

We Believe in God

LESSON
TWO

How God Is Different Discussion Forum



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We Believe in God

Lesson Two: How God Is Different

Discussion Forum

With

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Dr. Robert G. Lister
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Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Carl R. Trueman
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Carey Vinzant
Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler
Rev. Valery Zadorozhny

Question 1:

Why should we distinguish between God's communicable and incommunicable attributes?

Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

Well, I think it's very important to understand what are the communicable attributes of God and what are the incommunicable attributes of God. The communicable attributes of God are those attributes of God which are reflected in us who are made in his image and are restored progressively by God's work of grace through his saving work in our life. So that, for instance, God is holy in the sense of purity. Well, he made us holy, and though sin has marred us, when we come to Christ, he now begins to rebuild that as we pursue holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord" — by his grace, for his glory, but we actually engage in the pursuit of holiness... But now, there are some attributes that are not communicated to us... So, when we say that God is holy, what we mean is God is unique; he is one of a kind. The incommunicable attributes are those attributes that declare his uniqueness... There is none like him. And that uniqueness of God is declared through his incommunicable attributes. No matter how much I am like Jesus, I will never be Jesus. No matter how much I can reflect God's glory, I will never be the full owner of God's glory. I have a measure of his glory. The only one who has the glory of God without measure, that is the outshining of all of his attributes, is Jesus: "And the Word became flesh ... and we beheld His glory, the glory ... of the only begotten [from] the Father, full of grace and truth." I have a measure of his glory. I do not have the fullness of it, but I can give glory to him who alone is God.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

There are lots of systematic theologians that think that the distinction between the incommunicable and communicable attributes just shouldn't be made. And that's especially true in recent decades. And there are lots of good reasons that they bring up that lead to that conclusion. I think probably the most important one is that when you look at the Bible, the Bible doesn't make that distinction explicitly in the Scriptures; it just does not appear. And even more than that, when you start talking about them in theology, you always have to come back and say, well, they're not separate from each other; they're not distinct from each other, that when we say God is infinite and eternal and unchangeable and things like that — his incommunicable attributes, the ones that he doesn't share with us — then you realize, well, that doesn't say very much about him unless you connect it to things are his communicable attributes, the ways in which he is like his creation. So, he's infinite in his holiness, or he's eternal in his goodness, or that kind of thing. So, you can see that for those reasons it makes sense that people would not want to make that distinction in systematic theology anymore.

But there are some values to making that distinction that I think that sometimes we may overlook. When you think about the incommunicable attributes, the ways in which God is different from his creation and doesn't share his qualities with creation, what it does is, it exalts God. It makes it clear how magnificent he is, how supreme he is. And so we praise him and we honor him in those ways. And the other thing that it does is that it humbles us because, as creatures, we simply cannot be like God in those ways. We can't even begin to imitate him. We can't, and in fact the Scriptures never call on us to try to be infinite. They never call on us to try to be eternal. They never call on us to try to be unchangeable because that's just simply impossible. And so the motif of trying to be like God does not apply to the *incommunicable* attributes.

But now, if you flip it over and think about the communicable attributes, there we find that there's value in identifying those as well as a separate or different sort of class of attributes of God. For example, they tell us that, yes, God is like creation, but he is still far superior. He is immanent; his immanence over us is still emphasized because, well, yeah, God is holy and we're to be holy, but his holiness is far beyond compare with ours. And so, even the ways in which we are like God, he's still our supreme Creator. But even more than that, the most important reason, in my opinion, for identifying those communicable attributes is that the *imago Dei*, "the image of God," is connected to the theme of *imitatio Dei*, "the imitation of God." So, the image of God is to be *like* God. So, how is the image of God to be like God? How is that a moral consideration or a moral obligation for all of us? Well, it's true; it is our obligation in terms of his communicable attributes. Things like his goodness. Well, God is good and we are to be good. God is wise; we are to be wise. In fact, we're to have the wisdom that comes from God. God is powerful; we are to exercise power as he tells us. God is holy. We're supposed to be holy like him: "Be holy because I am holy." God is true. God is truth. God is faithfulness. And we're to be truthful; we're to be faithful. So, there are these practical benefits to believers if they do make those

distinctions between the incommunicable attributes and the communicable attributes of God.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

So, Scripture teaches us that humans have been created in the image of God. Scripture teaches us that God's nature and his being is reflected in his creation. And so, when we do the work of systematic theology, talking about the communicable and the incommunicable attributes of God is helpful in trying to understand, even though those distinctions themselves are not directly out of Scripture, it helps us to understand some of the things that are in Scripture that we're going to try to understand... As we try to learn from Scripture about what Scripture does teach, things like how God is reflected in his creation. What does it mean to be in the image of God? How is this creation of man different than the creation of the animals, so to speak? And then also, as our sin wants to reach up and make us into gods, in what ways are we the image of God but not ourselves gods? In those conversations and those discussions, talking about the communicable attributes of God and the incommunicable attributes of God, even though that language doesn't come out of Scripture itself, it helps us to be able to understand what has God transferred, so to speak? What has God given to the world — such as just *being* itself — that everything in the world has, but that it has only because God had it first, but that God is able to transfer? And yet, what does it not have? Well, it doesn't have the ability to exist all by itself without needing a Creator. It doesn't have this sort of eternity of existence. And so, having those distinctions, in what ways has God communicated to these things that he's made, aspects of who he is that help us to understand what's meant in Scripture, is very, very helpful. But trying to make those terms themselves into hard and fast, "and this is where the border stops and this is where it starts on these different ideas," they don't come directly out of Scripture, and so Scripture does not define in and of itself the distinctions. So, they're helpful for learning, but they are not in and of themselves the objects that we should be seeking to learn about.

