

§ 3. Doctrine of God

Lecture 10

Understanding God's Immutability / God's Personal Attribute of Incorporeality

We are wrapping up our discussion of divine immutability this morning. I argued last time that we should not follow the path charted by ancient Greek philosophers in thinking of God as utterly immutable. God, in the Hebrew Bible, is not frozen into immobility like an ice statue. Rather he is a dynamic interactive God who acts in history and interacts with people and therefore is not absolutely changeless and immutable. So how should we understand God's immutability in light of the scriptural passages that do affirm that God cannot change?

J. I. Packer, I think, gives a nice summary of God's immutable attributes in his book *Knowing God*. Here is what Packer says.

1. *God's life does not change.* That is to say, God exists forever and he neither matures nor regresses. God is permanent, eternal, never begins to exist, never ceases to exist, and as Packer says he neither gets better or gets worse. He neither matures nor regresses. He has a perfect permanent life.
2. *God's character does not change.* God's mercy, love, faithfulness, justice never change. God's moral qualities are essential to God. Although he may deal with people in different ways, they will all be consistent with his fundamental moral character which is immutable.
3. *God's truth does not change.* That is to say, the word of the Lord endures forever. God's revelation to us stands secure. Obviously, that revelation progresses from the old covenant into the new covenant as further truth is unfolded. But God's word is trustworthy and true and therefore can be relied upon.
4. *God's ways do not change.* Again, God certainly does deal with people in different ways. He dealt with the people in the old covenant in a different way than he deals with us. There was a system of animal sacrifices and temple worship in the old covenant that is done away with now. But I think what Packer is saying is that God, in the ways he deals with people, is consistent in dealing with men. He punishes sin consistently. He bestows grace freely. It is not as though God is capricious or changing in the way he deals with people. His different ways will be expressions of that deeper consistent way of dealing with human persons – punishing sin and unrighteousness and awarding or bestowing grace and forgiveness freely.
5. *God's purposes do not change.* God's plans are from eternity past with full foreknowledge of the future. Nothing catches God by surprise. He doesn't need to change his plan or adjust with mid-course corrections because his plans are set from eternity past.

Therefore there is simply no need to change. Indeed change is ruled out in virtue of his full foreknowledge of the future. So God's purposes and plans are unchangeable.

6. *God's Son does not change.* Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

I think that gives us a nice summary of the ways in which we can affirm biblically that God is immutable but without falling into this fallacy of thinking that God is utterly and totally changeless. He can change in certain contingent ways but he will not and cannot change in his life, his existence, his fundamental character, and in the way he deals with human persons.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I know you've been asked this before but I can't remember your answer. I know there are some verses in the Bible that makes it sound like God learns certain things. Does that have any applications on his immutability? How does that happen?¹

Dr. Craig: It would if you interpret those literally. It would mean that he could learn new things. I think, again, this is going to be related to divine foreknowledge. If you think that God does have complete foreknowledge of the future (we are going to talk about that when we get to omniscience – we only hinted at it so far) then it would be impossible for God to learn something new in the sense of learning some new propositional fact. What he would know would be whether or not that event were happening now, or whether it is still in the future and therefore to be anticipated, or has already occurred and is in the past. In the sense that he knows tensed facts, it is true that God at one point knows Christopher Columbus will discover America, and then later he knows Christopher Columbus is discovering America, and later he knows Christopher Columbus did discover America. Would you call that learning new things? In a sense he learns something new. He learns that tensed fact. But the fundamental propositional content of those facts is the same. It is just that he either knows it will happen, it is happening, or it has happened. But it would be impossible for him to learn some new propositional fact if he is completely omniscient and has foreknowledge of the future.

Passages where, for example, God says to Abraham *I am going to go down and see if the reports that have come to me from Sodom and Gomorrah are true* would be an anthropomorphic element of the story. It would reflect the storyteller's art and making it an exciting story about how Abraham converses with God and God says *I am going to go down there and find out whether these reports are true*. God doesn't need to go down to Sodom to see if this is true. He is omnipresent, right? He is also omniscient. This would, I think, simply be a part of the narrative that shouldn't be pressed for theological precision.

