

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 3—God’s Nature and Attributes, Q. 4

What is God?

- I. Berkhof, “While it is not possible to *define* God, it is possible to give a general *description* of His being. And it’s perhaps best to describe Him as a pure Spirit of infinite perfections [or attributes].”
 - A. WSC 4 is probably the best definition of God ever written. Founded on His revelation in Scripture, it *ascribes* to God in absolute perfection and unlimited degree everything excellent we find in ourselves and *denies* of Him every defect and limitation we find in ourselves.
- II. *God is Spirit*. The nearest approach to a biblical definition is found in Christ’s own words in Jn 4.24, God is spirit. This essentially means that He is without a bodily parts or passions (for these would limit His greatness and power) and is in no way visible to the physical eye, 1Tim 6.16. But it also means He’s a holy intelligent *Person* possessing all the essential perfections of the human spirit.
 - A. When we ascribe personality to God we mean that He is a reasonable Being capable of determining the course of His life. In other words, God is not an *impersonal* force or power, but a real, moral, rational, and independent *personality*. Being a *personal God*, He is a God with whom men can converse, whom they can trust, who enters into their experience, who helps them with their difficulties, and who fills their hearts with joy and gladness. Moreover, He revealed Himself in a personal form in Jesus Christ.
 - B. Being God, He is *infinitely perfect*. His being and attributes are free from all limitations and imperfections. He’s not only boundless and limitless, but also stands out above all His creatures in moral perfection and glorious majesty, Ex 15.11.
 - C. Being infinitely perfect, God is not composed of different parts or subject to division. Rather, God is *simple*, or one. This means the attributes of God are not different parts of Him, but are instead just Himself. They are simply manifestations of the perfections that He is. God and His attributes are one, such that He is being, He is wisdom, He is power, truth, life, love, etc.
 - D. When we speak of God’s attributes or perfections, we typically distinguish between incommunicable and communicable. Those which are incommunicable (infinite, eternal, and unchangeable) find trace in the creature, but those which are communicable do (being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth).
- III. Infinite. Eternal. Unchangeable.
 - A. God is *infinite*, not subject to any limitations or boundaries, Jer 23.23-24; Ps 139.1-12
 1. In relation to *space*, God is *omnipresent*. He is everywhere present, dwells in all His creatures, filling every point of space, but is in no way bounded by space. The whole God is everywhere present at every moment. We cannot cross a line and say, “Now here God is not; here is a limit which He has not and cannot pass.” As one writer said, “God is a circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” 1Kgs 8.27; Isa 66.1
 - B. God is *eternal*. It’s not simply that His continuance is from everlasting to everlasting, knowing neither beginning nor end; but eternity itself is Himself, He possess it, inhabits it, and it is no different than who He is as the Eternal One, Ps 90.2; 102.12; Isa 57.15. Eternity, as we think of it, as a timeless duration, is but a moment to Him because He comprehends it within the arms of His own infinitely extensive and immense being. Just as God does not subsist in place by parts, so neither does He subsist in time by parts.
 1. Time is a limited duration, measured by the succession of either thought or motion minutes. But God exists outside of and beyond all limits of time, without beginning, end, and succession. There is no past or future with God. All duration is always present to Him. God doesn’t run through time, as we do, going from past to present to future. Neither does He move from eternity past to eternity to come as a man moves from room to room. Instead, just as a thousand years are

as one day to Him, so eternity is as an instant to Him. He inhabits and possesses the whole of it continually.

2. This is how, for instance, the atonement of Christ, accomplished in history some thousands of years after Adam, can be applied by God to Adam just as easily as it's applied by God to you and me, two thousand years afterwards.

C. God is *unchangeable*. He is forever the same in His being and perfections, and also in His promises and purposes, Num 23.19; Ps 33.11; Mal 3.6; Js 1.17.

1. When Scripture speaks of God repenting or changing His mind (Gen 6.6; Ex 32.14; 1Sam 15.28-29, 35; Jonah 3.10), it's a human way of speaking and indicates a change in man's relation to God. The heart, will, mind, purpose, and plan of God are unchangeable because He is perfect in wisdom, infinite in knowledge, and has eternally decreed whatsoever comes to pass.

IV. In His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

A. *Being*

1. Existence is truly proper to God alone, the self-existent One. All the being His creatures enjoy is derivative and unceasingly dependent upon Him, the great I AM, Ex 3.14; Gen 1.1. God alone *is*. In relation to *His being*, this is His *absolute perfection*, that He is *infinite* in every way.

