

CHAPTER 5.

GOD’S NAMES AND PERFECTIONS

Consider the following scenario. A father is looking for a violin teacher for his daughter. One potential teacher asks the father to describe his daughter. He says, “Well, she is eleven years old. She is very eager to learn how to play the violin. She can be quite shy at times, but once you come to know her, I’m sure you’ll find that she’s friendly and talkative.” Of course, a father naturally speaks about the good qualities of his child. However, to begin this lesson we want to focus on something else, namely, the difference between *essence* and *attributes*. We do not use these words every day. Since people do sometimes use them to describe God, let us explore these terms a little further.

In the example above, the father listed three attributes of his daughter. First, she is eleven years old. Second, she is eager to learn. Third, she can be shy. Now let us fast-forward three years into the future. The daughter is no longer eleven years old; now she is fourteen. She is no longer eager to learn how to play the violin; in fact, she stopped taking lessons after only one year. Moreover, by now she has lost almost all of her shyness; she loves talking to almost anyone who is willing to listen to her. In other words, in the span of a few years these three attributes of the daughter have all changed, noticeably if not dramatically.

Even though his daughter has changed in many ways, without hesitation the father will still say, “She is my daughter!” Being a daughter is simply an unchangeable part of who she is. It is part of her essence.

Attributes can change, but essence remains the same. In particular the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle made extensive use of this distinction between essence and attributes.

Many theologians have taken over this distinction, and they use the terms *essence* and *attributes* to describe God. God's essence is his divine nature or divine being. Turning to his attributes, we could mention that God is eternal, infinite, almighty, wise, holy, just, and good. But as soon as we say this, we run directly into an obvious problem. According to Aristotle's philosophy, attributes can change but essence remains the same. Is that also true of God? Could God change his attribute of holiness into something else and still remain God? Could God switch from being infinite to finite, all the while leaving his divine essence intact? The answer is no. In short, the concepts of essence and attributes do not work with God as they work with human beings. When Scripture says, "God is love" (1 John 4:16), then we should understand that love is part of the very essence of God. God cannot alter or abandon his love and still remain God. That is impossible. Love is simply and eternally part of who he is.

For this reason we also speak sometimes of the *names* and *perfections* of God, rather than of his essence and attributes. That is the approach we will take in this chapter.

THE NAMES OF GOD

Today when parents give their child a name, there are a few motivations that often play a role. Sometimes a particular name is chosen because it is part of a family tradition. For example, a son may be named after his father or grandfather. Other times parents chose a name because they like the way it sounds. Still other parents consider the meaning of the name, and they want their child to grow up to be the kind of person whose character matches that meaning.

In the Bible, when God gives someone a name he focuses on the meaning. For example, God changed the name of Abram to Abraham, and then he immediately added, "I have made you the father of a multitude

of nations” (Gen 17:5). That is exactly what Abraham means: father of many nations. So, let us apply this to God’s own name, I AM WHO I AM. This same name is also indicated by the word *Yahweh*. In many Bible translations, it is written as *LORD*, with all capital letters. This name should not be confused with *Lord*, which means ruler or master. We will return to the title *Lord* a little later.

I AM WHO I AM or Yahweh

God revealed his name, I AM WHO I AM, to Moses at the burning bush at Mount Horeb. God appears there to Moses because his people in Egypt are suffering in their slavery (Exod 2:23). God hears their groans, and he is going to do something about it. That is why he comes to Horeb: to send Moses to free his people from their cruel bondage in Egypt (Exod 3:9–10). Moses feels inadequate for such a large task, but God still sends him and promises to be with him (Exod 3:12). It is at this point that Moses asks about God’s name. He says, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Exod 3:13). Then God answers, “I AM WHO I AM . . . Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod 3:14).

There are a few important things to notice about the revelation of this divine name. In the first place, I AM WHO I AM is sympathetic toward the sufferings of his people. There are those who think that, for the most part, God is uninterested and uninvolved in what happens here on earth. These people are called deists. However, as the Holy Spirit makes clear in Exodus 3, I AM WHO I AM is not the God of the deists. On the contrary, he listens, he has compassion, and he acts to save his people. In short, I AM is the God of redeeming action.

Second, I AM WHO I AM is consistent. Yes, he is taking action to save his people, but this is also exactly what he promised to do many years earlier (Exod 3:17; see also Gen 15:12–16). When it concerns fellow human beings, sometimes we never quite know where we stand. They make promises. But will they keep them? They put on a brave face. But

are they really terrified inside? With people we often ask, “Is this person truly all that he says he is?” However, by revealing his name our God answers that question even before we ask it. He says, “I AM WHO I AM.” That is, I AM consistently WHO I AM.