¹ 5:00

Student: There is a quote from C. S. Lewis where he said, *Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me*. I wonder if you could comment in light of when we pray for others or when we pray for ourselves for healing or whatever. Why do we do that?

Dr. Craig: Lewis is making the point from the quotation that you cited that prayer is good for us. Prayer is a spiritual discipline that helps us to draw near to God, to depend on him, and to be more devoted to him. But I am not persuaded that that is all that prayer does – that prayer just affects us. I think prayer affects God as well, and that our prayers make a difference in what God wills and does. Does that mean that the purpose of prayer is to change God (the subject of this section – immutability)? No! It doesn't mean that we change God's mind. God knew from eternity past that we would pray at that moment. And from eternity past he knew how he would respond to those prayers. It may well be the case that if we had not prayed, God would have decided to do something different. So prayers really do make a difference. But they don't make that difference by changing God's mind. He will foreknow how you will pray and will answer accordingly or if you, say, fail to pray because you are disobedient or sinful, he may withhold some blessing because you've refused to pray. So prayer, I think, really does make a difference, but we shouldn't think of it in terms of changing God.

Student: I have a question about the second person of the Trinity – the Son. Jesus Christ was and is a human being. But if you read certain biblical passages, it almost seems like the flesh was added later on. Can you explain that? I have a little trouble understanding that.

Dr. Craig: Actually, someone raised this very point last week. What we want to say in the incarnation (if you are an orthodox Christian) is that the incarnation is not a matter of the second person of the Trinity giving up some of his attributes – like giving up omnipresence and becoming shrunk down to Palestine and walking around in Galilee.² That is not the way we should think of it. We should not think that he gave up his omnipotence and became as weak as a human being that was able to be crucified. Or that he gave up his omniscience and became ignorant like a human being. The orthodox doctrine of the incarnation is that in addition to the divine nature he already had, he assumed (or added to it) an additional nature which is a human nature. It is that human nature that is spatially limited, ignorant, temporal, and so forth. These qualities are to be ascribed to the incarnate Christ with respect to which nature you are talking about. So Jesus Christ is omnipotent with respect to the divine nature; he is not omnipotent with respect to his human nature, for example.

Student: I understand that. But how do you add something to a substance and then say there is no change?

²

Dr. Craig: Oh, that was the question last week unfortunately. I said I agreed that that does involve a change. But that is not a change that would violate any of the ways in which God is immutable that Packer laid out. His character and his fundamental attributes all remain the same. But I think there is a change in that the second person of the Trinity once did not have a human nature, and then the second person of the Trinity did have a human nature, and ever since will have. That does seem to me to be a change, but it is the sort of change one can allow without compromising God's perfection.

Student: To sort of rephrase what you just said, the first person of the Trinity never changed, but the second person changes. He has two natures. The earlier question, God allows us to pray also to get back into the role originally assigned to Adam – caring for others. We can bow our knees and affect others to heal the land. Praying for others we are doing like bowing the knee to Christ in submission. He is changing things differently. You would say Christ shows us how we take the new covering, we can have fellowship with the divine nature and be a partaker of it. Christ humbled himself to learn obedience as you said a long time ago, yet he already knew who Bartholomew was before he met him. He has both natures but he is showing all the power is available to us – the same power that raised him will raise us. All the power in God is available to us as we kneel before Christ and let him be Lord.

Dr. Craig: OK. Good.

END DISCUSSION

To sum up midway through our study of the divine attributes, we've been looking at God's attributes in virtue of his infinite being. We've seen that God is self-existent, necessary, eternal, omnipresent, and immutable. If we want to meditate on something that will expand our minds, think on God. To return to Charles Spurgeon's words with which we began: “The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy which can ever engage the attention of a child of God is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.”

God is an infinite being that stretches our mind beyond its mundane limits.

