



“The Nature of God: Who He Is”

Acts 17:16-34

Lesson 4

In A Nutshell

When the apostle Paul visited Athens, his spirit was deeply troubled by the idolatry he saw (Acts 17:16). We need that same stirring of heart as we minister to an equally dark day of idolatry. The problem we face today is the same one Paul faced in Athens—the true God of the Bible was to them the Unknown God (v. 23). It was He whom Paul declared in this world of darkness. Paul wanted this city to better understand the nature of God, what He is like (v. 29). Theologians call this study *theology proper*.

To explain what God is like is to describe His attributes and His works. Lesson 4 focuses on His attributes, and Lesson 5 on His works. Roland McCune defines the word *attribute*: “these attributes are the qualities which are inherent in and manifestations of the being or essence of God” (*A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 1: 203). Ordinarily, an attribute can be either a quality or a lack of quality, something positive or something negative. All of God’s attributes are perfect, however, so they are often called His *perfections*.

As Paul declared to the men of Athens what God is like, he spoke of God’s greatness (vv.24-25a), God’s goodness (vv. 25b-28), and God’s personhood (vv. 29). These categories will organize our study of the nature of God, along with an additional section on the Trinity.

To The Testimony!

God Is Great

- Deut. 10:17-22
1. Moses affirms the greatness of the biblical God in this passage. As we begin to fathom God’s greatness, our study should cause us to fear Him, to serve or worship Him, to cling to Him in love, and to swear by His name in faith (v. 20). Simply put, the God Who is great is our God. In theology, when we say God is great, we mean especially that His nature is unchangeably infinite in many important respects. The attributes of God’s greatness speak of the ways in which He surpasses the limitations known to those who are not God. In the chart that follows, match each attribute and passage with the limitation God surpasses.

God's Greatness

<u>Attribute/Passage:</u>	<u>Limitation Surpassed:</u>
Omnipotence—Jer. 32:17, 26-27	To be too late
Omniscience—1 John 3:20	Inconsistent instability
Eternality—Psalm 90:2	To need something from another
Immutability—Malachi 3:6	The inability to do all you please
Transcendence—Psalm 123:1	To be too far away
Independence—Acts 17:25	To be too small
Omnipresence—Jer. 23:23-24	Ignorance about something
Imminence—Acts 17:27-28	To be earthbound
Immensity—1 Kings 8:27	To be absent

God Is Good

Exod. 33:7-34:9 2. Exodus 32 records one of the most tragic events of the history of Israel, the golden-calf incident. Aaron did not deny the Lord's existence. He redefined His attributes in a way more acceptable to the sinful people of Israel (Exod. 32:1-14). On the heels of that horrific episode, Moses's approach to the Lord greatly contrasts what had just happened. He prayed, "Show me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight" (33:13). Later He prayed in the same vein, "Show me Your glory!" (33:18). How does the Lord answer Moses's prayer (v. 19), and what attributes specifically did God show Moses (34:6-7)?

Exod. 34:8-9
Isa. 6:1-7 3. When Moses witnessed God's goodness pass by, he had a reaction that is similar to the one that Isaiah experienced when he saw the Lord high and lifted up. What was that reaction? Why did these men of God have that reaction? What attribute of God's goodness does Isaiah see especially?

Interesting Insight!

“Christians in Our Time sometimes act as though they were the first to recognize that God is a God of love. Of course the Bible tells us that God is love, but the Christians of modernity seem to think that this constitutes an adequate theology in itself, that God is fundamentally if not exclusively love—and hence that talk of divine holiness is distracting or intrusive. Protestant liberalism pioneered this displacement of God’s holiness in the nineteenth century, but in this century evangelicals have taken up with distressing carelessness the wholesale reordering of the Christian faith that it introduced, from the meaning of Christ’s atonement to the meaning of Christian sanctification.

“. . . the tenet that has been most characteristic of Protestant thought since the earliest days of the Reformation—namely, that holiness fundamentally defines the character of God. This must be so. If God’s holiness is his utter purity, his incomparable goodness, the measure of all that is true and right, the final line of resistance [separation] to all that is wrong, dark, and malignant, then love must be a part of this. If love is virtuous and right, it must be an expression of divine holiness, the essence of which is truth and right. God’s love is inescapably a manifestation of his holiness, as are his goodness, righteousness, mercy, and compassion. Holiness is what defines God’s character most fundamentally, and a vision of this holiness should inspire his people and evoke their worship, sustain their character, fuel their passion for truth, and encourage persistence in efforts to do his will and call on his name in petitionary prayers” (*God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 135-136).

God Is Personal

- Gen. 16:7-16 4. One of the wonderful names of God He used to reveal His nature comes by the lips of Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian maid, the mother of Ishmael by Abraham. The angel of the Lord, a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God in the form of an angel, appeared to this destitute woman after she had fled the mistreatment of her mistress. The name was *El Roi*. What does the name mean in English (v. 13), and what does it say about God’s personhood?

1 Tim. 5. Each of the passages listed describes God with the same attribute.
 1:17; 6:16 This truth about God can make knowing Him personally more
 Rom. difficult. What is the attribute, and how has God remedied this
 1:20 problem when it comes to knowing Him personally (John 1:18;
 Col. 14:8-11)?
 1:15

God Is a Trinity

Deut. 6. The ancient faith of Israel was uniquely monotheistic among its
 6:4, 13 pagan polytheistic neighbors. The Bible is clear that there is only
 10:20 one true God, not many gods. Nevertheless, hints of plurality
 Matt. exist even in the Old Testament revelation in regard to the one
 4:10 true God. Look up each of the passages below, and identify the
 John phrase in each that hints at a plurality of sorts belonging to the
 17:3 one true God of Israel.

Gen. 1:26	
Gen. 16:7-13	
Psa. 45:6-7	
Isa. 63:7-10	
Zech. 2:10-11	

Matt. 7. The two greatest evidences for the Trinity were the incarnation
 28:19 of God the Son in Bethlehem and the baptism of God the Holy
 2 Cor. Spirit at Pentecost. God is an indivisible one in essence, and a
 13:14 co-eternal three in person. Describe the part each person of the
 Eph. Trinity played, first in regard to the incarnation of Christ (Luke
 4:4-6 1:30-35; Gal. 4:4), and then at Pentecost (Acts 1:6-11).

NBBC Doctrinal Statement

We believe there is one and only one Divine and True God, an Infinite Spirit, Maker and Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth, wholly independent from His creation, inexpressibly glorious in holiness, and worthy of all possible honor, confidence, and love; that in the unity of the God-head there are three distinct persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—known as the Trinity, equal in every divine perfection and executing distinct but harmonious offices in the great work of redemption (Exodus 20:2, 3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Revelation 4:11).