Question 2:

What do the Scriptures tell us about God's spirituality?

Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

In John 4, I think it's verse 24, Jesus says that God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. That God is "spiritual" is a way of expressing that God is not material: God is other than the world that he has created, and that the relationship between us and God is rooted in the Spirit of God, the third person of the Godhead. And so, that God is spiritual means, I think, a little more than simply that God is immaterial, that God is ethereal, but that God is experienced and God is known by means of the Spirit.

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

When it comes to God's spirituality, the Scriptures tell us various things. First of all, at the most basic level, God is a spirit. That means, for example, that he's invisible. Even though God manifests himself sometimes visibly in Scripture and of course supremely through the flesh of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, God in himself is invisible. No man has seen him; no man can see him. Secondly, it tells us that God is not confined by the usual parameters that embodied creatures would be confined by. God is omnipresent; God can be everywhere. God sustains the whole universe by his Spirit, so it tells us it connects to our understanding of God's attributes, that God is without limit.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The Bible says God is spirit, which means he's not made of matter in his essence. He is spiritual in that sense, which is why it's especially amazing to think that in the incarnation, where God became a man, he took on humanity. So, to say God is spiritual affirms that about him, but it doesn't then make us think negatively about the physical realm, because in the incarnation we have a radical affirmation of the physical realm because God takes it to himself in his Son.

Question 3:**What do theologians mean by God's simplicity?****Prof. Brandon P. Robbins**

Theologians often talk of the simplicity of God, meaning that God is not complex. God is not made up of parts. Because we are finite creatures, we can only, kind of, talk about one thing at a time, so we have to use different terms, sometimes, to describe God. We have to say that he is all-powerful, and he is all-knowing. We've got to say he has different attributes, like God is love, and God is merciful, and God is just. But when we say he's "simple" that means — in a way that we almost can't even conceive — he is one at the same time. His righteousness is his mercy; you know, his justice is his grace. He is completely simple and is not made up of individual parts like we are. He does not have hands and feet and eyes and those kinds of things that have different sections of him. He is a simple being.

Rev. Valery Zadorozhny, translation

God's simplicity is a very interesting notion because, on the one hand, the Bible says that God is inconceivable. That is, a man cannot analyze him and sort him out. And on the other hand, theology contains the concept of God's "simplicity." And, as we know, we may say that God has revealed himself as Trinity, but these three persons are one; they have one essence. That is, he cannot be broken down into what we'd call "parts." If we take any created thing, it necessarily consists of parts. A solution consists of water and something else; there are many molecules in it. And God is one. So, in this sense, he is simple.

Dr. Jeffery Moore

Theology sometimes talks about God as “simple.” And when you hear that not from a technical background, you think, “Oh no, God's very complicated.” There is so much going on there; he's so big and all of that. But, to talk about God as “simple” is to talk about him as not being divisible. You can't separate him out into this part, this part, or this part. God is absolutely, wholly, completely integrated so that you can't... You know, I have arms and legs and I would still be me if I were to lose a finger or something like that... God's just not like that. He cannot be divided.

Question 4:
What is God's omniscience?**Dr. Richard Lints**

God's omniscience is a way of speaking of God's knowledge. He has *all* knowledge. Now, when we say that, again there is some mystery involved. At a formal level, we might say for every true proposition, God knows, and knows that it's true. But at a more experiential level, we also want to say that God *understands* everything, that there is no mystery in God's knowledge of all that is, including God's knowledge of himself. Most of us live on this side of that infinity. We are limited in our knowledge. We are limited in our understanding. We bump into that reality all the time, especially the more complex our world has become in its technology, in its urban developments, in ordinary experience, we bump into how limited our understanding is. And to affirm God's omniscience is to affirm God has no such limits. God knows everything.

Dr. William Edgar

The word omniscience basically means, “knowing everything.” It doesn't just mean knowing quantitatively everything. It means knowing personally and determinatively everything. The reason God knows everything is because he determines everything. Now, this doctrine is a very precious one for us because we don't know everything. We know partially; we know through a glass darkly, but we have One in the universe who does know everything. And this means that God doesn't have to think a problem through. You know, if you enjoy things like crossword puzzles or heuristic games, you love just pondering, “now, what's the letter that belongs here, and what is that word?” God doesn't do that. He has an instant omniscience, an instant knowledge of everything. His knowledge, as Van Til used to say, is coterminous with his being. His knowledge and his being are coterminous. In other words, it's two different ways of saying the same thing. We can't say that of human beings. We know, but we know through a process, and our being doesn't determine what we know outside of a relationship with God who reveals himself to us. So, this fact that God knows everything is one more way to show his utter distinction from the creature, his holiness, the wonder of his being, and it is a comfort to know that, whereas, we can't figure out what's going on sometimes, and we suffer and we don't understand why, he knows... His omniscience is a comfort. When we get to the other side, I imagine God will explain things to us about things that were mysteries here, and he will gently

chide us by saying, “Didn’t you forget that I was omniscient and that I might have had a good reason for doing these things?”

