

## Sanctification in Community: The Doctrine of God, Part 2

### IV. The Attributes of God

#### A. Introduction

1. Definition: The attributes of God are those unique qualities and perfections that inhere in and manifest the being or essence of God.
  - a. By saying the attributes *inhere in* the divine essence is meant that they are more than a list of adjectives or characteristics that describe God; they are the essential conflation of divine qualities without which he would cease to be God. God is what his attributes are.
  - b. By saying that the attributes *manifest* the divine essence is meant that God is known only through his attributes.

#### B. The Summary Attributes of God

The following three attributes are classified as “summary” or “transcendent,” because they properly stand apart as qualifiers of all the attributes in the natural and moral realms.

1. The Independence of God (also called his self-existence or aseity)
  - a. Definition: The independence of God is his *absolutely necessary being and sovereignly sourced wholly in himself*.
  - b. Biblical proof
 

Exodus 3:14; 6:3; cf. John 8:58—“I Am that I Am” This play on the Hebrew word for “to be,” reflected elsewhere in his primary Hebrew name, “Yahweh,” identifies God by his primary characteristic: He is the absolutely necessary being, transcendent over, independent of, distinct from, and indispensable to all other beings.

Acts 17:24–25, 28—The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.... For in him we live and move and have our being.
  - c. Implications of Divine Aseity
    - (1) By virtue of his aseity, God is necessarily Lord and possessor of all creation.
 

Psalm 24:1—The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
    - (2) Everything that creatures are and have comes from God.
 

James 1:17—Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

- (3) When we give to God, we give back only what he has first given us, or, in the words of Augustine, “When God crowns our merits, he is crowning his own gifts in us.”

1 Peter 4:10—We are “stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

- (4) When we give back to God, he therefore has no obligation to recompense us.

Luke 17:10—Stewards who serve their master are “only doing their duty.”

- (5) God owes nothing to any creature; we owe everything to him.

Job 41:11 (cf. Rom 11:35–36)—Who has a claim against me that I must pay?  
Everything under heaven belongs to me.

- (6) God has no needs.

Psalm 50:9–13—I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?

## 2. The Infinitude of God

- a. Definition—God’s infinitude is *the complete absence of external limitations or restrictions with respect to his person and actions; his intrinsic perfection and completeness.*

- b. Biblical proof

Psalm 145:3—Great is the LORD and worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.

Matthew 5:48—Your heavenly Father is perfect.

Romans 11:33—Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

- c. Qualifications

- (1) God’s infinitude does not mean that he is wholly without restriction. He is most certainly limited by the limits of his own nature and character.

Habakkuk 1:13—Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.

Titus 1:2—God cannot lie.

- (2) That God is unbound by the created space-time continuum does not mean that he cannot enter into it.

- God is not above or outside the law. The law is an expression of his character and thus he cannot act contrary to it.
- God can be apprehended within our created space-time continuum (most visibly in Jesus Christ), but he cannot be comprehended, because he exists beyond it.

### 3. The Immutability of God

- a. Definition—The immutability of God is his *changelessness with respect to his person, attributes, and purposes; his incapability of growth or decay in any respect.*

God has never grown or diminished; he has never learned or forgotten anything; he has not changed his mind about anything, nor lost any of his power. He is neither more nor less merciful, loving, wise, truthful, etc., than he ever was.

- b. Biblical proof. God is unchangeable in his:

- (1) Purpose: Ezekiel 24:14—I am the LORD. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. I will not go back; I will not relent.
- (2) Decree: Psalm 33:11—The plans of the Lord stand forever.  
Isaiah 46:11— What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.
- (3) Promises: Romans 11:29—God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.
- (4) Person: Malachi 3:6—I the Lord do not change.  
Hebrews 1:11–12—They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.
- (5) Character: James 1:17—The Father does not change like shifting shadows.

- c. Objections

- (1) Texts that speak of God *repenting, relenting, being sorry, regretting* (Gen 6:6; Exod 32:14; 1 Sam 15:10–11; 2 Sam 24:16; Isa 38:1–6; Jonah 3:4; 4:10; etc.).
- (a) Some dismiss these texts as instances of anthropopathism—attributing human motions and emotions to God for the sake of our understanding. There is probably some truth to this idea, but there is probably more to the answer than anthropopathism alone.
- (b) A better answer is to recognize that God changes in his dealings and relationships with changeable men in order to remain changeless in his dispositions: immutability does not mean immobility.
- God’s delight in his creation changed to sorrow when sin entered (Gen 6:6).
  - God’s anger at Nineveh changed to approval when they repented (Jon 3:4).
- (c) A further point of explanation is the fact that many of God’s announcements are conditional in nature, carrying unspoken exceptions and exclusions. This explanation is particularly useful for Jonah, who explicitly recognizes this phenomenon when he flees to Tarshish (Jon 4:2).
- (2) The Problem of the Incarnation: Did God change when he became a man?

While John 1:14 speaks of the Word as “becoming flesh,” the Scripture writers are ordinarily use more precise language: Christ “partook of flesh” (Heb 2:14), received a body that had been “prepared for him” (Heb 10:5), or assumed human likeness (Rom 8:3; Phil 2:7). These texts qualify John’s statement. Christ did not “become man” in the sense of *transmutation*, whereby he ceased to be what and where and when and how he previously had been. He added a human nature to his person without any change to his deity.

Furthermore, when Christ died, he died not with respect to his divinity (i.e., Christ did not cease to exist; nor were the Father and Christ estranged), but with respect to his humanity (i.e., his human material and immaterial were disjoined, then reunited in resurrection). He absorbed the penalty, in his own body on the tree, which we could not (at least not without irreparable consequences), and then shared his resurrection life with us.

### C. The Natural Attributes of God:

1. God is independent, infinite, and immutable with respect to his *being*. That is, he is omnipresent (he is not limited by space) and eternal (he is not limited by time).