B. *Wisdom*

1. God is *omniscient*. He knows all things, declaring the end from the beginning. All knowledge every creature has is *derivative*, derived either from that which is given to him innately by creation or that which is learned by observation and study. But knowledge, all knowledge, is *original* to God. He not only knows it all, but what it is is by virtue of His being. In other words, there is no knowledge, known or to be known, that exists outside of God. Moreover, all that God knows He knows instantaneously. God doesn't reason or think successively by inference and deduction as we do. He knows everything at once. "He knows Himself and all things outside of Himself by one eternal absolutely perfect act of intuition."
2. God's knowledge is *perfectly righteous* and without the possibility of error, Dt 32.4; Dan 4.37. Hence, He alone is the all-wise God, even wisdom itself, Pr 8. He knows all things in their essences as they really are, not merely as they appear; and He knows them in all their properties and relations and with infallible accuracy. Thus, He cannot be deceived. And He knows the best means of realizing His purposes in creation.

C. *Power*

1. The word Almighty conveys three ideas about God: God is *omnipotent*, His dominion is universal, and His essence is infinite. So He can do anything He chooses to do, with or without or against second causes, as He pleases. In His works of creation and providence, He is without all hindrance and limitation from anything outside Himself, Dan 4.34-35
2. God's only limit is Himself, for He cannot act inconsistently with His own perfections, Num 23.19. "God's power is limited only by the workings of His will. He does not work all things that He might work. "Unto you," says Christ, "all things are possible." God does not show Himself omnipotent by doing all He can do, but in everything that He does do, He shows an almighty power in it." Goodwin

D. *Holiness*

1. God's holiness, His "inward health and purity," is absolutely perfect. There's no conflict, no limit, no deficiency, no exaggeration in His moral perfection. The *love* of righteousness and the *hatred* of sin are His most characteristic and controlling principles. They are the foundation of His being and of all His plans and works.
2. The divine holiness is God's most perfect beauty. It is the attribute of attributes. It is a transcendental attribute, running through all the rest and casting its glory upon them all, so that God is holy in His being, holy in His wisdom, holy in His power, etc. Holiness is the very lustre and glory of His other perfections, Isa 6.3

E. *Justice*

1. The justice of God is absolute and immutable, and without limit. He is just in making and in executing laws as King of the moral world, Dt 32.4. There is no respect of persons with Him. He cannot be bribed. The divine law, which is the perfect reflection of His righteous character, is the foundation of all His dealings with His creatures, Hab 1.13
2. He is immutably determined by the moral perfection of His nature to visit every sin with a just recompense, it not in the person of the sinner, then in the person of his Substitute, Ezk 18.4. So that even in the justification of the ungodly, the justice of God is not, for it cannot be, set aside, but must be, and gloriously is, magnified, Rom 3.26
3. The terrible lake of fire (where His own handiwork will suffer eternal misery) and the cross of Calvary (where His own beloved Son suffered the eternal misery of His elect) are awful testimonies to His absolute justice.

F. *Goodness*

1. The goodness of God is absolute and measureless, Ps 119.68; Mt 5.45; Acts 14.17. Goodness is the *genus* that comprehends mercy, grace, longsuffering, kindness, love, etc. These are all branches from this root. All that God does with men in the way of favor or beneficence is a manifestation of His goodness. It is His goodness that prompts Him to be kind to all His creatures. “For He is good” is the OT equivalent of “God is love”.
2. Mercy is goodness toward the suffering. Grace is goodness toward sinners. Love is goodness toward holy ones. Patience is goodness toward the struggling. Kindness is goodness toward the needy. To despise the goodness of God is to despise your own happiness.

G. *Truth*

1. God is perfectly self-consistent, i.e. true to Himself. He is true to His past, to all His plans, and to all His promises. He is infallibly correct in all His revelations and reliable in all His engagements. He is not merely true, but Truth itself, Jn 14.6. That which is true is so because it’s in harmony with who He is and with the revelation of Himself to the world. Thus, God’s is the foundation of all knowledge, all practice, and all faith.
2. The Bible is to be believed and received as absolutely authoritative because God is Truth and cannot speak otherwise, Num 23.19; Pr 14.5; Heb 6.18

Questions:

1. How do we divide the attributes of God, and why?
2. How do we explain that the Bible sometimes ascribes change or regret to God?
3. What is the holiness of God and why does Scripture speak so often of it?
4. What is the goodness of God and are there other names for it?
5. What comforts can we draw from this description of God, and how do these perfections of God relate to us practically?
6. What impact do these attributes of God have on the Bible and how we read it?
7. How do God’s attributes impact our prayer life?
8. How do God’s attributes help us in times of suffering?
9. Memorize WSC 4