Third, I AM WHO I AM remains faithful through the generations of his covenant. (We will study the doctrine of the covenant in more detail in chapter 11.) Immediately after God reveals his name, he adds, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Exod 3:15). In other words, God does not change who he is, or how he acts, from day to day. In fact, he does not change from generation to generation either. Jacob could rely on the fact that God would treat him in the same way that he treated his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham.

Fourth, I AM WHO I AM cannot be defined by comparing him to anyone or anything else. As the LORD says through the prophet Isaiah, “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?” (Isa 40:25). In other words, the only one who can be properly compared to God is God himself. That is why his name sounds redundant: *I AM WHO I AM*. However, in this case the repetition is full of meaning and purpose. God is saying that he, and he alone, is God. You cannot equate him with idols, or angels, or human beings, or anything or anyone else.

Therefore, in sum, God is the entirely unique, always consistent, redemptively active God who remains faithful from generation to generation in the line of his covenant people. All of that is compressed into his most special name: I AM WHO I AM or *Yahweh*. It is also helpful to know that a shortened form of this name is *Jah*; it can be found in names such as Elijah and Adonijah as well as in the common exclamation of praise: Hallelujah.

Yahweh Sebaoth

About two hundred and fifty times you will read in Scripture one of his combined names, the LORD of hosts, *Yahweh Sebaoth* (1 Sam 1:3; 1 Sam 15:2; Isa 5:7; Hag 1:2, 5, 7, etc.) This compound name emphasizes that this redemptively active God controls all the angels and all the nations and creatures of the earth, including the heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars. In short, God is the Supreme Commander who can issue an order to any creature, either visible or invisible, and that creature simply must obey. This is the meaning of *Yahweh Sebaoth*.

God Almighty or *El Shaddai*

The LORD used this name when he appeared to Abram and confirmed his covenant with him. He said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (Gen 17:1; see also Exod 6:3). There is some discussion about the exact meaning of the second part of this name: *Shaddai*. No definite conclusion has been reached, but from the way this name is used in the Bible it is clear that it highlights just how high and exalted our God is. There is no one more powerful than he is, no one more gracious, no one wiser. In every possible way God is surpassingly great. This is the meaning captured in his name *God Almighty*.

Lord or Adonai

On other occasions Scripture ascribes certain titles to God. The most frequent one is *Lord* (spelled without all capitals), which is literally *Adonai*. This title describes God’s exalted position as the ruler over all. In 1 Timothy 6:15 the apostle Paul uses an expanded version of this title when he describes God as “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.” This title also reminds us of our position. Since God is our Lord, we are his servants (LD 13, Q&A 34). Servants have a clear purpose in life: they are to obey their master’s commands, promptly and wholeheartedly (Luke 17:10).

Other descriptions of God

There are many other vivid descriptions of God in the Bible. He is called the “horn of my salvation” (Ps 18:2), “my shepherd” (Ps 23:1), “the Holy One” (2 Kings 19:22), and “the Ancient of Days” (Dan 7:9)—to list but a few. Each one of these descriptive titles emphasizes a certain aspect of God’s character or his activity. At the same time, we must remember that since God is God *Most High* (Ps 78:35), he far transcends these descriptions. That is to say, God is our shepherd, but he is also much more than our shepherd. He is our Father, our Redeemer, our Guide, and our King, too. We should be careful that we do not cling to one particular description of God (e.g., Redeemer) to the detriment of other descriptions (e.g., King). True faith involves accepting *all* that God reveals about himself, not just our favourite parts (LD 7, Q&A 21).

THE PERFECTIONS OF GOD

The Belgic Confession describes God as the one who is “a simple and spiritual being; he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good” (Art 1). As mentioned above, according to many theologians the Confession refers here to the attributes of God. However, they might better be called the *perfections* of God. Even though the Belgic Confession only adds the word “perfectly” to “wise,” it could just as well have added it to the other terms it mentions. God is also perfectly immutable and perfectly just. Let us take a brief look at each perfection in this list plus two more: God’s grace and his holiness.

Simple

Is God simple? There are some things about God that are very difficult to understand. So it sounds strange to describe God as simple. However, here *simple* does not have its more common meaning. It indicates that God is not compound; that is to say, he is not a collection of various, different parts. By contrast, our bodies are compound. We are made up of a head, chest, arms, legs, etc. But God is non-compound, or, to say it more positively, he is simple. This may all sound rather abstract, but it

is important when we speak about the perfections of God. When human beings administer justice, they sometimes compromise or even cancel out their compassion. God is not like that. He is perfectly and simultaneously just and merciful. He is perfectly and simultaneously almighty and good. None of his perfections ever compromise or cancel out any other perfection. In this way God is simple, and his simplicity is expressed at the end of 2 Timothy 2:13, where we learn that God cannot deny himself.