- a. Omnipresence

- (1) Definition—*God transcends spatial limitations and so is present simultaneously and eternally in all places with the whole of his being.*

- (2) Biblical proof

1 Kings 8:27—Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you (cf. also Acts 17:24–25).

Jeremiah 23:24—Am I only a God nearby,” declares the LORD, “and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the LORD.

Psalms 139:7–10—Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

- (3) Qualifications /Objections:

- (a) How can God be “in heaven” (Matt 6:9, etc.) and how does he “indwell” us (1 Cor 3:16, etc.)?

In terms of his metaphysical presence, God is “in” everything. He is on earth as surely as he is in heaven; he is in the unregenerate just as surely as he is in believers. But he does not *manifest* his presence equally throughout his universe. He manifests himself gloriously in heaven and ethically in his children—in ways he does not manifest himself on earth and in unbelievers.

- (c) How can an omnipresent God be described as “drawing near” (Jer 23:23; Jas 4:8)?

**Answer:** That God is described in terms of being *near* or *far away* should not be taken in a spatial/locative sense. Nor, however, should it be understood in an existential sense as though his presence may be “felt” or otherwise known by extrasensory means. Instead, God’s drawing near should be understood in the Hebrew sense of coming near for blessing or judgment, in this case the former. “Drawing near,” then, is an expression of objective divine approval, favor, and blessing.

(4) Practical Values

- (a) Negatively, one cannot escape God (Jonah 1:1–3; Amos 9:1–4).  
 (b) Positively, the believer can never be abandoned (Ps 139:10) and can be the dwelling-place of God (John 14:23).

b. Eternity.

- (1) Definition—*God is the author of time, and his existence cannot be measured by time. The past, present, and future are possessed by God in one indivisible present.*

Time as we know it is marked by the *succession* of events. With God that succession does not exist. God is above time in that sense. Man can be said to be above time in a very finite sense (i.e., he can aspire, remember, etc.), but God is above time in an actual sense.

(2) Biblical proof

Genesis 21:33—God is the “God of the Ages,” the *el ’olam*.

Exodus 3:14—God names himself “I AM,” giving some indication of his being a living person, but also of his relationship to time—he exists in an eternal now (cf. esp. John 8:58).

Psalms 90:2—Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

1 Corinthians 2:7—God’s decree extends “before time began.”

Revelation 1:8; 4:8—“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

(3) Qualifications

- (a) Time is a system of measurement marked by a succession of events in a changing universe. Because the immutable God exists outside his transient universe, it is necessary to say that he also exists outside of time as we know it. Time began when God created it.

Though some of the passages above convey something of a temporally linear sense, reflecting the vantage of the human author, these should be regarded as an instance of anthropomorphism. God is not merely everlasting (i.e., he exists at all times); he is also eternal (i.e., he exists outside and above time).

- (b) That God does not regard time as we do (see, e.g., Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8) does not mean that he cannot interact with temporal beings or that he is careless in his expression of temporal realities. That a day is *like* a thousand years to God and a thousand years *like* a day does not mean that God is incapable of differentiating between a day and a millennium or is capricious in his use of temporal designations.

#### (4) Practical Value

- (a) Deuteronomy 33:27—There are everlasting arms in time of crisis.
- (b) Psalm 90:1–2—There is comfort in the midst of the brevity of life (even when you know your life will end before you reach the promised land).
- (c) Psalm 102:1–13—Though we will die, God will not.

## 2. God is independent, infinite, and immutable with respect to *knowledge*.

### a. Omniscience

- (1) Definition—*God's knowledge includes all things past, present, and future, immediately, simultaneously, and eternally, whether things actual or possible.*

### (2) Biblical Proof

Psalm 147:5—Our Lord's understanding has no limit.

1 John 3:20—God...knows all things (so also John 21:17).

This attribute is manifested in

- The material realm. Job 28:24 (ESV)—God looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens (so also Heb 4:13).
- The animal realm. Matthew 10:29—God is intimately aware of the death of small birds.
- The underworld. Job 26:6 (ESV)—Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering.
- The thoughts of man. Acts 1:24—Lord, you know everyone's heart (see also Luke 5:22; 6:8).
- Minutiae of personal life. Matthew 10:30—He numbers our hairs.
- All possibilities. Matthew 11:21, 23—God knows what would have happened had Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom had Messianic revelations.

### (3) Qualifications/Objections

- (a) That God’s knowledge is *immediate, simultaneous, and eternal* means that it is not derived, discursive, or successive. He does not learn things; rather his knowledge is coextensive with his eternal decree. He not only has all knowledge, but is all knowing.

Isaiah 46:9–11—I make known the end from the [standpoint of] the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.

Jeremiah 1:5—Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Acts 5:18—The Lord knows all things “from of old.”

- (b) That God knows all possibilities is not to suggest that he knows possibilities as potential certainties. Rather, he knows certainties as certainties and possibilities as possibilities. He knows all that *will* happen by means of foreordination, and he knows what *would* have happened had he ordered matters differently. But there is no sense in which he knows what *could* happen in terms of genuine contingency.

- (c) Biblical implications of divine ignorance (e.g., Gen 3:9; 11:5; 18:20–21; 22:12; Deut 13:3; Ps 13:1; etc.) do not hold up under scrutiny. Never do these texts suggest that God did not know the data in question:

- In Genesis 3:9, God knew where Adam was. Instead, this is a pedagogical technique designed to draw out a confession from Adam and Eve.
- Genesis 11:5 and 18:20–21 speak to God’s collection of evidence unto judgment, using anthropomorphic language for our understanding.
- Nowhere in Genesis 22:12 and Deuteronomy 13:3 do we find a statement that God was ignorant of the faith of those tested prior to the test, only that the test successfully *demonstrated* their faith (or lack of faith). This demonstration, then, becomes the basis for God’s just action.
- Passages that suggest that God “remembers” and “forgets” (e.g., Ps 13:1) should not be taken as cognitive deficiency; rather, they speak to God either extending or withholding covenant blessings.

#### (4) Practical Value

- (a) God is aware of all our needs even before we are aware of them—  
Matthew 6:8; Isa 65:24.
- (b) The disasters and inequities of life are within God’s knowledge and control—Psalm 94.

