

Divine Attributes

*Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your goodness to us as Your people. We thank You, Lord, mostly for the gift of Your Son. We thank You, Father, for the reality that whatever we are, we are in Jesus, that He is the mirror of our election, that He is the very embodiment of Your character, Your nature, Your essence in history and in the world. We pray now that as we turn our attention again this evening to Your character and to the doctrine of the trinity, that we would do so faithfully, that we would do so seeking to be biblical in all things. We thank You for all You have given us this day. For it is in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

The first thing we will take up is the issue of divine attributes. We have said quite a bit about divine attributes, but we want to return to it for a number of reasons. First are the expectations of the Christian community. If you are going to study the doctrine of God, people expect you are going to study the divine attributes. It is just somewhat traditional. So we should return to this issue and do it a bit more systematically than we have already up to this point. The second reason is that the act of attributing certain powers or capacities to God is not unbiblical. While knowing God is a matter of knowing Him as a personal actor rather than as a static collection of attributes, this is not to say that God cannot be characterized as possessing attributes. He certainly can. Scriptural statements which come down to “God is ‘X,’” and you can fill in the ‘X,’ are fairly easy to find. God is all-powerful. God is all-knowing. God is eternal. God is a person. Those are all easy to find. The third reason is, even though God voluntarily binds Himself to the covenant and His accommodated revelation, and even though He does that such that we cannot speak of Him outside of our standpoint in history, outside of our standpoint in the covenant, we need to remember that God is always more. He is more than our statements. He is more than His covenantal manifestation, and a reflection upon the attributes gives us an opportunity to confess that. Even if we cannot rationally unpack it all, it gives us an opportunity to confess that God transcends even His covenant manifestation.

Should we classify the attributes? Over the years, it has been common to put God's attributes into different schemes of classification, and there have been a couple of different ways of getting at this. One popular way traditionally is to make the distinction between communicable and incommunicable attributes. According to this taxonomy, a distinction is made between those attributes which God in some ways shares with human beings—those would be called communicable attributes—and those which are unique qualities to God alone—those would be incommunicable attributes. A second way of classifying God's attributes is by making the distinction between metaphysical and relational attributes, sometimes called natural and moral attributes. According to this way of organizing things, those qualities which adhere to God's essence, which pertain to Him as He is ‘in and of Himself,’ are understood as metaphysical or natural attributes. Those which characterize His relationship with the creation, however, are understood as relational or moral attributes.

I am not sure that either of these, or any other method of classification, quite frankly, compels allegiance. Recently people have suggested some other classifications. Millard Erickson has suggested a classification of attributes of greatness and of goodness. And the work of Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest has put forth a five-fold classification system: attributes of intellect, ethics, emotion, volition, and relationship. These recent classifications demonstrate that the older, traditional systems have not been compelling and perhaps are unnecessary. The fact is, I see no reason to work with a classification system at all. Scripture does not do it, and any classification system has its shortcomings. You see, any form of classification will invite us, even unintentionally, to make some kind of mental distinction within God, such that some attribute or collection of attributes is understood as being unrelated to others, or that some attribute or collection of attributes is somehow understood as being superior to others, or

more essential or more necessary to who God really is. I think here what we really need is just a little common sense. If we confess that human beings are in some sense unitary creatures, that the things that we are and do come from the entirety of what we are, then we should confess the same about God. We function as wholes. Also, before we get to our list, I want to emphasize that our list is just that: it is a tally. It is a list of capacities or characteristics which Scripture speaks of God as having. We will not attempt to order them and we will not attempt to argue that one attribute or some group of attributes is more fundamental than others.

One last thing before we get into the issue is that we need to say something here about philosophy one more time. Philosophical theology has done much with the notion of divine attributes, both in identifying them and in seeking to understand them in terms of their inner relationships. We want to be very careful here and follow Scripture. We do not want to follow a philosophically speculative agenda. It seems to me that the second commandment demands that our understanding of God be derived from Him rather than our own minds, see Exodus 20:4-6 and Deuteronomy 5:8-10 for that mandate. It is always the case that theology must beware of aligning itself too closely with any philosophical system or with the dictates of human reason. Philosophical concepts can serve the Gospel, but they must not be allowed to force the Gospel into their conceptual mold. We can and sometimes we must avail ourselves of philosophical concepts, and that is certainly true in some points in our reflection upon God. We are going to see that when we turn to the issue of the trinity. Yet we must not let those concepts rule our thinking. Donald Bloesch put it this way: "As Christians, we should not use biblical images to illustrate and support a philosophical vision, but we may use philosophical concepts to clarify a biblical vision."