Dr. Jeffery Moore

Using the term “omniscience” is an attempt by humans to be able to put a category on the idea that God knows everything. But as soon as we say the word or try to define the word, we’re thinking in terms of “I know a lot of stuff, and if I knew even more stuff, that would be more like God, and if I knew all the stuff, then that would be like God”... I guess the word omniscience, like all theological terms that talk about the nature, the character of God, is very presumptive. It’s an attempt on our part to give a name to something that is so big, like God’s eternity or God’s infinity, something that’s so big and maybe it makes us a little more comfortable to have a name for it. And also, it helps us to remember the distance between us and God. In every circumstance I can say I don’t know everything about this, but what I know about this leads me to believe, or leads me to act in this way. None of those restrictions apply to God. He does know everything. He knows where every electron is in its orbit around every nucleus of every atom of every molecule of every cell of every thing that is not only on this earth and living and breathing, but the inanimate things and all of the stars and all of the planets and all of the universes, and all of the things we don’t even know exist so that we would know to look for them or where to look for them. People talk about “dark matter” and these, you know, this energy that can’t be seen and all of those things. None of that is missing from God’s database. He knows all of those things. And to contemplate how much he knows compared to how little I know, we have a term, omniscience, but it’s awfully small for such a big task.

Question 5:

What do theologians mean by God’s aseity or self-existence?

Rev. Vernon Pierre

God’s aseity sounds like a complex word that really just says something very simple but important. It speaks to God’s self-sufficiency, his independence, that he doesn’t need anything from creation, that he wasn’t lonely when he made creation. It speaks to God being sufficient in and of himself. And Acts 17:24-25 says:

God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25, ESV).

And it’s an important concept. Many of the other gods in that day, they needed people; they needed people to feed them and to pay attention to them. This says something about the God of the Bible, that God is consistent in and of himself, he’s independent in and of himself. He creates us for his own glory out of his own good will.

Dr. R. Todd Mangum

Well, God's self-existence has to do with one area in which God is completely different from any other entity in the universe. Every other entity in the universe is a creation of God. Every other entity in the universe, animate or inanimate, living or substance, material, is a byproduct of a Creator. Often critics of Christianity will say, "Alright, you criticize us, Christians, for thinking that the universe spontaneously combusted out of a big bang, but okay, you have the same problem. You say all of creation was created by a God, but who created that God?" The principle of God's self-existence is a response to that line of questions... When you fuse that together with Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, the creation account, we know where everything else came from, but "In the beginning God." Well, what about before the beginning? There was God. There has always been God, because God is self-existent.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

When theologians describe God as self-existent, they mean that he doesn't get his existence from somewhere else. God gives us existence and we've got used to the dependence on God for our existence. But God is not in that same position. God exists because God exists, and he wasn't created by another God. God exists because God exists, and the rest of us exist because God willed it to be.

Question 6:

What does God's aseity, or self-existence, teach us about his independence from his creation?

Dr. Simon Vibert

When theologians talk about God being self-existent, they're pointing to the fact that God is dependent on no one or nothing else in order to be sustained. God eternally was, God is, in his own being, self-existent. Augustine wrestled with this, of course, and he looked at the Trinity as being a great model of how within the Trinity — the Father, loving, and the Son, beloved, and the Holy Spirit who helps communicate the love between them — even within the Godhead itself there is love perfectly given and expressed. So, God has no need of the creation in order to sustain himself.

Dr. William Edgar

God is self-existent in the sense that he depends on no one outside of himself, no thing outside of himself. He is utterly self-sufficient, self-dependent, and has existed forever, whereas we are dependent on God for our existence. Our every breath depends on his generosity and his providence. That's true of the whole creation. The animals, the plants, everything depends on God. And the reason God's self-sufficiency is precious to us is that we don't have a God who in some way is dependent on us for existence. There are people, for example, who say the reason God made us is because he was lonely, and we would answer to that, God didn't have to make us. He wasn't lonely. He already had fellowship within himself because of

the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit existing in love, in honor and glory and communication forever. So, he's independent, self-sufficient, and we are not. It doesn't mean we are insignificant. It doesn't mean that he hasn't given us a call in life and a purpose and the ability to converse with him. These are all very real things. But the bottom line is that we can only do those things because we are dependent on God. And again, that's a very good thing. We wouldn't want a God who was dependent on us. Freud thought that the reason people believed in God is because they needed a father figure to explain the difficulties of the universe. And yet, he also thought this was a neurosis. We need God because we're unstable and we're desperate for explanations, and in our desperateness we make him into something like a person. Well, the Bible, of course, puts it exactly the other way. God is independent; he's self-sufficient. He's not a neurosis. He is at best a comforter. He's also a judge and he sets the terms of our knowing him. So, it's a precious doctrine. It doesn't mean he treats us like robots, but it does mean everything we do, every breath we take is dependent on our God.

Rev. Clete Hux

Most theologians, when they refer to God as being self-existent, they're referring to God being independent of anything in the created order. He doesn't get his meaning, his significance from the created order. He is independent and self-existent.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

God is self-existent. That means he doesn't depend on anyone or anything else for his very existence. Unlike everything else that is besides God, he's independent in that way, entirely un-needing of anything outside of himself, starting with his very existence and then continuing with his sustenance. He has ongoing existence in an independent way, not depending on anyone or anything for that existence or ongoing existence.

Question 7:

What is God's infinity?

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

God's infinity is an attribute of God typically applied to him by systematicians. You won't find the word "infinity" in the Bible, but what the term is attempting to capture is the idea that God is without limits, that he cannot be circumscribed by space or by time, but he's of a completely different order, if you like, to the created universe.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

To say that God's "infinite" means he's free of all qualitative limitations. That means anything that's true of God is true without limit. It doesn't mean, as sometimes people think, that everything's true of God. He's not infinitely rock-like; he's not infinitely dishonest. But anything that's true of him is true without limits. So, he's infinitely gracious, infinitely loving, infinitely wise, infinitely knowing. In some ways his

infinity is a meta-attribute. It's one of those ways of describing all of his attributes. So, his eternity is his infinity in relation to time; his omnipresence is his infinity in relation to space; his omniscience is his infinity in relation to knowledge. So, God's infinity is this wonderful truth of him that he never runs out of resources, he's not limited to anything that's true about him. It's one of the main ways we're radically different than God, because we as creatures are by definition finite. We're limited in everything and dependent on God for everything. And that's a wonderful thing to acknowledge when we know that the God who cares for us has unlimited resources to do that.