#### b. The Omnisapience of God

- (1) Definition—*God applies his knowledge in such a way that the best means are employed to achieve the highest ends in order to glorify him the most: God is all wise.*

## (2) Biblical Proof.

Romans 16:27—God is described as “the only wise God.”

Romans 11:33—Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

This attribute is manifested...

- In creation. Psalm 104:24—How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all.
- In providence. Romans 8:28—God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.
- In redemption. Ephesians 3:10—His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.

## (3) Qualifications

(a) The omniscience of God is directly tied to his omniscience. Only an infinitely knowledgeable God could possibly know all of the factors that comprehensively determine the best possible course of action.

(b) By arguing for divine omniscience, we are arguing that ours is the best of all possible worlds. It is not, so be sure, the world with the least possible evil; nonetheless, the passages above suggest that the world in which we live best forwards the whole of God’s purposes for the universe.

(4) Practical Value: God’s wisdom assures the believer that God not only knows the events of our lives, but also that the events that are occurring are the best possible thing that can happen, both for our growth and God’s glory.

3. God is independent, infinite, and immutable with respect to his *power*: He is *omnipotent*.

a. Definition—*By his exhaustless power, God can do all things consistent with his character and will.*

b. Biblical Proof

Job 42:2—You can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

Psalm 115:3—Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

Jeremiah 32:17, 27—Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.... I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?

This attribute is manifested...

- Over all creation. Psalm 135:6—The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.
- Over men and angels. Daniel 4:35—All the peoples of the earth are regarded as

nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”

- Over Satan. Job 1:12; Revelation 20:2, 10—Satan must ask God for permission to do things, and will ultimately be cast by God into hell.
- Over sin and depravity. Matthew 19:6—With God all things are possible.
- Over death. 1 Corinthians 6:14—By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.

c. Qualifications

(1) God can do all that he wills, but he will not do all that he can. In short, he has absolute power over his own power. He cannot, for instance...

(a) Do logically nonsensical things such as making a shorter than a straight line between two points, make A be not-A, create a rock too large to lift, etc.

(b) Do immoral things

Titus 1:2—God...cannot lie.

Numbers 23:19—God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?

(c) Act contrarily to his own will

Hebrews 2:17—He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

Matthew 26:39—My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.

(2) God’s omnipotence, like all his attributes, cannot be ceded in any sense to his creatures. Some suggest that God voluntarily ceded sovereignty to humans such that they have control over their own destinies. God is regarded not as omnipotent, but as “omnicompetent.” This is summarily refuted in Scripture:

Election: Romans 9:21–23—Does not the potter have the power to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory.

Regeneration: John 1:12–13—To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Faith: Matthew 19:16, 27—The disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

d. Practical Values

- (1) That which is impossible for us is possible with God (Matt 19:25–26).
- (2) The events in our lives are not only within the scope of his knowledge and wisdom: God also has infinite power to effect his ends.

**C. The Moral Attributes of God**

1. God is independent, infinite, and immutable with respect to his moral character: God is *Holy*.
  - a. Definition: Holiness is *God's self-affirming purity that renders him separate from sin and necessarily devoted to seeking his own honor*.
    - (1) Etymologically, holiness comes from simple Greek and Hebrew terms that mean “separate” or “apart.” The terms simply mean “set apart from ordinary usage,” and may be applied not only to persons but also to physical objects and personal property (Exod 40:11; Lev 29:14, 16). The term frequently carries no moral connotations at all and can even, ironically, denote impurity (Gen. 38:21; Deut 22:9).
    - (2) From this most primitive idea the transition was made to the idea of separation from *uncleanness*, or *moral purity*, a common understanding of the term today
    - (3) Something of the more primitive amoral meaning of “apartness” persists in the descriptor as applied to God. God’s holiness refers not only to his apartness from all that is unclean (his ethical purity), but also to his apartness from all that is finite and created (his majestic transcendence).
  - b. Biblical Proof
    - (1) Holiness as Majestic Transcendence
 

Exodus 15:11—Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?

Psalm 99:1–3—The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake. Great is the LORD in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations. Let them praise your great and awesome name—he is holy.

Isaiah 6:1–4—I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke (see also Rev 4:6–8).
    - (2) Holiness as Ethical Purity
 

Leviticus 1:43–47—Do not defile yourselves.... Do not make yourselves unclean. I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.... You must distinguish between unclean and clean.

Isaiah 5:16—The LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.

Isaiah 6:5—Isaiah was convinced of his ruin for having seen the thrice holy God from the standpoint of “unclean lips.”

Acts 3:14—You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you.

c. A Question of Priority

It is incorrect to suggest that any of God’s attributes are more important, more necessary, more abundant, or more primary. Nor can we set God’s individual attributes against one another as contradictions in the divine essence (i.e., God’s love did not cancel out his holiness on the cross; nor does his holiness extinguish his love in the Lake of Fire. God immutably is what his attributes are—all of them simultaneously.

God does, however, seem to favor his holiness in his self descriptions (he is the “Holy One” [56x]; the thrice holy God [Isa 6:4; Rev 4:8]; he chooses “holy” as the name of his third person, and swears by his holiness [Ps 89:35; Amos 4:2]). Why is this the case? It is here suggested that, among the moral attributes, holiness supplies the self-affirming ethical standard by which all God’s self-communicating attributes are governed. The holiness of God is the ground of all moral obligation (cf. John 3:16).

d. The Manifestation of Divine Holiness: Justice and Righteousness

(1) **Righteousness** is conformity to a standard. In God, it is *that perfection of his character whereby he exhibits perfect conformity to his own holy standard.*

(a) Two senses.

- God’s righteousness *in se* is the eternal and absolute conformity of God to his own being.
- God’s righteousness *ad extra* is reflected in the imputed righteousness of Christ secured for believers on the cross (Rom 1:17; 3:21).

(b) Biblical proof

Psalm 145:17—The Lord is righteous in all his ways.