Spiritual

God does not have a physical body. He is a spiritual being. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at the well, “God is spirit” (John 4:24). Angels are also spiritual beings, but they are creatures. Only God is a *divine* spiritual being. On certain occasions God miraculously took on some kind of visible and physical form. For instance, he appeared in the form of a man to Abraham (in Gen 18 compare vv. 2, 8 with vv. 10, 13; also v. 16 with vv. 17, 20, 22). However, occasions like this are exceptions that God makes for a special purpose. In his very own nature God is spiritual.

Eternal

Time began when God started to create. Scripture starts with these words: “*In the beginning* God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). This is confirmed shortly after that when we read, “And there was evening, and there was morning, the *first* day” (Gen 1:5). As a result, everything other than God has a beginning and is both temporal and time-bound. This includes even such basic things as matter itself, light, and energy. Only God is eternal. He has no beginning and no end (Ps 90:2); he is not subject to time but, rather, sovereign over time. He can stop time (Josh 10:12–14), and he can even reverse time (2 Kings 20:8–11).

Incomprehensible

We can know God since he has revealed himself, but we cannot *completely* comprehend, or fathom, who he is or how he works. For more details on what is called the incomprehensibility of God, see chapter 4.

Invisible

God is spirit (see *spiritual*, above). Since he does not have a physical body, he is also invisible to our natural, human eyes. “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; see also 1 Tim 6:16). It is true that in Exodus 24:10 the Holy Spirit says that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, as well as the seventy elders “saw the God of Israel.” However, we must understand this as one of those special occasions at which God appeared in some kind of visible form. By nature, however, he is still invisible.

Immutable

Literally, the immutability of God means that he does not change. Some people have the mistaken idea that this implies that he does not move, act, empathize, or grieve. They suppose that God is like a divine statue enthroned in a heavenly but stony stoicism. Clearly, this is not the God who reveals himself in Scripture. God grieves deeply and he has a tender heart of compassion (Gen 6:6; Hos 11:1–4, 8). He acts to defend his people (Exod 15:1–21). So, *immutable* does not mean *immobile*. Instead, it describes how God is steadfast and consistent in his plans and actions (Ps 33:11; Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17). God does not say one thing and then do another. If he plans it, he does it. If he announces it, he accomplishes it. Even on those occasions when God does relent from a punishment that he had threatened to impose (Exod 32:14), he remains consistent with his own character and compassion (Exod 34:6–7).

Infinite

With human beings, there is always a limit. We reach the limit of our mental capacity. At the end of a hard day of work, we also come to the end of our physical strength and stamina. We become exhausted. With

God there are no such limitations. His understanding is limitless (Job 11:7–9); his strength never runs out (Isa 40:28). Therefore we must be careful never to think of God in a limited, creaturely manner. Unlike us, he is infinite.

Almighty

There are two aspects to God's almighty power. On the one hand, he is more than sufficiently strong to do whatever he chooses to do. He can make the noonday sun stop shining (Luke 24:44–45), or he can bring the dead back to life (1 Kings 17:22). These are things which are simply impossible for us, but they are possible for God because he is almighty (Luke 1:37). On the other hand, *almighty* also expresses the fact that God governs over all (Rev 4:8; compare with 5:13–14). In other words, God is almighty with respect to both his *power* and his *position*.

Wise

Wisdom is more than knowledge. Wisdom is knowing the right thing to do at the right time and in the right way. God is not only infinite in his knowledge, he is also perfect in his wisdom. This is evident in creation. One look at a flower or an animal, and the words of the psalmist come to mind: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all" (Ps 104:24). Evidence of God's wisdom can also be found in the salvation that he has worked for us in Jesus Christ. Which human being would ever have thought up the plan to save sinners by sending God's eternal Son to be born from a virgin and then to die on a cross? Human beings would never have come up with such a plan! Many have even ridiculed it as nonsense. Yet it is a most glorious display of God's wisdom (1 Cor 1:18–31).

Just

Without fail, God always knows the difference between good and evil. Even Satan recognizes that (Gen 3:5). Furthermore, God not only knows the difference between good and evil, he also takes action against those who are guilty of sin, and he punishes the evildoer (Exod 34:7). In this

way God himself is just and administers justice to others. God does not need a law outside of himself in order to determine whether something is right or wrong. God intuitively knows right from wrong, and therefore he himself determines what is right and what is wrong. Then, in order to teach us about his just requirements, he has revealed his righteousness in his law (Ps 119:137; Isa 42:21).