Rev. Clete Hux

God's infinity, or the attribute of infinity, basically refers to him not being measured as we would measure in creaturely terminology. He cannot be measured in time, in space, in history the way the created order is. He's much beyond that. Again, it has to do with his eternal nature. God is infinite. He cannot be numbered; he cannot be measured.

Dr. Carey Vinzant

What is God's infinity? In short, it means that God is not limited. It's probably the *locus classicus* on this topic is Nicolaus Cusanus' *On Learned Ignorance*, where he makes the point that in fact the word infinite, it's a positive term with a negative meaning. It means, "not limited." Now, this has all sorts of implications. It touches on the idea of God's eternity, the idea of God's omnipresence, the idea of God's omnipotence. See, all of those things are tied to limitation. You know, power as we know it is limited. Time happens within boundaries. Space happens, we are spatially limited. We are temporally limited, we begin, and at least physically, we come to an end... The idea of limitation is a very human problem, and the doctrine of God's humanity is simply a statement that he does not have this problem. There's a wonderful little moment in *The Knowledge of the Holy* where A.W. Tozer says, "What a wonderful thing to turn from all of our limitations to a God who has none."

Question 8:

What does it mean to say that God is eternal?

Dr. Josh Moody

That God is eternal is describing who God is in relation to our common understandings of time, that he is not bound by our understanding of time. So, right in the nature of who God is, is the description "I AM." So, God is not "I was" or "I will be", but he is "I AM." And so, before the creation of the world, for eternity, God does not have a beginning, he does not have an end. He is above and beyond and through all that. Time is not something that binds him. And so God is eternal. He is Yahweh, I AM. He doesn't begin; he doesn't end. He is from eternity past, eternity future, above and beyond this concept of time, which is one that binds all of our realities, but does not bind God in his own person and nature as the eternal God.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

When we say that God is eternal, it means that God has always existed and that he will always exist; so, we can kind of look in both directions. We can look back, and as far as we can see on the time line, if you like, God was always there. When we look forward as far as you like, God will always be there. So, that is the eternity of God. He's not limited by our time scales. He didn't begin when the world was created, he brought it to be, so God existed before the world was created. He's existing right now and engaged with the world as it is, and he will continue to exist when this world comes to an end and God brings out this new heaven and a new earth. He will continue with us forever and ever. Amen. So, that's something about the eternity of God.

Dr. Richard Lints

God's eternity is a way of speaking of God's relationship to time. It's fraught with difficulties when we use this language because we want to affirm both that God creates time, the progression of time, but he also orders time; he's sovereign over time. So, there's a sense in which creation, the beginning of all that is, is the beginning of time. But God exists before that point in time, and so to speak about a time before time is itself a conundrum, a difficult concept to grasp. We speak about certain episodes in our own lives as lasting "an eternity." It's a way of speaking about how long that experience seems to be. So it is when we speak of God's eternity. We want to articulate that he experiences the full breadth of history at once, but across time as well. So there is undoubtedly caution and carefulness that's required to speak about God's relationship to time.

Rev. Dan Hendley

When we say that God is eternal, what we mean is that he has no beginning and no end. To compare it to human beings, we may speak of the human being having an immortal soul, which means that we'll never die, and so in that sense we are eternal in one direction. But we're not eternal in both directions because we had a beginning. When we say that God is eternal, we suggest that God had no beginning, that he has always existed. So, the question, "Who made God?" is sort of an irrelevant, irrational question. Nobody made God. He has always existed, and of course he always will exist. So, God is eternal in both directions, and that's what we mean when we speak of the eternity of God.

Question 9:**What is God's immutability?****Dr. Glenn R. Kreider**

By "immutability" we mean that God is not mutable; we mean that God does not change, that his immutability is a reference to his unchanging nature, his unchanging character. He is always loving; he is always merciful; he is always holy; he is always

just. Immutability is sometimes misunderstood to deny that God changes in his way of dealing with people, that there is a static way that God relates to people. But when the Scripture talks about us in Ephesians being “by nature children of wrath,” but now because of the redemptive work of Christ, we are God's friends — we are in a relationship with him — is in no way to undermine that God does not change in who he is, but he does change, by virtue of his own action on our behalf, change in his relationship to us.

Dr. Miguel Nuñez, translation

The concept of God implies perfection. And perfection cannot change because then it would become imperfect. God is immutable in every way. God is immutable in his essence. God is immutable in his characteristics as God. When God speaks, that word is immutable. When God is powerful, that power is immutable. When we talk about God's wisdom, that wisdom is immutable precisely because it belongs to God, and God is perfect. God is eternal, the same from eternity to eternity. The attributes of God are all immutable. When we think of a mutable or changeable being, we are no longer thinking about the Creator. We are no longer thinking about God. We are thinking of a creature. The creature is the one who changes, changes when she gets old, changes because he is not perfect, changes because we can improve. When we exist or believe or think something, since we are creatures, we can improve in the future, and therefore, change to improve. But God is perfect. He does not need to improve. He *cannot* improve. It is not only that he is immutable. He cannot change because, by virtue of being God, he is a perfect being in himself, independent of everything, not dependent on anybody. Nothing affects him. Nothing transforms him. Nothing changes him. He does not age. He exists outside of time and space. He is a being without comparison, set apart, and therefore, we can only talk about the immutability of God. So, regarding the question: How is God immutable? In every way that we can think of God, God is immutable. His decrees are immutable. His word is immutable. His essence, as we said, is immutable. His Spirit is immutable because he is God, and God by definition is immutable. God has not become immutable. He is: "I AM WHO I AM" and always will be. In God's case, what he once was, he is today. What he once thought, he thinks today, and he will think the same tomorrow, because everything God conceives is perfect. Therefore, he doesn't have the need to change opinions tomorrow, or change his being, or change his methodology, because from day one he thought of everything immutably; he thought of everything perfectly.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