Isaiah 45:19–24—I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is *right*.... By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all *integrity* a word that will not be revoked.... They will say of me, “In the LORD alone are *righteousness* and strength.”

(c) Manifestations of God’s righteousness

- In punishing the unrighteous. Romans 3:5–6—If our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? ( I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

- In rewarding the righteous. Hebrews 6:10—God is not unrighteous so as to forget your work of love.
- In chastening his people. Daniel 9:14—Calamity fell on the people because “the Lord our God is righteous with respect to all his deeds.”
- In the cross. Romans 3:25–26 cf. Acts 17:3—Propitiation was necessary to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
- In the forgiveness of sins. 1 John 1:9—If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us.

(2) **Justice** is the *pure administration of God’s righteous standard*

(a) Two Aspects

- God’s *retributive* justice is his justice whereby he exercises holy wrath against those who violate his righteous standard.
- God’s *remunerative* justice is his justice whereby he shows benevolence toward all who conform to his righteous standard.

(b) Biblical Proof

Genesis 18:25—Far be it from you to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Romans 2:6–8—God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life, but for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, wrath and anger.

2 Thess. 1:5–7—God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well and will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

(3) Qualifications/Objections

**Objection #1:** If God truly is *just*, then why does he not treat all people equally?

**Answer:** The modern idea of justice as “fairness” or “equitable treatment” should not be imposed upon the understanding of God’s justice. As noted above, the biblical concept of *justice* in Scripture is interchangeable with the concept of *righteousness*. To be just is to act in accordance with a standard of righteousness. God is always just. God is not always equitable.

**Objection #2:** Then does this mean that God is partial or prejudicial?

**Answer:** No. Partiality is exercised only when a party has a claim to something and does not receive it. If God owed everyone a favor, then God would be unjust to withhold from one person what he gives to another (or vice versa). Partiality is absent, however, when no one has any rights. Culpability for sin cannot be predicated of God in such instances (see, in principle, Rom 9:21–24)

**Objection #3:** How can a righteous God be party to genocide (Deut 7:1–2; 20:16–17) and other atrocities (Psalm 137:9)?

**Answer:** The matter of punitive severity must be measured against (1) the severity of the offense and (2) the virtue of the one offended. In both cases listed, the punishment was meted against those who had for centuries engaged in the foulest forms of idolatry and had relentlessly abused God’s covenant people—offenses directly leveled at an infinitely holy God.

That the punishment extended to the relatively “innocent” is further no tension in God since (1) culpability for “collateral damage” in war does not necessarily rest with the aggressor, but with the unjust party to war and (2) there are no truly innocent persons in the world.

**Objection #4:** Is *wrath* an attribute of God?

**Answer:** Wrath is the disposition of God arising from his holiness that constitutes his necessary, inevitable reaction to sin. It cannot be said, however, that “God is wrath” (in the sense of an attribute), because in the absence of sin, God exhibits no wrath. The same cannot be true of love, mercy, etc.

- e. Practical Value of God’s Holiness, Righteousness, and Justice
  - (1) It guarantees the punitive finality of judgment against sin and sinners (Acts 17:31).
  - (2) It guarantees that no good deed will be forgotten (Matt 10:42; Heb 6:10).
  - (3) It guarantees the believer’s eternal security (John 17:24–25).
  - (4) It guarantees that God will never surrender to caprice in the realms of ethics, redemption, and sanctification.
2. God is independent, infinite, and immutable with respect to his *Truth*.
  - a. Definition: By truth is meant *the perfect conformity of God’s being, attributes, words, and activities to all that God is, ought to be, and claims to be*.
  - b. Three Aspects:
    - (1) Metaphysically, God is the only *true* or genuine God in the face of all pretenders. No other claimant is what he must be in order to claim to be God. God alone answers to the authentic idea of God.
 

Deuteronomy 6:4—The Lord our God the Lord is One.

Jeremiah 10:10 (cf. vv. 1–9)—Yahweh is the true God.

John 17:3—This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God.
    - (2) Epistemologically, God is the *truthful* God: The knowledge, declarations, and representations of God eternally conform to his being. He always represents things as they actually are and his prophetic decrees are always accurate.

John 17:17—Your word is truth.

Titus 1:2—God cannot lie.

- (3) Ontologically, God embodies *truth* as to its foundational source and basis.

John 14:6—I am the truth.

Colossians 2:3—In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Proverbs 1:7—The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Truth, by definition, is that which conforms to God; that which God would say about a thing. There is no reality external to God by which truth may be evaluated and validated. God is the standard of all truth.

c. The Manifestation of Divine Truth: *Faithfulness*

- (1) Definition; Faithfulness is *God's trustworthiness to act or perform in accordance with his word and promises.*

Faithfulness is the ethical and transitive dimension of divine truth—truth emanated. The idea is that if God is truth in himself, he will be faithful to his creatures.

(2) Biblical Proof

Lamentations 3:22–23—Because of the LORD's great love (ἔλεος) we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Psalms 119:90—Your faithfulness continues through all generations.

Romans 11:29—The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

(3) The Realms of God's Faithfulness.

- (a) In keeping his covenant obligations. Deuteronomy 7:9—Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands (cf. also Lam 3:23; Zech 8:8).
- (b) In completing his redemptive work. 1 Thessalonians 5:24—The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it (cf. also Rom 8:28–31).
- (c) In preserving his people in temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:13—God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (also 2 Thess 3:3).
- (d) In forgiving sin. 1 John 1:9—If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
- (e) In answering prayer. Psalm 143:1—O LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.

3. God is independent, infinite, and immutable with respect to his Ethic: *Goodness*.

By calling God “good,” we mean that *he is naturally inclined to promote the welfare of his creatures*. He is fundamentally benevolent. The term is a broad one and subsumes within it the ideas of lovingkindness, longsuffering, mercy, grace (both aspects), and love. The following is a delineation of these ideas.

a. The Love of God.

(1) Definition—The love of God is “*that in God which moves him to give himself and his gifts spontaneously, voluntarily and righteously for the good of personal beings regardless of their merit or response*” (McClain).