As we begin, we are going to cover some things that we have covered before. We are just going to do it a little more systematically. Some of the attributes we will speak about we will have more to say about than others, so there is not going to be any particular balance here.

First, God is a person. This is where we want to start. We might even talk about all these attributes as the attributes of His person. As you recall, without the fact that God is a person anything else we say about God is simply a formal statement. What is a person? A person is self-conscious being. Do you see how you do have to use some philosophical concepts? A person is one who is capable of willing, feeling, and choosing, one who is able to enter into reciprocal relationship, that is to say, he relates to persons, and he relates to persons as a person. How can we possibly get to the idea that God is a person? We will look at this a bit more when we look at the trinity, but here we can say, God has a name (Exodus 3:14). He engages in activity and reciprocal relationships (Genesis 1, Genesis 3, and Matthew 3, among many others). He can be prayed to (Matthew 6:9).

What are the implications of God's personhood? First, our relationship with Him is a personal moral relationship. We might rightly speak of our relationship with God being an obligatory relationship, a contractual relationship. It is a legal relationship, but first and foremost, it is a personal relationship, and all personal relationships are also moral relationships. All relationships between persons have moral expectations. Second, we can pray to him. The very fact that God is a person is the foundation of our prayer.

Second in our list, God is a spirit. What is a spirit? A philosophical definition, one from Aristotle, would be 'a rarified incorporeal substance.' I do not know what that means either. The fact is, the only way we can get at what a spirit is, is by negation. A spirit does not have a body. Nowhere in Scripture do we get a nice definition of a spirit. We cannot analyze spirit the way we can analyze atoms or wood or anything else. What we can say is that God is not composed of matter. He does not have a physical nature. He is invisible. There is scriptural support, though I am not going to read the texts. I will draw your attention

to John 4:24, which says it most crisply, “God is a spirit.” The implications are that God is not limited by bodily or physical reality. Second, He is not susceptible to physical limitations or death. And third, Scripture uses a number of different ways of talking about God: anthropomorphisms, analogies, metaphors. We will have to know God through His self-disclosure.

Third, God is sovereign over all things. Sovereignty gets used in many, many different ways. I am sure I use it many, many different ways. All I mean here by saying God is sovereign is this: God is not dependent upon anything else. His life is not dependent upon His creation. He is the source of all living things, and again there is scriptural support in Exodus 3, Jeremiah 10 and so forth. The implications are that God does not derive His life from any other source. Sometimes this is called ‘aseity,’ which is simply a way of saying that God is independent. He is non-relative. He is non-contingent. We are relative creatures. We are contingent creatures. This is not the case with God. He does not depend on His creation. The fact that God is sovereign also means He has the right to demand obedience from His creatures.

Fourth, God is transcendent. We have addressed transcendence a number of times, and we have noted that the leading idea is that God and His creation are never to be confused with one another. The word ‘transcendence’ simply means ‘to stand above.’ Although the term is extra-biblical, it does capture the idea that God is the high and lifted up one, the one whom the earth cannot contain. For example, Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that God’s thoughts and ways transcend those of humans, for “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares Yahweh. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” This notion of height, of being high and lifted up, is often discussed in Scripture by associating God with heaven, the skies above, which are too high for any man to reach. In fact, oftentimes in Scripture, the word ‘heaven’ does designate a place necessarily—an angelic abode or the locale of the divine throne. It is also a metaphor for divine transcendence, or the fact that God is different, that He is separate from us. Very commonly, you will read the phrase, “A voice came from heaven,” which is a frequent device used to introduce divine speech. The idea is that while the voice of God is heard, the source of the communication is not here. A voice came *from heaven*. You are looking all over. You are looking every place but here, and this leads us to misunderstandings of transcendence.

The biblical understanding of height, and of God residing in heaven, suggests a spatial understanding of transcendence. God stands above this place. God is out there somewhere, rather than here. In Psalm 113:5-6, the psalmist writes, “Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?” But that is not to say that God is absent. Simply because we are saying God is not here, we are not saying He is absent. While God is other than creation, He is always close to it. Isaiah 57:15 expresses both God’s transcendence and His nearness. Listen to Isaiah, “For this is what the high and lofty one says, He who lives forever, whose name is holy, ‘I live in a high place but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.’” In Ephesians 4:6, Paul says, “There is one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.” So while God is above, while He is other than us, He is always near.