One of the many significant attributes of God, the Triune God, is immutability. That's the term that you'll find in many theology texts. Immutability might be translated “unchanging.” And that's really wonderful news because we are so aware of the impermanence and the transience of just about everything in our lives, in our world, in our relationships, and even in our own fleeting lives. I think of that descriptor of God as the still-point in a turning universe. What is there that draws our restless souls to a vision of the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever? I think it's this profound psychological and spiritual need we all have for that which is rock solid,

that which is trustworthy, that which can function as an anchor for the soul when the mountains shake and everything appears to be falling into the sea... We find our strength in this immutable God. Now, in the history of Christian theology, however, there was an unfortunate appropriation early on of some platonic notions of God's immutability that implied that God was serenely detached and unaffected by the problems and struggles of his creatures and could not be touched in any way by what was going on in our chaotic existence. And so, this alien platonic notion of God's impassability effectively distanced God, at least in our perceptions of him, made him a cool and more philosophical essence than the dynamic, impassioned, personal God of Scripture. So I think it's very important that we affirm that constancy of character and that firmness of resolve that immutability truly represents. The God who begins a good work and brings it to completion, that's the God we're talking about. But the immutable God is God the Father who is not untouched by the suffering and neediness of people, who is not unresponsive to their prayers. This God is an interactive, relational God whose stability of character and purpose is something we worship and adore.

Rev. Peter Cui, translation

The Bible says God is unchanging. God is life. He is the "Unmoved Mover" who loves us with unfailing love and is ever righteous. He entered into a dynamic relationship with the world, and he affects his creation and gives it, especially human beings, freedom. Under these circumstances, we see God's unchanging nature manifested in his dynamic relationship with a changing world. Because of this, although he doesn't change his standards, he will sometimes change his decisions. For example, God created mankind according to his will, so why did he regret this later? Precisely because he does not change his standards. When the world he created betrayed and disobeyed those standards, an unchanging God must surely move from merely upholding creation, to bringing renewal instead.

Question 10:

How can God be immutable if the Bible says that he sometimes changes his mind?

Dr. William Edgar

There are passages in Scripture which tell us that God relented or that he answered prayer. The impression is given that he thought one way, and then he decided to make a change. And the problem with that for those who read it at one level is that it makes God seem fickle. The Bible elsewhere tells us that he's one, he's holy, and that he planned whatsoever comes to pass from all eternity, and there's no variability, no changeability in that. And I think there's several ways to do this. The most satisfactory way I know is to say that at the level of his being, his eternal decrees, there is no change. But, he made the world significant. He made the world, as the *Westminster Confession* puts it, with secondary causes that he sustains. So, you know, if it doesn't rain, the crops won't grow. If a man and a woman don't get together there

won't be a baby. Now, he can do miracles, but he doesn't generally ordain the world by miracles. He does it with his ordinary providence. So that world is a significant world because choices are real, and he honors the choices people make in his covenant relations. So, for example, when Jonah was called to preach at Nineveh, Nineveh was a very sinful city, and as we know, he didn't want to go — that's another story — but he went and he preached, and the people of Nineveh responded to his message. He preached that there'd be a judgment, and from the king on down to everyone, they repented in dust and ashes, and God saw that their repentance was genuine and he relented from the judgment that he was going to bring. That's because the creation is real; he has a covenant relationship, a relationship of condescension with us. Even the great John Calvin, who is a hero to many of us, I think, was a little bit weak on this one. He said it looks like he relented, but that's just human language, that's language of accommodation. Of course, we know God can't do that. Well, I think it's more than he looked like it. He really did. He really does answer prayer when we pray. It really did make a difference that Jesus died on the cross so that there could be a transition from wrath to grace in history. And that's because the creation is utterly real. So, if you wish, there's two levels here. God's eternal decrees don't change by definition, but he is so powerful that he has decreed that the world is real and that his relationship to the world is dynamic, and he has compassion; he is sorry he made people; he answers prayers; he judges; he relents of his judgment. All of those are covenant relationships. And if we kind of thin that out, we'll make ourselves into robots, and we'll make the world into a theater that's not a real place. The Bible, I think, says both things and doesn't give a rational bridge between the two, but it does allow us comfortably to live with the two. It's God's utter sovereignty, but change happens in response to the creation's decisions.

Dr. Don Collett

The Scriptures speak of God changing his mind in order to teach us something about the relationship between his sovereignty and human responsibility. In the Old Testament book of the prophet Jeremiah — Jeremiah 18 is a classic example of this relationship. On the one hand, we're taught that God is fully sovereign, that he can reshape Israel according to his sovereign purposes, but then immediately after that, the next verses that follow teach us that repentance is needed for those who would respond properly to God and come to know him. And so, what we learn — and in the response to the repentance of those peoples, God will change his posture toward them. And what we learn from that then is that while God is fully sovereign — and I say that in an unqualified way because I think that's the way Scripture presents it — the way we respond to him does affect our relationship with him. So, while our responses occur within his sovereign purposes, if you will, those responses still remain significant and important for how God relates to us. That's a very great mystery that I couldn't sort out if I had an hour to explain, but I think Scripture clearly teaches that. God changes his mind as a way of reminding us that, while God is fully sovereign, our responses do affect our relationship with him.

Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe

In the Old Testament, you'll have episodes where they speak of God changing his mind. The old translation said that God "repented." A good example is in Exodus 32. And we always have to understand these in a narrative way, that there's a narrative here. And God is, I like to say, a character in the story; he plays a part in the narrative. And in the narrative then, it's picturing God in his relationship with human creatures down here on planet earth and how he interacts with his human creatures. And he speaks; he listens. He sees something; he does something; he watches; he responds; he takes the initiative. So, God is doing things in the narrative. Now, in Exodus 32, God had said to Moses in verse 10, "Leave me alone, and my wrath will burn hot against Israel and I'll consume them, and I'll start over then with you, Moses." Israel had committed the golden calf apostasy, Israel has rebelled against Yahweh, and thereby they have provoked him to anger by worshiping false idols like a golden calf instead of their true God. But he asks Moses' permission — "Let me alone, and I'll wipe out this nation and start over with you." And then 32:11, Moses intervenes, intercedes, and he says, No. "Why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you brought out of Egypt?" So they're not "my people," they're "your people" whom you delivered. And the "Why" means, "You should not do this." "Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and consume them?'" And so, Moses is arguing, what would the Egyptians think of the God of Israel? What a lousy God that is. And whereas we know that God's desire is to be the God of all nations, through Abraham and through his seed, all the families of the earth will be blessed. God had promised that in Genesis. And Moses knows that, so Moses is making arguments to God in his prayer. And then his petition, then, in verse 12 is, "Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster." That's the word — change your mind — and the word simply means to change your course of action. So that God in history is threatening to destroy the people, and Moses is petitioning him to change his course of action and don't do that, and instead, "turn away from your wrath." Then Moses further prays, "Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel" — Jacob — "your servants, to whom you swore and said, 'I will multiply your offspring, and I'll bring you into the Promised Land.'"

So, Moses makes these arguments that God should not destroy the people right there at Sinai, even though they're rebellious. And verse 14 says, "And Yahweh relented." Yahweh changed his mind. Yahweh turned from the disaster that he had spoken of. So, Yahweh turned away from his wrath and instead spared the people there at Sinai. So, when it talks about Yahweh changing his mind, it means turning away from his wrath and turning to his mercy. And so it's talking, it's referring to God's interactions with his people. And God, like I say, is moved by Moses's petition, and he turns away from that course of action, and he turns to a different course of action... So, God in the Bible is portrayed as interactive, and in that interactive, he prefers to have mercy. His wrath is provoked. He's provoked to righteous wrath and punishment because that's what sinners deserve, rebellious sinners, but he would prefer to have mercy and to forgive. And so, very often it speaks of him changing from this position to this position, and when it does that, it uses that expression, he "changes his mind," or he

does an "about face." So, he turns from punishment to mercy. That's what it's referring to.

Dr. Richard Lints

The Scriptures use the language of God changing his mind carefully. It occurs in a number of Old Testament contexts in particular, and we need to be cautious every time we read those texts to understand them in context. So, a famous one occurs in Exodus the 32nd chapter, when Moses has gone up to the mountain to speak with Yahweh, with God, and God sees Israel's disobedience at the base of the mountain. Moses pleads with God for patience towards his people. And the author writes that God relents; God changes his mind. Being careful, however, reading that in the context that God's ways, God's designs for Israel have not changed. Moses executes a great and terrible judgment, the very judgment he was pleading God to be patient with, when he returns down the mountain. So, in the context, God changing his mind is the changing of the stance towards Israel's disobedience from the vantage point of Israel themselves. There is a sense we must also affirm that God's purposes, God's ways, remain always the same. God is faithful, a language much more common across the Old Testament to speak of God's consistency; what he promises, he will fulfill. So it is that those limited texts which talk about God changing his mind are not because God has realized something he didn't know beforehand, but rather that in Israel's experience, God's judgment is not brought as quickly as they would have expected it to be brought.

Question 11:

What does it mean that God is omnipresent?

Dr. Jeffery Moore

We use this word "omnipresent" to describe that God is everywhere at all times, that he is in the smallest place and the biggest place, that he is present on the, kind of on the molecular level. You can't divide creation too small, nor can you look at it on too large a scale without finding God there, and one of the key things is, without finding all of God there. That's entirely beyond our human imagination. We could spend time trying to sort through that and figure out what in the world that could mean. I think it's better to think of God's omnipresence in terms of what actually impacts our daily lives. And there we get our cue from the Psalms: "If I go to the highest place, you're there; if I go to the lowest place, you're there. If I go on the other side of the sea, you're there." The fact that God is everywhere is intended to be both law and gospel for us. I can't hide from him what I'm doing that's wrong — the law side of things — so I can't go somewhere over here where God doesn't see, and do my dirty business, and then come back and, you know, be all sweetness and light. But on the other hand, the gospel side of that is true. I can't wind up so low, so far away that God is unable to reach to my particular situation and bring his love and his grace and his forgiveness.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

When we say that God is omnipresent, we mean he's available everywhere. So, it's not just that God is limited in one little planet called heaven, as we sometimes kind of imagine it. What we're thinking about is that God fills all time and space. In fact, he's beyond all time and space. It's very hard for us to imagine with our own imaginative conceptions, but what we're saying is that God is not limited to being in one place at one time as you and I are and we experience that as our daily reality. God is not limited in that way. He's "immortal, invisible, God only wise," as we sing in one of those great hymns. And there is the sense of God being beyond the limitations of the physical body.

