIND SO MANY PROFESSING CHRISTIANS who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or who at least wish there were no such thing. While some who would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the divine character, yet they are far from regarding it with delight; they like not to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it. Even with those who are more sober in their judgment, not a few seem to imagine that there is a severity about the divine wrath that makes it too terrifying to form a theme for profitable contemplation. Others harbor the delusion that God’s wrath is not consistent with His goodness, and so seek to banish it from their thoughts.