In fact, one way the Christian tradition has clarified this is to say that God is omnipresent. He is never absent from any place in His creation, even though He cannot be confused with any place in His creation. We think here of David’s words in Psalm 139:7-11, “Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there, your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the

light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you. The night will shine like day, for darkness is as light to you." For David, God's pervasive presence was a comfort, but to the sinner, it is a threat. Thus Amos speaks of the evil-doer who seeks to hide from the Lord but to no avail.

Regarding a second misunderstanding here, we should note that God's transcendence does not entail the notion that God and His creation are to be distinguished in such a way that no possible contact is available between them. We talked about this idea a bit before. The doctrine of providence, which we will talk about later, holds that God actively governs His creation in such a way that His creation is never independent of Him. In fact, God's creation requires His continual and personal application of His fatherly, kingly power. Further, the biblical understanding of revelation is that something of God can be known by His creation and that God can manifest His person and His will in particular events and places. The incarnation makes it clear that God can and does enter into the world. John 1:14 and 1:18 tell us that the Word become flesh in such a way that Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates God's very person to the world. And this is precisely why it is helpful to think in terms of a spatial difference when it comes to transcendence. People many times say those spatial metaphors are not helpful. I think they are. I think we need them in certain places. I think it is helpful to think of transcendence in terms of the classical spatial distinction. God cannot be confused with this location or that location or any other place. He is always distinct, but He can, as He wills, become localized. This model—God is other than, cannot be confused with, yet can enter into His creation—is going to be very helpful for us when we look at the issue of time, so just remember this model. Some consequences of transcendence include that pantheism—thinking of some aspect of creation as divine, whether it is trees or stars or whatever—is disallowed. And second, worshipping some aspect of creation, some item within creation, an idol, is also disallowed.

God is holy. Many of the texts that speak of God's transcendence also speak of the fact that He is the holy One. Isaiah 6:1-7 is a good example here. God is not only ontologically different from His creation, but given the historical reality of sin, He is also morally distinct from His creation. 'Holiness' is a term in Scripture that carries the idea of being free from moral corruption. As such, God's holiness conveys the truth that not only is He free from sin, but that He hates sin, that His Word is the standard of truth. And you see there the biblical support. But I have to admit here, I have a bit of a problem with the notion of holiness. But I think all fallen human beings have a lot of problems with the notion of holiness. But theologically, or systematically, my problem is that I do not like having to talk about an attribute of God in the negative, of Him being sinless. I think we should also be able to talk about His holiness more positively. It is not just an absence of impurity. We need to understand that God's holiness is His positive moral perfection. Thus God's holiness includes His inherent truthfulness in all His words and His inherent faithfulness in all His ways and inherent righteousness in all His judgment. God is truthful in what He says. He cannot lie. His Word is the standard of truth, and He can be relied upon to keep His promises. He is faithful in His ways. He is consistent in His ways, in His character. He is not capricious and He can be relied upon. And finally He is righteous in all His judgments, which is something that Scripture will come back to over and over again. Psalm 147, Genesis 18, and Romans 3 all relay these points.

God is constant in His person. This is really an extension of the idea of divine faithfulness. The philosophical idea is that God is immutable. Plato said God is the locus of all perfection. He is Himself a perfect being. Change would mean moving from one state to another. Either you were perfect and move now to a state of imperfection, or you were imperfect and you moved toward a state of perfection. Since both of these are impossible, God must be unchanging. God must be immutable. That was the thinking of Plato. Well, let us look at a little text here, Psalm 102:25-27. "In the beginning, you laid the foundations of the earth and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will

remain. They will all wear out like a garment, like clothing; you will change them and they will be discarded, but you remain the same and your years will never end.” You can refer to Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17 as well.