Holy

Closely linked to God's justice is his holiness. *Holy* means *set apart, distinct*. God is holy in two senses. First, with respect to his nature and being, God is distinct from all creatures, and he is, of course, radically set apart from all false gods (Exod 15:11). Second, with respect to morality, God is set apart from and opposed to all that is sinful, wicked, impure, and unclean (Hab 1:12–13).

Good

The Belgic Confession says that God is good in himself, and that he also generously gives good gifts, like a fountain of fresh water that keeps bubbling to the surface (Ps 135:3; Jas 1:17). In his goodness God takes diligent care of his creation (Pss 104:27–28; 145:9), even being generous toward those who do not believe in him (Matt 5:45).

Gracious

God's graciousness is closely related to his mercy, compassion, and patience. It describes his forgiving love and faithful kindness toward sinners who do not deserve or merit them in any way (Titus 3:4–5). For this reason we often speak of God's sovereign grace. The addition of the word *sovereign* emphasizes that the basis of God's grace lies entirely within himself, and not within us (2 Tim 1:9). It is helpful to distinguish between God's goodness, which he extends toward all people, and his grace, which he showers upon his chosen ones (see chapter 12 for more detail).

OPEN THEISM: A POPULAR BUT HERETICAL IDEA

In the last few decades it has been popular in some circles to speak about the openness or vulnerability of God. This trend is also called *open theism*. Open theists usually begin by affirming that God exercises general rather than meticulous providence. In other words, they believe that God has a general plan in mind for the direction in which he wants history to go, but he does not control all the little details of what happens from day to day. Then they often continue by saying that God has purposefully restricted his own sovereignty and knowledge in order to give human beings room to co-operate with him in determining the course of history. Practically speaking, this means that God does not know everything about the future, and God will sometimes change his mind on the basis of what human beings decide to do. In short, open theists believe that God is open toward the future and can even be surprised by developments that take place.

Now that we have studied the perfections of God, it should be clear that open theism must be rejected. To begin with, the Lord reveals himself to be the God of meticulously complete providence, even to the point that he knows how many hairs there are on your head (Matt 10:30) and determines whether a sparrow lives or dies (Matt 10:29). Also, God's eternal plan and purpose includes everything (Eph 1:10–11). Nothing catches him by surprise.

However, more is at stake. Open theism makes God less infinite and more finite, less immutable and more unpredictable. In short, it makes God more like a human being. Open theists take this approach because they are afraid that speaking about an almighty, immutable God makes him sound too cold and impersonal. However, if we remember that simplicity is one of God's perfections, then this problem is resolved. God is as compassionate as he is almighty; he is as loving as he is immutable. None of God's perfections compromises the other ones. Indeed, God's glory shines through all the more brightly when we confess that he is *both* infinitely almighty *and* immeasurably gracious.

Suggested Reading: Exodus 3

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Summarize the meaning of God's personal name, Yahweh, or I AM WHO I AM. What benefits do Christians receive from knowing the name of their God and applying its truth to their daily lives?
2. Read Psalm 110 and Mark 12:35–37 carefully. Using what you have learned about God's names and titles, especially *LORD* and *Lord*, explain how Jesus Christ's argument works.
3. God is eternal, and we are promised "eternal life" (Matt 19:29). Are God's eternity and our eternity the same? Explain your answer.
4. Explain how God's justice and mercy are simultaneously displayed in the same Saviour, namely, Jesus Christ. Article 20 of the Belgic Confession will be helpful.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Read Jonah 3. On the one hand, God announces through his prophet that Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days (v. 4). On the other hand, we read that God did not destroy the city (v. 10). How does this fit with God's perfection of immutability?
2. God is invisible and "no one has ever seen or can see" him (1 Tim 6:16). That being the case, what does the apostle John mean when he writes that "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2)? Does this "him" refer to God the Father (v. 1) or God the Son (v. 2) or both? Will our glorified eyes be able to do something that our present eyes cannot do? Or will this be a different kind of seeing, e.g., some kind of spiritual seeing? In your discussion also refer to Job 19:26 and Matthew 5:8.
3. Some people struggle with the combination of God's eternity and immutability. They say, "Since God is eternal, he knows the past, the present, and the future. In the morning God already knows what is going to happen to me in the afternoon, and he is not going to change his mind. So, why should I even pray to God? It's all a foregone conclusion." How would you respond to someone who is having this struggle? Lord's Day 45 will be also helpful.

4. On the basis of James 1:17 the Belgic Confession describes God as the “overflowing fountain of all good” (Art 1). Yet someone will surely make the following observation: “There are many things which flow from God’s hand that are anything but good: war, disease, floods, and hurricanes.” This leads to the obvious question: how can bad things flow from a perfectly good God? How would you answer that question?

Jason van Vliet