(2) Biblical Proof

Exodus 34:6–7—The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

1 John 4:8, 10—God is love.... This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

(3) The Character of God’s Love

(a) God’s Love Is Fundamentally God’s Self-Communication.

As is the case with all the divine attributes, God not only is loving, but is also himself love. Love is the sharing of what he is with others.

John 5:19–26—Whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.... For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.

(b) God’s Love Is Self-Sacrificial

God not only gives himself *to* his creatures; he has also given himself up *for* his creatures—Substitution.

Ephesians 5:2—Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:25—Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Galatians 2:20—I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

## (c) God's Love Is Selfless

Love does not operate on the basis of what its object can give; rather, love operates on the basis of what it can give its object.

Deuteronomy 7:7–8—The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you.

Romans 5:6–8—When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

## (d) God's Love is Self-Induced

God's love is wholly voluntary. It is under no compulsion, and does not operate on the basis of merit or reciprocation in its object.

1 John 4:10—This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Hosea 14:4—I will love them freely.

Ephesians 1:3–5—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

## (e) God's Love Is Self-Referencing

God's love always operates according to the ethical standard of God's own holiness: his is always a *righteous* love. It cannot overlook or condone sin and cannot do wrong for the sake of its object.

John 3:16—God *so* loved the world (i.e., in *this* way), that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

## (4) Objections

**Objection #1: If God loves sinners, how can he simultaneously hate sinners (e.g., Psalm 5:5–6; 7:11; 11:5)?**

**Answer:** While some would contend that God loves the sinner and hates the sin, these passages clearly say otherwise. One cannot legitimately extricate the sinner from the sin which so merits God's wrath.

As passionate creatures, it is difficult to countenance the idea of hating and loving simultaneously. But for a dispassionate God, there is a theological sense in which this is not only possible, but also necessary in God. Love and hate in God are not passions, but dispositions in God that display in affections that settle dispassionately upon personal beings. Depraved man is the object of divine wrath because a righteous God cannot do otherwise; he is also the object of God's love because as an intrinsically loving God, he has met the ethical demands necessary to the common grace which he showers on them.

**Objection #2: If God is infinitely loving, why does he not love everyone into heaven, and why does he sometimes cease loving people (Hos 9:15)?**

**Answer:** Theologians who argue the priority of God’s infinite love regard it as necessary for God to love all men equally and completely, and avoid universalism by positing creaturely sovereignty. Thus God’s love is not limited, only man’s willingness to receive it. This model makes logical sense, but does not comport with Scripture, which most clearly indicates that God does *not* love all people identically (Mal 1:3; Rom 9:13, 18, 21; Matt 13:11ff; John 2:24; etc.).

It is better to say that God’s necessarily infinite love-in-himself does not oblige him to communicate this love infinitely. God’s attributes are all infinite *in se*, but he nonetheless remains independent as to their communication. Thus, God may, in accordance with his own will and decree, extend his love in a particular manner without being subject in any sense to criticism (Rom 9:20).

b. The Manifestations of God’s Love

Attribute	Realm	Object
Love	Ontological	All Image-Bearers
Mercy/Longsuffering	Practical	Miserable Persons
Grace	Judicial	Guilty Persons

(1) Mercy/Longsuffering

(a) Definitions

- God’s mercy is *his compassion, pity and gentleness toward miserable sinners*.
- God’s longsuffering is an aspect of God’s mercy that involves *the postponement, mitigation or withholding of deserved judgment*.

(b) Biblical Proof.

Psalm 78:38—Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.

Psalm 103:8–10—The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

2 Corinthians 1:3–4—Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.

Ephesians 2:4–6—Because of his great love for us, God is rich in mercy.

(c) The Manifestations of God’s Mercy.

- In withholding judgment

Nehemiah 9:31—But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

- In saving lost sinners

Isaiah 63:9—In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

- In caring for his creatures

Psalm 111:4-5—The LORD is gracious and compassionate. He provides food for those who fear him.

(2) The Grace of God.

(a) Definition—God’s grace is *the undeserved, unearned, unrecompensed and unwanted favor of God toward guilty sinners.*

(b) Biblical Proof

1 Peter 5:10—He is the “God of all grace.”

Ephesians 1:7—In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.

Romans 5:17—Those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ.

(c) Manifestations of God’s Grace.

- Common Grace is the operation of the Holy Spirit among all men whereby he restrains the effects of sin, enables the positive performance of civic righteousness and relative good, and grants all varieties of non-salvific benefits.

Psalm 145:8–9—The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Luke 6:35—He is kind even to ungrateful and wicked men.

- Special Grace is God’s particular manifestation of grace toward specific men whereby he saves them.

Romans 3:23, 24—All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace.

Ephesians 2:8, 9—It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

**Question: What is common grace and what is its role in the counseling task?**

See esp. John Murray's article in vol. 2 of his collected works, also

Edward T. Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8 (Spring 2024).

Bob Kelleman, comp., *Common Grace and Biblical Counseling* (RPM Ministries, 2025). Available at <https://rpmministries.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2024-Common-Grace-and-Biblical-Counseling.pdf>

Common grace is the operation of the Holy Spirit, based on the atonement of Christ and on God's merciful and benevolent attitude toward all people, by which he immediately (via *miracles*) or through secondary causation (via *providence*) restrains the effects of sin, provides non-redemptive blessings, and enables the positive performance of civic righteousness among all men without distinction.

1. The Background to Common Grace: Total Depravity

At the fall, all men became totally depraved. That is, they became wholly evil and incapable of any meritorious good (Rom 3:10–23; Eph 4:17–19; Rom 8:5–8; Jer 17:9). But as we glance about at society, two observations emerge:

- These "totally depraved" men sometimes perform benevolent and righteous deeds (i.e., deeds that correspond to God's incidental expectations at any given point).
- Our holy God, who cannot overlook sin or reward sinners (Hab 1:13), routinely keeps evil people in life and even permits them to thrive.