The reason I wanted to read at least one text here is that when we look at those texts that are usually put forward as proof texts for immutability, we find that the philosophical idea does not really appear to be part of the biblical concern. The concern of these texts is not whether God’s nature or essence is capable of changing. The concern of these text is whether the Lord can be relied upon. Having said that, we should also point out that asking philosophical questions of the text, such as, “Can God’s nature change?” is not illegitimate. Asking those kinds of questions does have its place, but we need to realize that such questions are usually not the direct biblical concern. Such propositions as, “God is constant in His nature, and therefore may be called immutable,” may be a legitimate philosophical deduction from the biblical witness of God’s faithfulness. But when we concentrate solely, or even primarily, upon the philosophical question, we run the risk of missing the biblical point. That is why I am doing this now. Far too often, when people talk about God’s attributes, we end up in philosophical discussions and we miss the very point of the biblical text. The contemporary Christian philosopher Steve Davis suggests that the classical doctrine of immutability arose in order to protect the belief in a God who is faithful in His ways, in a God who keeps His promises, in a God who does not act arbitrarily, in a God who is not capricious. I think that is right and it comes a whole lot closer to the concerns of the biblical writers than does the mere philosophical question of immutability. We need to keep the biblical point in view. God is not arbitrary. He is consistent. He is faithful both in His ways and His person. If you recall, I mentioned this in referring to Bray who said just about all that is necessary to say on this very issue, “If Abraham were here with us today, he would recognize the God we worship as his God.”

We need to realize that sometimes the philosophical questions applied to the attributes of God have caused more problems than answers. In fact, philosophy has led theology down some unproductive paths here. For instance, the static, unchanging God of the philosophers, with the whole idea that God cannot change, has led some to push it so far as to say that God is impassable. He has no passions, no dispositions, and no emotional state. He is incapable of feeling emotions: love, hate, joy, or displeasure. In changing your emotional state from one of those to another, some philosophers would say that constitutes some kind of change. Since God is immutable, God must also be impassive. The biblical reality is that Scripture shows God as evidencing just those emotions, and many more besides. I am going to suggest that rather than thinking of God as an unmoved mover, a static being, we would do better to think of Him as dynamically acting in the world, yet stable in His nature. God can dynamically engage creation personally, engage us and not lose Himself in the process, nor be threatened by us in the process. Performing different actions at different times is not an indication of a change in a person. Human beings do different things at different times in different situations, yet without being thought of as having changed. It is only when a person acts in ways that are inconsistent with their nature, when they act so differently that the whole pattern, the whole tenor of their lives appears to be changed, that we say that they have changed.

God is all-powerful. This is another one we have talked about before. And here I am going to split our discussion into first the Old Testament and then the New Testament. When God comes to Abraham in Genesis 17:1, He identifies Himself there by the divine name *El-shaddai*, God Almighty. The occasion, if you recall, was God’s promise that Sarah will bear a child. Now at that time, Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is 90, so the promise of childbearing is a breathtaking one. Sarah had been unable to conceive during all of her childbearing years and now she is way past those years. It has been some 25 years since God first promised Abraham and Sarah descendants, and the promise is getting a little old. It got so old and so bothersome that if you recall, they tried to give God a little help with Hagar and the

birth of Ishmael. So when God approaches Abraham at the age of 100 and tells him that he is going to be a father, Abraham is a little doubtful. He laughs at God's suggestion. God again repeats the promise. When Sarah heard the news, she also laughed at the idea that at this late stage in her life, she was going to be a mother. Then God said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." That is Genesis 18:13-14. The point is, nothing is beyond God's ability. Nothing is beyond His power. Jeremiah 32 is of special interest pertaining to this divine name: *El-shaddai*. The context there is the fall of the city of Babylon. In verse 17, Jeremiah says, "Oh sovereign Yahweh, you have made the heavens and earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." God's power is also related to His mighty deeds by which He brought Israel out of Egypt. You see that in verses 20-22. Thus His power extends not only to creation but to history as well. And as the text proceeds there, Yahweh will even judge His elect people Israel by the use of a pagan people, Babylon. "I am Yahweh, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"

What we also see in the Old Testament is that it is very common to see attributions of great power to God. Job 42:2 says, "I know that you can do all things. No plan of yours can be thwarted." We should also mention that the term *El-shaddai*, the divine name, is very common in the book of Job. It appears no less than 31 times in Job. God has the ability, the right, to act with power. No obstacle can prevent God from reaching His goal, from achieving what He purposes to do. We also have Psalm 115:3: "Our God is in heaven, He does whatever pleases Him." Notice there a statement of transcendence together with God's power.