Dr. Josh Moody

When we talk about God being omnipresent ... what we're saying is there is no place that we can run to that God is not. Jonah could not run away from God. You cannot hide from God. You cannot go to a place where God is not present. God is *omni* — "always" — present. This is either the most frightening truth ever expressed or the most encouraging truth ever expressed, depending on our relationship to this God. So, for the Christian, however bad things are, wherever they are, they cannot be cut off from his loving presence. Whatever they feel about his loving presence, it doesn't change that he is omnipresent. So it is extraordinarily comforting. For the non-Christian, or the person who's not in a saved, justified, righteous relationship with God, it's a frightening reality — cry, "Rocks, fall on me!" There is no way to get away from his omnipresence. And so, this truth should lead us to rejoice if we're his and repent quick if we're not.

Question 12:**What does omnipotence mean?****Rev. Dan Hendley**

Well, the word "omnipotence" simply means all power or all-powerful. So when we say that God is omnipotent, we are saying that he has all power. Now, some people might hear that and think that we mean that God can do anything, and that's not what we mean by that. We mean that God can do all his perfect will. There's a couple of things God cannot do. One thing is that which is irrational or illogical to do. Can God make a rock so big that he himself can't lift it? Or another thing you can say God can't do is, can God make a four-sided triangle? Well, of course not. Something is illogical or nonsensical; that doesn't mean God's power is limited in that way. God can do everything he wants to do. The other way that we might consider God's power to be limited is that God is only going to do those things that are consistent with his holy character. The Scriptures tell us that God cannot lie. It doesn't mean that he's restricted by any external forces from lying. It just means that God, like every other being in the universe, human beings, animals alike, is bound to act according to his nature. And having a perfect, faithful, truthful nature, God cannot lie. God cannot violate a promise he has made. But that in no way suggests that there's some

limitation on God's omnipotence. We're just clarifying by those exclusions what we mean by omnipotence, and that is that God can do all of his perfect will and there's nothing outside of him that can frustrate him.

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

The word "omnipotence" is applied by theologians to God to speak about his all-powerfulness, the fact that God is able to do anything he wills. It's important to put a couple of qualifications on that. For example, God is not free to do certain things. The Bible tells us he's not free to lie; in other words, he's not free to contradict his own nature. Nor is God free to engage in logical contradiction. He could not, for example, create a triangle with four sides. That would involve a logical contradiction. But in line with his nature and in line with the logic that is deeply embedded in his nature, he is otherwise free to do all things.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

God's omnipotence is a good reminder to us as believers that when the world seems like it's spinning out of control, feels like it's descending into chaos, it's not. God cannot be bound by another source or power superior to his. The world, whatever else it may seem like, the world is not spinning out of control, God is sovereign, we may have confidence that he has not been overpowered, and it gives us strength to walk with faith in those times that appear mysterious to our limited perspective. When we don't see all that God sees, it is good to know that God has not had his control or his power wrested from him against his will. Whatever is coming to me, whatever is taking place in my life, is taking place under the authority of God's loving hand. And I can take confidence, even when I can't explain my circumstances that I know the God who sustains me and walks through this with me.

Dr. Scott Manor

Omnipotence means, in its most basic sense, one might consider omnipotence to mean the ability to do anything, and so we obviously apply the term "omnipotence" to God. And so we would want to say God can do anything. And that's a very sort of simple, straightforward way of thinking about it, but it's a little bit more complex and nuanced than that. And so, you might want to ask the question, for example, that the scholastics did in the Middle Ages: Well, if God can do anything, then that would mean that God can sin. And God can't sin, and so then, we have a question of, is God really omnipotent if he can't do something? And so, what people like Thomas Aquinas and others thought through was how do we nuance our understanding of what omnipotence means so that we don't end up asking silly questions like, can God make a square circle? And so, what they came up with was an understanding that omnipotence means the ability to do anything that's, sort of, inherently feasible, that's inherently possible, and so, because God inherently is incapable of sinning, then inherently it would be impossible for him to commit a sin. And so, omnipotence doesn't necessarily apply in that sense. It's inherently impossible to create a square circle. And so, omnipotence doesn't extend to those categories that are kind of self-negating. It's more for those categories to be able to describe God's power in terms of what things are inherently possible.

Question 13:**How do you interpret the passages of the Bible that tell us that there are some things God cannot do?****Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

There are some passages in the Bible that talk about things that God can't do. For example, they say he can't lie, he cannot tolerate evil, he cannot bear the sight of sin. And it might be tempting to interpret these passages as implying restriction on God's power. In fact, I think that's a faulty understanding of what God's power and freedom is. God is all-powerful and all-free to be himself. He is not actually free to contradict his own nature, and that doesn't represent any restriction on his freedom. In fact, if he were able to contradict his own nature, if he were able to say, not exist, he would be less God than he is and would, ironically, be much less free. So, a lot of the problem with those passages relative to God's freedom is actually rooted in our only faulty conception of freedom. Freedom for God is not the freedom to do "A" or to do "B." Freedom for God is the freedom to be God, fully, infinitely, and eternally.

Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

It's sometimes said that God can do anything, and in a sense that's true if we understand what we mean by "anything." I think that sometimes it's thoughtless if we don't really think through what we mean, and especially when we come to passages in Scripture that say things like, "God is not a man that he should lie or son of man that he should repent," that he should have something to be sorry for. There is a sense in which there are certain things that God can't do. He can't lie, for example, as that verse just said. There are certain things that God can't do, like for example, will himself out of existence. There are certain things that can't do because they are against or completely antithetical to his basic nature, his character. And oftentimes I've had to point out to people that there are some things that God can't do, and we should be glad for it, that God is not the kind of God who can do the things that the Roman gods did and, you know, be capricious and cantankerous, infighting with one another and these kinds of petty things that essentially show God to be nothing more than a glorified human, a human higher up on the scale of strength or higher up on, you know, Mt. Olympus, that sort of thing. In fact, God can't do these things because in his very character, in the infinite nature of who he is, there are some things he really can't do.