The answer to this conundrum is common grace, or the mitigation of the full effects of sin.

2. The Basis for Common Grace: The Atonement

No single verse anchors common grace to the atonement. However, this conclusion is theologically necessary. Apart from the atonement, there is no ethical basis for a holy God dealing with sinful people in grace or mercy. Common grace is *grace*, that is, undeserved, unearned, and unwanted favor from God. There is only one kind of grace that God extends, and there is only one basis for that grace: the atonement of Christ.

3. The Manifestations of Common Grace

a. By common grace God maintains the universe.

Colossians 1:16–17: For by him all things were created, in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Acts 17:25, 28: He himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;...for in him we live and move and exist.

b. By common grace God is kind to all people.

Psalm 145:8–9: The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and his mercies are over all his works.

Matthew 5:45: He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Luke 6:35: He himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.

c. By common grace God restrains sin.

2 Thessalonians 2:6–7: He who now restrains [the Holy Spirit in the Church] will do so until he is taken out of the way.

Romans 13:3–4: For it [human government] is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

d. By common grace God withholds his judgment.

Genesis 6:3—God’s longsuffering would extend for only 120 years.

Acts 17:30—God temporarily overlooked the offenses of mankind.

e. By common grace God extends the Gospel offer to people.

Romans 2:4: Do you think lightly of the riches of his kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

Acts 17:27: God’s goodness to mankind in general is specifically designed “that they would seek God. Cf. 14:16–17.

**NOTE:** While common grace is an expression of God’s longsuffering with mankind, it is strictly non-redemptive. It does *not* free the will or place man in a state of moral equilibrium so that men can act contrary to their natures and choose God. Instead, its *effect* is to “store up wrath” (Rom 2:5) against the unbeliever and increase his liability to punishment. He not only sins, but also treats God’s patience with contempt (Rom 2:4–5), and “tramples underfoot the Son of God, regarding as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and thereby insults the Spirit of [common?] grace” (Heb 10:29 cf. also Heb 6:4–8; Matt 11:22, 24). The point of these passages is to highlight the extreme severity of punishment reserved for unbelievers who have received the greatest amount of common grace.

f. By common grace God enables civic or cultural righteousness.

2 Kings 10:30: Jehu did well in executing what is right in God’s eyes.

Luke 6:33: Sinners “do good to those who do good to them.”

Romans 2:14: Unbelievers “do instinctively the things of the Law.”

**NOTE:** The “good” that unbelievers do is relative. That is, while these “good” deeds (honesty, virtue, benevolence, advances in science and technology, etc.) correspond visibly to the righteous standards of God and are thus genuinely righteous, they are always ill-motivated (so, e.g., Matt 6:1, 5). For this reason Isaiah may rightly say that all their *righteous deeds* are as *filthy rags* (Isa 64:6), and are thus actually punishable (Rom 14:23; Prov 21:3 [KJV]).

4. The Purposes of Common Grace

a. To direct men to the Lord

Acts 4:16–17, 17:27; Rom 2:4, above. Also 2 Peter 3:9; Jer 7:23–25; Isa 48:9.

Common grace acts as the sphere in which special grace operates, but the salvation of individuals is not its sole purpose. Other purposes of common grace include:

- b. To effect an orderly and decent society.

1 Timothy 2:1–2: I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of...kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

After the removal of the “Restrainer” in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–8, we find that all people would have died if those days were not shortened (Mark 13:20).

Common grace restrains the inherent anarchy, rebellion, disorder, and chaos of the unregenerate. It checks the depravity of man so that it does not run rampant on the earth. It also allows for all sorts of advances, industrial, medical, and in all of the sciences.

- c. To promote a general fear of God.

Jonah 4. It is highly unlikely that the city of Nineveh repented unto salvation (there is no record of fruit of salvation, esp. the annual pilgrimages that were expected of all OT saints, and history records that the Assyrian hostilities resumed almost immediately after Jonah’s ministry). However, there was a general fear of God seen in the Ninevite acknowledgement of God’s holiness as exhibited by their fear and remorse—something that pleased God, if momentarily.

1 Kings 21:25–29. God postponed his judgment against Ahab when he humbled himself before God’s sovereignty. But Ahab did not get saved at this time.

- d. Innumerable blessings

Genesis 30:27: God blessed Laban because of Jacob.

Genesis 39:5: God blessed Egypt because of Joseph.

### **Implications of Common Grace for the Counseling Task:**

The Biblical Counseling Movement has long stood against “integrationist” models of counseling that privilege secular methods and techniques without due examination of their undergirding philosophies. The above material on common grace, carelessly applied, can provide a platform for smuggling such methods into biblical counseling. There is a rather shrill debate ongoing whether some of the major spokesmen for ACBC, CCEF, and other traditional bases of biblical counseling are doing exactly that—and it is possible that this is happening to some degree.

However, it behooves us to remember (as we did earlier in our discussion of biblical sufficiency), that our commitment to the Bible as the *principium unicum* of biblical counseling, does not require explicit proof texts for all the counsel we give. The Bible at all points informs our counsel and can most certainly negate the legitimacy of specific counsel that has been conceived or incubated in “natural law,” “common grace,” or even in “wisdom” carelessly extrapolated from the biblical text. *None of these sources possess authority independent of, much less greater than, the Bible.* But this does not deny the possibility that natural law or common grace may at times supplement the counseling task

## D. God's Decree

1. Definition: God's decree is **“that eternal plan of God by which God has rendered certain all the events of the universe, past, present and future”** (Strong).

Psalm 139:16— All the days *ordained* for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Isaiah 14:24, 27— Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have *purposed*, so it will stand.... For the LORD Almighty has *purposed*, and who can thwart him?

Isaiah 46:10–11— I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My *purpose* will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my *purpose*. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

Jeremiah 1:5— Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I *appointed* you a prophet to the nations.

Job 14:5— Man's days are *determined*; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.

Acts 2:23— This man was handed over to you by God's *set* (predetermined—NASU; definite—ESV; prearranged—NLT) purpose and foreknowledge.