The New Testament equivalent to *shaddai* is *pantokrator*, a term we talked about before. It could be translated in English as 'all-powerful,' perhaps even better as 'all-governing.' It appears 10 times in the New Testament. Along with 2 Corinthians 6:18, it appears nine times in the book of Revelation. And it usually emphasizes God's lordship over historical events. Revelation 1:8 is representative: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, say the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come the Almighty," the *pantokrator*. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament can also make great statements of power, attributing power to God. There are many of these in the New Testament. A good example is the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. If you recall, he was told to sell everything he owned and give it to the poor, and then come back and follow Jesus. But as the story proceeds, the young man went away sad. Jesus then gave His teaching about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. And of course, the disciples upon hearing that said, "Then who can make it? Jesus, you have just made it so hard that no one can do it." And His reply gets right to the point: "With man, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." There is an interesting statement about election as well in Matthew 19:26. In Ephesians 1:19, we find this statement by Paul: "His incomparably great power for us who believe, that power is like the working of His mighty strength." We cannot measure God's power and we should not miss Romans 8:38-39 here. Paul speaks of the inability of any alleged source of power to separate God's people from His love: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor future, neither any powers, neither height nor depth, neither anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." We have noted the problems that attend to an abstract notion about omnipotence, so I am not going to repeat any of that here. Let it suffice to say that the point of God's power is that He has sufficient resources. He has sufficient power to bring to realization everything He promises to do. That is the ground of our comfort. That is the ground of our reliance. God can keep His word. He can keep His promise.

God is eternal. What we mean when we say that God is eternal is that He is infinite with respect to time. There are no limitations in terms of God's relationship to time. He is the sovereign Lord over time. In

terms of scriptural support, there are Psalm 90, 102, and 93, Isaiah 40, 1 Timothy 1, and 2 Peter 3. It is probably the case that almost all theologians would in some sense want to affirm that God is eternal. By this, we mean that God has always existed, and that He will never come to an end. But when we ask what that means, that is when the theological arguments start. There are really two major views here of divine eternity, and on the face of it, these two views are mutually exclusive. We may call them 'atemporalism' and 'temporalism,' or we can call them 'atemporal eternity' and 'endless temporality.' Let us look at both of these very quickly. First of all, the atemporalist view is the one that has a very long history in the church. It was held by such ancient theologians as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. This position holds that God is completely and utterly outside of time. Time in no sense applies to God. God holds all of His own existence in one timeless point. There is no sequence. There is no before and no after that applies to God. Further, He holds all of human history in one simultaneous glance. He knows the future and He knows the past exactly as He knows the present. They are essentially no different for Him. The atemporalist view holds that there are really two separate modes of existence: time and eternity. Man exists in time but God exists in eternity. This means that since God exists outside of time, since He exists in eternity, temporal statements are irrelevant to him.

The second view is the temporalist view. This position claims that time applies to God, just as it applies to us. There is sequence within God. There is before and after. He is aware of a sequence of events. He knows the present and He knows the future but He does not know the future in exactly the same way that He knows the present. God remembers the past and He anticipates the future. The real force or power for this position derives from the fact that timeless eternity is incoherent for human beings. We can talk about it but we cannot understand what we have said after we have said it. In fact, most of the arguments for the temporalist position are really arguments against atemporalism.

Let me give you some examples of some of these arguments. The temporalist will argue that atemporalism really makes it impossible for God to work in the world. The world we live in is time-bound, but if God is in eternity, He cannot work here. If temporal statements have no relationship to Him and for Him, He cannot work here. The claim that a timeless God works in time is by definition absurd. If God works in time, He must be in time. Second, the notion of a timeless person is also incoherent. A person, in order to be a person, must be able to remember, anticipate, reflect, deliberate, intend, and so forth. All these are time-bound events, but beyond that they are things that take time. There is a certain amount of duration with them. It takes time to remember something. It takes time to deliberate about something. These are actions that by their very nature are subject to temporal succession, duration, extension, and relationship. Third, Oscar Cullmann in his 1960 book *Christ and Time* argued that the idea of timelessness is not a biblical concept at all. It is rather an improper import from Greek philosophy. The Bible knows nothing of a time and eternity distinction at all. What the Bible actually articulates is a distinction between limited time, which is our time, and God's unlimited time. We might even call it our timeliness and God's timefulness. For example, when Scripture speaks of God as being eternal, it does not say timeless. What is translated as 'eternal' is in Greek a phrase which might better be translated 'into the ages of the ages' or sometimes it simply appears as 'the ages.' Our English word 'forever' might actually be a better choice. If I could use geometric terms, we are rays, for we have a beginning point and we go on forever. Then what is being suggested here is that God is a line. He has always existed and He will always exist. He is not a point.

We might take these two traditions and categorize them this way: the atemporalist position holds that time is irrelevant to God. The temporalist position holds that God is in time. The atemporalist response is, have you not just made God a creature of time? The temporalist position misses the important biblical fact that time is a creature of God. God is not a creature of time. Time is a created reality. As an

essential feature of the created universe, time came into being along with matter at creation, and God existed before creation and therefore God is independent of time.