Philosophers sometimes will put it this way, that God can't create a rock so big he can't lift, because there are impossibilities with respect to basic principles of logic, which again are grounded in the nature of God. But then there's also moral possibilities that, because of who he is, his goodness and his righteousness and his holiness, he would never perform because he is completely, incomprehensively, infinitely good and righteous. His will stems from who he is, and so the choices that he makes, that flow from him, are infinitely consistent with his character, and so he

would never be arbitrary, he would never be capricious, he would never deceive or tell a lie because that is not in his nature... I am so grateful that God is not the kind of God that we make in our own image, but in fact, it is the participation in his image that gives us any kind of moral credibility and ability in our own lives and the power of the Holy Spirit working to set us apart and to make us like him. So, I think it's a wonderful thing that God can't do certain things because, otherwise, the universe would be arbitrary, senseless, and it might not be moral, in fact. But the Scriptures do teach that there are some things God can't do, and I'm glad for it.

Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

Very often you will hear the complaint that when you say God is all-powerful and all-knowing, omnibenevolent, well, if God can do everything, right, why does the Bible say there's things that he can't do, like lie? From a logical standpoint some people will say that the idea, the very concept of being all-powerful is illogical, because could God make a rock so big that he can't lift it? Right? Either way, you're at the horn of a dilemma that you cannot answer. And the basic answer to all of those things is, when we say that God can do all things, we mean that God can do all things that are consistent with his character. And some things aren't consistent with his character, so God can't lie, God can't sin, God cannot deny himself, God can't break his own covenant.

Dr. Steven C. Roy

God's power is so great that it can exceed our wildest expectations. Paul says in Ephesians 3:20 that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ever ask or imagine... But with all of these biblical affirmations of God's power, Christians affirm that there nonetheless are things that God cannot do. In particular, God cannot deny himself or his character. This is an implication of divine simplicity which affirms that all of God's attributes work together harmlessly and fit together seamlessly so that one never works at cross-purposes with the other. In particular, with regard to God's omnipotence, Christians have affirmed two major kinds of things that God cannot do. First of all, God can't actualize a logical contradiction. He can't make a married bachelor or create a round square or a square circle. In other words, God's omnipotence never works at cross-purposes with his rationality. The second thing, broad categories, is God can never do something unholy or unrighteous. Hebrews tells us that it's impossible for God to lie. Second Timothy, Paul says that God cannot deny himself. And in James, James says God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone with evil. In other words, God's omnipotence never works at cross-purposes to his righteousness and his holiness. So, that's what Grudem means when he says God is able to do all his holy will. If God purposes to do something consistent with who he is, no one or nothing in the universe can prevent him from doing that. Such is God's power; such is the omnipotence of God.

Question 14: **Where is God's love best demonstrated?**

Dr. Don Collett

God's love is best demonstrated in what I would call the cross-shaped logic of the gospel. That logic is expressed very well by Paul in Romans 5:8 when he says, "God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." This unconditional love of a God who is not saving people that meet conditions, but saving precisely the people that can't meet conditions. That's a very beautiful image of the gospel. And so, I would say that the love of God is best demonstrated right there in the cross of Jesus Christ and in the sending of Christ to us. And that's an important thing to keep in mind, as well as that, for all the hard things that people sometimes say about the God of the Old Testament, it was the God of Israel the God of the Old Testament, who sent Christ as a manifestation of his love, which should teach us much about his character.

Dr. Ramesh Richard

The best demonstration of God's love must be placed in the background of all the other opportunities for us to think that God loves us. For example, in general care, God's providence in what sometimes we call the general revelation of God, you cannot come to a full understanding of God's love. In fact, there are factors in nature, which compete with one another, which do not say that God simply loves. It says that God cares, the fact that you're alive today. It says that God has providentially provided food even for the birds. But that's not necessarily proof of God's love. The best demonstration of God's love comes from what he did in addressing the fundamental challenge of the human race. We are in rebellion, we have departed from him and we cannot take one step close to him, and so he initiates the sequence and orchestrates and facilitates our salvation. How better to understand God's love in the supreme passion of the Lord Jesus, when God sent his one and only Son, who was not replaceable. He couldn't get another son like Abraham tried to do. He provides his one and only Son to be the Savior of the human race. The best demonstration of it then is found in the cross. The supreme, final, and, I'm going to say, the exclusive demonstration of salvation. God's love of you, unconditional, offered with invitation is that you can be rescued forever.

Dr. Philip Ryken

If you ask me, where is the love of God best demonstrated, I can give a really simple answer to that question, but I can also give a more complicated answer to that question. The really simple answer is the love of God is best demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for our sins. But I think we can maybe go a little deeper than that. There's a sense in which God's love is demonstrated everywhere. Everything that God has made, everything that God does in the world, everything about his salvation of his people, all of that demonstrates his love for us. But Jesus himself said, "Greater love has no man than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends." And when God himself in the person of his Son, infinitely perfect

one, without any fault or sin of his own, when that innocent one lays down his life and takes upon himself the guilt of all of our sins, there's no greater love than that. And that's why the cross is celebrated really everywhere in Scripture. It's celebrated in the Old Testament as the promise of the atonement that's coming, celebrated as the climax of the Gospels, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And then the whole rest of the Bible is really celebrating Jesus Christ for what he's done for our salvation. And there are lots of reasons why the cross should be at the center of the Christian faith, but this is certainly one of them, that in the cross we see perfectly demonstrated the love of God.

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