Romans 8:29–30— For those God foreknew he also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he *predestined*, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Ephesians 1:5, 11— He *predestined* us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.... In him we were also chosen, having been *predestined* according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,

Ephesians 2:10— For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God *prepared in advance* for us to do.

### A Note on the Will of God:

The two terms above are largely interchangeable, but two separate ideas clearly emerge in their usage, disclosing two ideas with respect to the “will of God”:

- God's *sovereign* will is reflected in all the uses listed above and refers to God's secret, determinative decree according to which all things must necessarily and inevitably occur. Being secret, it cannot be known (Isa 55:8–9), and the Christian's proper response to it is to accept it in faith.
- God's *moral* will refers to God's revealed, prescriptive ethical/moral expectation of his creatures that they ought to do. This will can and must be known, and the Christian's proper response is to obey it (Acts 20:27; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 8:5; Eph 6:6; 1 Thess 4:3; 5:18; Heb 10:36; 1 Pet 4:2; 1 John 2:17).

The idea of God’s “perfect” will; i.e., a best course of action among several legitimate options, which God normally hides but divulges privately to those who meet certain conditions in an earnest quest to discover it, is not a category reflected in the biblical material. The “perfect will” idea fails for the following reasons:

- It erroneously conflates two mutually exclusive expressions of God’s will, one wholly secret, the other wholly revealed.
- It is based on a semi-gnostic, existentialist view of discerning truth.
- It is based on poor exegesis of texts such as Romans 12:1–2.
- It often reflects a faulty view of divine sovereignty, suggesting true contingency in the decree of God.

For additional material on this topic see Doug Huffman, ed., *How Then Should We Choose?* (3 views); also James Petty, *Step by Step: Directions for Divine Guidance*, and Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will*.

## 2. Delineation

- a. God’s plan is comprehensive. It is singular and all-inclusive with no room in the least for contingency or indeterminism.

Ephesians 1:11—Our election was “predestined according to the plan of him who works out *everything* in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Romans 8:28—In *all things* God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (cf. v. 36).

The Decree of God includes details such as

- (1) The Stability of the Universe (Ps 119:89–91)
- (2) The boundaries of nations and political powers (Acts 17:26; Romans 13:1).
- (3) The length of each man’s life (Job 14:5; John 7:30).
- (4) The manner of each man’s death (John 21:19).
- (5) The salvation of believers (Eph 1:4–5; 1 Pet 1:2).
- (6) The perdition of the ungodly (Rom 9:22; 1 Pet 2:8).
- (7) Geological and meteorological details (Job 26:32; Ps 104:3–9)
- (8) The most trivial of circumstances (Prov 16:33; Matt 10:29–30)
- (9) The free acts of men, including...

- Good Acts

Ephesians 2:10—God “prepared in advance” for believers to do good works.

Isaiah 44:28—Cyrus fulfilled God’s plan to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple

- Evil Acts

Genesis 50:20—The wickedness of Joseph’s brothers God *intended for good*.

Amos 3:6—When disaster comes to a city, the Lord has caused it.

Proverbs 16:4— The Lord works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.

Lamentations 2:17—The exile was part of God’s “purpose” that he “commanded from long ago.”

Lamentations 3:37–38—Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

Acts 2:23; 4:27–28—The Crucifixion was according to God’s “pre-determined plan” which was “destined according to his purpose.”

Romans 11:25–26, 31—Israel’s hardening was “intended” by God to complete his broader purpose.

Revelation 17:17—The details surrounding the rise of Antichrist reflect “God’s will.”

b. God’s plan is free and unconditional

(1) God’s decrees rest solely on his good pleasure.

Psalm 115:3; 135:6—God does whatever he pleases.

Isaiah 40:13–14 (also Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16)—Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult?

Daniel 4:35—All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

Ephesians 1:11—He works out everything *in conformity with the purpose of his will*.

Romans 9:18–21—God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.... Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

(2) While certain of the events of God’s decree may rest on a condition (i.e., Jonah in Nineveh), the whole of God’s decree is not contingent in any way. God is never subjected to the unexpected outcomes of chance, contingency, or unplanned entities. It is independent of all that is finite and creaturely.

(3) By saying that God’s plan has no contingencies, we necessarily conclude that God has not only decreed events, but also all *means* and *results* of those events.

Acts 4:27–28—Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

2 Thessalonians 2:13—From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

*This firmly establishes all manner of human responsibility, be in prayer, evangelism, or growth in Christian virtues and disciplines.*

c. God's plan is eternal.

God determines all events from the standpoint of the beginning, simultaneously and without succession. There is no process or discourse in the establishment of God's decree.

Isaiah 37:26—Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass.

Isaiah 46:10—I make known the end from the [standpoint of the] beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

Ephesians 3:11—God is carrying out his “eternal purpose.”

1 Peter 1:20—[Christ] was chosen before the creation of the world (cf. 2 Tim 1:9)

d. God's plan is immutable.

God's decree is inalterable and static. God has no contingency plans if the original plan goes awry. Change of purpose can only occur because of imperfection, ignorance, impotence, or deceit, none of which may be predicated of God.

Acts 2:23—The death of Christ is carried out τῇ ὀρισμένῃ βουλῇ καὶ προγνώσει (lit., according to the having-been-fixed will and foreknowledge of God, a construction made particularly rich by the employment of the perfect passive participle).

Isaiah 14:24, 27—The LORD Almighty has sworn, “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand.”... Nothing can frustrate the plan of God.

Isaiah 43:13—No one can reverse the plan of God.

Acts 13:29—All that was written must be carried out.

f. God's plan does not, however, absolve creatures of personal responsibility.

As noted above, predestination renders certain, but it does not compel. Man makes decisions apart from any coercion.

Matthew 18:6–7—If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!

Luke 22:22—The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him.