Can we resolve this? Philosophical and theological reflections on time have proven to be very complex, very convoluted creatures. Perhaps both of these positions are speaking some truth. Perhaps both of them are partly right. I think the atemporalist position is right in saying that God is the sovereign Lord over time, that He is not a constituent of the created order. But the temporalist position is also right in saying that God acts in time, and we temporally bound creatures always experience God in time. I think we can confess God is outside of time. That is all we can do. We cannot follow Him there. We cannot speak knowingly, rationally, or coherently about God outside of our space-time frame. So rather than locking God up in either a timeless eternity, which is really beyond our understanding, or making Him the creature of time, I think we can be better off to think of God as somehow beyond time yet working in it. What I suggest here is that God's relationship to time parallels His relationship to space. Time and space are usually thought of as the two fundamentally distinguishing characteristics of the universe, even at the level of physics. When we talked about transcendence, we did not seem to have any problem whatsoever in thinking about God as being different than we are yet also fully capable of coming close to us. God's relationship with space is that He is not in any sense spatial. He is not located in one point or another. He does not occupy any extensions spatially, but He can reveal Himself in space. I think the same thing is true regarding time. We should think of God's relationship to time on the same model. God is not located in time. He does not have temporal location. He is as much outside of time as He is outside of space, yet He can enter into temporality in the same way that He enters into space.

God knows all. He is all-wise. The Christian tradition has always affirmed the thesis that God knows all things, including us, and that He knows all things exhaustively and accurately. Thus we often speak of God as being omniscient. The doctrine of divine omniscience is important for us. It is important for prayer. Christians regularly pray for God to intervene in certain situations in life. We also pray that God will guide our lives. Both types of requests, however, assume God's knowledge. In order for God to intervene in our lives, we are assuming He knows what is best for us. In order for God to guide us, we are assuming He knows the ends He intends for us. We assume throughout that He knows what is good and what the future will be. Further, trust in God's guidance through the conduct in our personal affairs assumes that He truly, even meticulously, knows us and knows what is good for us.

There is much biblical material that addresses the nature and extent of God's knowledge. But I want to spend a little bit of time here because the issue of God's knowledge has been a particular problem in modern theology. First, God's knowledge is compared to that of humans. Isaiah 55:9, for example, says, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." We have read that text or something similar to it a number of times now. God's knowledge is vastly superior to our knowledge, so much so that we dare not even compare the two. Second is God's knowledge of us. We have read Psalm 139:1-5 before. We can just remind ourselves here, in that text, David says, "Even before I speak a word, you already know it." And his point is that God knows him meticulously. David has no secrets. He has no hiding places. He has no pocket that the Lord does not know about. Third is the greatness or the extent of God's knowledge. Job 37:16 says, "For he viewed the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens." Again, there is no place to hide. Also described is God's knowledge of the future. Isaiah 36:9-10 says, "Remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God and there is no other. I am God and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come."

God's knowledge, particularly God's knowledge of the future, is a hotly debated topic today, even within conservative evangelical circles. In the book, *The Openness of God*, written by Clark Pinnock and

a number of other scholars several years ago, the authors argued that if God knows the future perfectly, then the future is predetermined, and predetermined in such a way that it removes all human freedom and responsibility. The authors believe that God's knowledge of the future and human freedom are incompatible. And since our common sense tells us that we are free then God cannot know the future. But these writers fail to come to terms with the considerable amount of biblical material that affirm both God's knowledge of the future, even His foreordination of the future, and the fact that humans are responsible for their actions. The Bible says that God knows everything and the Bible says that we are responsible for what we do. And we could just leave it there as a kind of unresolved tension, a paradox, an antimony, or we could throw a lot of philosophical language at this thing. God has absolute foreknowledge, yet man is a free moral patron. The Bible, however, does not seem to suggest that there is any paradox or tension here.

While there are aspects of this issue that are beyond our understanding, I think we can offer some things to help us get some biblical reality. First, we should think about the nature of freedom. We need to realize that the Bible does not affirm freedom as we in the modern West think of freedom. Scripture, when it talks about freedom, means the liberty to conform to God's will for us. Do you hear that? It does not mean an unrestricted idea—do whatever you want. What the Bible means by true liberty is the ability to conform to God's will. But even without that wonderful biblical notion of freedom, we need to realize that there are problems with our common sense libertarian notion of freedom. We unreflectively hold to this idea that we are free to do whatever we choose, whatever we please, but if we reflect upon it, we see there are some problems with it. Very typically, we think of freedom as the power to choose to perform or choose not to perform some action. What will actually happen is not yet determined, and it will be determined only by my unconstrained choice, so real freedom for us in the West means I can do anything or not anything. There is no reason I should choose one or the other; I am free to do one or the other.