Acts 2:23—This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

## E. God's Providential Preservation of the Universe

### 1. Definitions

- a. **Preservation is God's upholding of the entire universe with all of its laws, properties, and processes.** It is a *conserving* and *maintaining* impulse whereby God protects his universe from catastrophic harm and destruction
- b. **Providence is God's power in bringing the movement of the universe to its predetermined goal. It is the outworking of God's plan.** It is a *providing* impulse whereby God supplies the needs of his creatures in keeping with his ultimate goals for the universe.

### 2. Preservation

- a. The preservation of the universe is a Trinitarian effort, though priority is given to the Son's role in preservation.

John 5:17—My Father is at work until now.

Psalm 104:27–30—The Spirit is the agent in granting/withdrawing provision; in renewing/retracting life.

Colossians 1:17—In Christ all things hold together.

Hebrews 1:3—The Son sustains all things by his powerful word.

- b. The Realms of Preservation

#### (1) Sustaining Life

Psalm 66:9 (NASU)—He keeps us in life.

Acts 17:25, 28—He gives all men life and breath.... In him we live and move and have our being.

1 Timothy 6:13—God gives life to everything (so Neh 9:6, etc.)

#### (2) The Laws and Processes of Nature.

Job 38:10–11—I fixed limits for the sea and set its doors and bars in place, saying, "This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt" (so also Ps 89:9; 104:9).

Genesis 8:22—As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

Psalm 104:19—The moon marks off seasons, and the sun knows when to go down.

#### (3) The General Sustenance of the Universe.

Colossians 1:17—In Christ all things hold together.

Psalm 104—God's perpetuation of the water cycle, day/night pattern, seasons, etc. perpetually renew the face of the ground so that the world in all its systems (zoological, botanical, etc.) continue to function.

### 3. Providence.

- a. Providence may rightly be thought of as a broader category of which preservation is a part. It assures the believer that God's preservation of the universe is not an act of bare sovereignty or disinterested benevolence, but one that is (1) laced with active concern for his creatures and (2) directed toward a specific goal. It is the outworking of the divine decree.
- b. By describing this activity as *providence* we highlight the *benevolent provision* and positive intentions that marks God government of his universe.

#### (1) God's providence both meets man's needs and satisfies man's chaste desires.

Psalm 37:23–25— If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.

Psalm 103:5—Forget not all his benefits: . . . He satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Psalm 104:14–15—He makes wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

#### (2) Unlike the work of grace, which extends properly only to personal beings, God's providence encompasses even animal and plant life.

Psalm 104:11–28—The trees drink their fill, the animals have refuge, and all seek and receive their food from God in an incredibly wise network of divinely arranged circumstances.

Luke 12:27–28—Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!

#### (3) In God's general providence he provides for even unregenerate man benefits intended to draw his attention to God in faith.

Acts 17:27—God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

Romans 2:4—You show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance.

#### (4) By God's providence we are assured that the ultimate good of believers is perfectly correspondent to God's universal purposes.

Romans 8:28—In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Matthew 6:8, 32–33—God's providence includes answered prayers.

- c. God's providence is directed toward specific, governmental ends.

## (1) The Universe at Large

Psalm 103:19—The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.

## (2) The Forces of Nature

Psalm 104:3–4—He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.

Job 37:11–13—He loads the clouds with moisture; he scatters his lightning through them. At his direction they swirl around over the face of the whole earth to do whatever he commands them. He brings the clouds to punish men, or to water his earth and show his love.

Psalm 148:8—Lightning and hail, snow and clouds, and stormy winds do his bidding.

## (3) The Great Catastrophes and Tragedies of History

Psalm 104:6–8—You covered the earth with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. But at your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight; they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys, to the place you assigned for them (cf. Ps 29:10).

John 9:2–3—Jesus' disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (see also Luke 13:4).

Genesis 50:20—You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Acts 4:28—Herod and Pilate "did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (so also 2:36).

Romans 11—The tragedy of Israel's rejection of her Messiah was carefully orchestrated to extend God's salvific blessings to the Gentiles.

## (4) The Affairs of the Nations

Psalm 2—Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? Why do the kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One? The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."...Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.

Psalm 22:28—The Lord rules over the nations.

Proverbs 21:1—The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

Romans 13:1—There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

## (5) The Trivial Affairs of Life

Proverbs 16:33—The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Proverbs 19:21—Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails (so also 16:1, 9; 20:24).

James 4:15—You ought to say, “If it is God's will, we will live and do this or that.”

## d. The Relationship of Providence to Sin

Strong offers four activities of God relative to sin in his universe:

- (1) He sometimes prevents sin (e.g., Gen 20:6).
- (2) He sometimes limits it (Job 1:12; 1 Cor 10:13; 2 Thess 2:7).
- (3) He sometimes permits sin (Exod 4:21; 2 Chron 32:31; Matt 19:8; Rom 1:24ff).
- (4) He always directs it (Gen 50:20; Exod 4:21; Ps 76:10; Acts 2:36).

## e. The Relationship of Providence to Miracle

- (1) In keeping with the pattern of creation, it would appear that God's normal pattern in maintaining his universe is *providential* (i.e., employing secondary causation) rather than *miraculous* (i.e., involving the imposition of supernatural power and the suspension or reversal of natural causation).
- (2) While God is not restricted in the performance of miracles, he apparently chooses to limit their use.

- (a) Miracles are “signs of an apostle” (2 Cor 12:12).

As signs of the apostolic (and prophetic?) office, miracles seem particularly well suited to function in a confirmatory role attending new revelation. This ability does not seem to attend other ministry (e.g., pastoral ministry or other “ordinary” Christian ministry); in fact, multiplied miracles in these spheres would effectively dilute this primary function.

- (b) Miracles are “powers of the coming age” (Heb 6:5).

By describing miracles as signs of the coming age, there is an implication that they are *not* features of the present age. This is the best explanation of Christ's miracles during his first advent.

- (3) What passes as “miracle” today rarely if ever meets the defining criteria of genuine biblical miracle.

Acts 4:16—The purpose of miracles as described above demands that they be “undeniable” and “evident to many,” which is how Scripture defines them.

Modern-day “miracles” are usually invisible or so laced with secondary causation that the claim of miracle is dubious.