Now, that is an unreflective, intuitive notion of freedom, but it should not take too much to realize that my ability to do a particular thing, like play the violin, bench press 300 pounds, become a United States Senator, or grow hair on my head, all of these things are going to be restricted, they are going to be informed by having the power, skill, opportunity, practical knowledge, determination, and any other number of physical, historical capacities and limitations. The ability to do something is bounded by all sorts of qualifications. Freedom, in other words, can never be understood as pure spontaneity. It can never be understood as random choice. Our unreflective notion of freedom in the West is terribly imprecise. We sometimes speak as if the will has the right to randomly act, to randomly choose, without pattern. But in practice, it actually appears that a human will is not so random and not so chance in nature. There is considerable evidence, after all, that humans act according to their characters. We all have, for lack of a better term, natures, patterns of behaviors, collections of conditioned responses, call them what you will. And we act according to those. There is also evidence that much of our behavior and many of our actions are determined by heredity. Studies that have been done with identical twins who have been separated at birth or close to birth and these have shown amazing similarities: similarities in personal taste, the type of people they marry, even the names they give their children. Further, there is considerable predictability about human behavior. We have all learned that we anticipate with a fairly high degree of certainty how a close friend or a loved one will act in any given situation. I just know what my wife would say if I do certain things. And anyone who has worked professionally in the management of people knows the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. It appears, then, that there are limitations, or at least circumscriptions on an absolutely free, spontaneous idea of liberty or freedom.

That might seem contrary to our intuitions. We feel like we are free, but the fact is many things that are counter intuitive are true. It is counter intuitive to say that the earth rises rather than the sun rises. But the fact of the matter is the sun does not rise. The earth rises. So we might better speak of freedom, even apart from the biblical definition, we might better speak of it as liberty to act in accordance with one's nature.

But the second thing we can say is we can address the issue of God's relationship to man regarding human freedom and responsibility. I believe that God's knowledge of the future and our moral agency and responsibility are not incompatible, and thus the position I am holding here is 'compatibilism.' Our free moral agency and God's sovereignty are compatible. And again, I take this position because Scripture fails to see a problem here. Many times we have these deep philosophical problems and every semester this question is addressed to me at least 10 times but it is interesting because Scripture does not see a problem here. That may suggest this is an artificially, philosophically created problem. God works in a number of ways to bring about His will by rendering certain what I will freely choose. Now when you first hear that you have problems with it. But let me say it again: God works in numerous ways to bring about His will by rendering certain that I and each individual will freely choose what He has already ordained. God has a number of ways in my life to make sure that I will do what He wants. He chose where I was born. He chose the parents I would have. He chose the people who would come into my life in significant ways. He chose the countless number of experiences and places and all the rest that have made me the person that I am and that had made the free choices that I freely made.

You may be asking yourself how we got from God's knowledge of the future to where we are. We started talking about God's knowledge of stuff and all of a sudden we are at foreordination. Did you all notice that? I hope you did. It was intentional on my part. Surely there is a difference in God's determining the future and His merely knowing it, right? No, there is not. Biblically there is not. In fact, merely knowing the future is, at least from a theological point of view, irrelevant. Let me say that again. God's mere knowledge of the future in terms of a precognition is theologically irrelevant. When Scripture affirms that God knows what the future will be, it means nothing less than that He has decided, ordered, and ordained the future. God's knowledge of the future means that the future is sure. If that were not the case, that He knows the future in the sense that it is sure, no one would care if God knew the future or not. I know I am kind of arguing with the Arminian tradition here, but that tradition will affirm just as strongly as I will that God knows the future. Why do you care? If it is not that He secures the future, that He promises the future, it really does not matter if God knows it or not. So I agree with Clark Pinnock that God's knowing the future makes the future absolutely certain.

It is essential to recognize, however, that God simply does not foreordain the ends without also foreordaining the means to the ends. What I want to reject here is fatalism. Fatalism is the view that God just ordains the ends so we are all like puppets. But He also works through the means and ordains the means as well. It is not the case that things are going to work out for me how they are going to work out for me no matter what I do. It is not the case that I am not responsible to lift my hand in the morning to get my clothes on. They are not just going to jump on. Now to some, what I call this compatible view is far too complex. They would say, "Okay, you are telling me that God goes before you in such a way that as you freely choose, He has so meticulously ordered things that you are going to choose the things that He wants you to choose. Oh, come on. You are going to tell me that God is handling all that for all the billions of people on the face of the earth. Think of all the circumstances that God must know, initiate, and control." But that may not be nearly as difficult as we might first think. We now have computer programs that do exactly that, that play out a proposed war scenario, for example, with every possible variable. I do not mean to suggest that God is merely a big computer, but the comparison does help us to realize what variables an infinite God can handle. He can get the boat where He wants it to go.

Finally on this issue, let me say that if we look at the problem of God's knowledge, His foreordination, and our freedom and responsibility as purely philosophical problems, we will tie ourselves in knots. You will never get to a biblical answer that way. Let me put it in a different context. As a father, I seek to manage situations for my children, even control them, and it does not matter whether it is getting my oldest to go back to college, which he has recently done, or getting my youngest to stop playing with guns and start playing with blocks, which he is nowhere near. Now on both those matters, it would be best if I could persuade my sons to get them to do that which I desire for them. I think that this model, coming from a way that we actually experience reality, is closer to the reality of God's sovereignty over our lives and His foreordination of the future. God spends a lot of work all the time convincing us. But it is also the case that I sometimes dictate the situation to my kids: "You must clean your room...you are not allowed to hit other children or say 'no' to your mother." And sometimes I pick up my three year-old when he is standing too close to the curb, and I carry him to the house; I do not ask him if he wants to go. A certain level of determinance is good for us, a certain level of God simply saying, "You are going to do what I tell you to do," is the best thing for us. And that too conforms to the biblical picture of God. What I am suggesting is that the biblical imagery that we talked about, of God as Father, King, Husband, Shepherd, ought to guide these questions. If God is a Father, how would a loving father relate to His children? Would He not seek to have all the knowledge that you can? Would He not, as a loving parent, seek to control certain things, to know that He is the competent one, and not them? Most of what we see as philosophical problems would be better served if we dealt with them as personal, relational issues.

God is just. Talking about God's knowledge of the future, and noting that He ordains human events, raises the question of God's relationship to sin. We will talk more about this when we discuss the issue of providence, but since it comes up naturally as a consequence of divine foreknowledge, we should say something about it here as well. To say that God is just is to affirm that He is righteous and He is holy in all His dealings and relationships. Scripture is insistent that God does not sin, that God leads no one to sin. Yes, somehow God controls all things, but He is holy and righteous. Again, what this suggests is that we may never lop off one side of the God-man relationship. Sometimes we Calvinists want to give so much glory to God that we speak of human beings as if they are not historical agents. Scripture does not go there. Scripture does not present man as a puppet. We are responsible for our lives, for the things that we do, but it is also the case that God is active in history. What Scripture will affirm is that God is sovereign. We saw that in Isaiah 49: "I determine the ends from the beginning." But it is also the case that you and I are responsible.

There are some consequences to the fact that God is just. First, He is the lawgiver. He establishes good and evil, and He does so not only by the things that He says in terms of His commandments but also by His actions. If God was not really righteous, His law could not compel obedience, His law could not compel trust. Something is not good, after all, simply because God says so. It must conform to Him as well, for it to be good. Yahweh is not Allah, the God of Islam, whose word is true simply because he says that it is true. That is not the case with the biblical God. He Himself must conform to His justice. Second, God is the judge and He must punish sin and if God did not punish sin then righteousness and sin would be relativized into absurdity. This is one of the biblical realities that many people have problems with. Why must God judge sin? If He did not, then those things would not mean anything at all. Third, God is concerned for the oppressed and the down-trodden. And fourth, God's righteousness and His concern for righteousness is what brings salvation.

God is good. God's goodness means that He deals generously and benevolently with His creatures. We could call the fact that God is good a character trait rather than an attribute. But there is really no distinction. That is the only reason I put 'God is good' here on the end. What we have been talking

about—God’s attributes, His capacities, His abilities—we could call character traits as easily as attributes. Once we see that all of these things are simply aspects of who He is, we can start adding many, many other things indeed. God’s goodness, His long-suffering attitude toward mankind in general and toward His people in particular, His love, the fact that He is merciful and gracious, His jealousy—these are all just as much a part of who He is as His transcendence, as His power, or anything else.