Now we want to turn to talk about God's attributes which he has in virtue of being a personal being. You will remember I said that the God of the Bible is both infinite and yet also personal. We've been looking at some of the ways in which God is infinite. In these respects, there is a great chasm between God and the rest of creation including man and the animals and plants and inorganic material. But now when we come to talking about God as personal we find man as made in the image of God as being on God's side of the chasm. Then the rest of creation is separated from God and man in that the remaining creatures in the world are not persons in the way God and man are.³

³ 15:16

Many people that I've talked to don't have trouble conceiving of God as an infinite being. That seems intuitively correct. But many people have trouble thinking that God can be both infinite and personal. They seem to think that somehow personhood excludes infinity – that God cannot be personal if he is also infinite. It seems to me that that is simply an unjustified assumption. God possesses all of the attributes of personhood that we do, whether these are intellectual attributes, emotional attributes, volitional attributes. But he possesses them to an infinite degree whereas we have them only to a finite degree. In that sense these attributes are communicable. They can be shared by both God and man to different degrees. Thus man is a person fundamentally because God is personal. It is because who God is that we are also persons.

Let's take a look at the first of the attributes of God that we want to speak of in terms of his personhood. The first one is God's incorporeality. Let's look at some scriptural data pertinent to this attribute.

1. 1 John 4:24. Jesus says, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” So God is a spiritual being. He is not a physical being. He is a being which is spirit.
2. God is omnipresent. We don't need to look at these verses again but just refer back to what we already said. God is not spatially located in the way that a physical object is. Rather, God is omnipresent. That will entail his incorporeality.
3. God is indiscernible to the five senses. He cannot be perceived by the five senses. 1 Timothy 6:16, speaking of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Lords, “who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light whom no man has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” Here God is said to be invisible. He cannot be seen and never has been seen. Also 1 Timothy 1:17 says, “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be power and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” So God is said by the Scriptures to be invisible. I think that would encompass not merely eyesight, but also being able to feel God or smell God or use any of the other five senses to apprehend God. God is not a physical object that is discernible by the five senses.
4. The Old Testament forbids making images of God. Exodus 20:4-5a, “You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them and serve them.” Here it is prohibited to make images of God that would be used in worship.⁴

Look at Deuteronomy 4:15-16:

⁴ 19:54

Therefore take good heed to yourselves. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.

So God is not to be portrayed in paintings, in statuary, in any sort of visual image. Any sort of image, however beautiful, however artistically inspiring, will diminish who God is by portraying him in some necessarily finite, limited, corporeal way. God is not to be pictured in any sort of way, according to the Scriptures.

5. At the same time, nevertheless, it is true that the Bible will often describe God in bodily terms. Psalms 18:6-10 gives us an example:

In my distress I called upon the Lord;
to my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.

Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
He bowed the heavens, and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub, and flew;
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

Now here God is described by the psalmist in very graphic bodily terms. He has ears. He has nostrils. He is like a fire-breathing monster who rides the heavens – rides on the cherubs through the clouds. At the same time that Israel is commanded not to make images of God yet you have these very physicalistic descriptions of God in the Psalms. We might well wonder what is going on here.

6. Moreover (this is the next point), there are, in the Old Testament and throughout the Scriptures, visions of God described – so-called theophanies – where people see God. These are often in bodily terms. For example, Exodus 33:20-23. Here Moses is asking to see the glory of God. God says to him that he will show Moses his glory, but he says,

“But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the

rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

Here God describes himself as having a face and hands and even a back that Moses can look at! God is described in very human terms here as having some sort of a body that Moses is allowed to glimpse. But Moses cannot see God's face.

What are we to make of this scriptural data? On the one hand we have the clear prohibitions against any kind of images of God, and also the affirmation that God is omnipresent, that he is spirit – not of the order of material or physical things. Yet we also have these descriptions of God in very graphic bodily terms and these theophanies – these visions of God – in terms of bodily images.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Very related to your discussion of the tension between not having an idol of God and also these images being described in the Bible, I wonder what your thoughts are in terms of where our limits should be in terms of describing God.⁵ For example, C. S. Lewis had him in the image of a lion in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which was very effective showing some characteristics of him. What would be the difference between that and having an idol?

Dr. Craig: There you are talking about a literary figure that is a Christ symbol – a Christ-figure. I think that is different, at least in my opinion. I think you could have people in literature that are Christ-figures in the story but you are not violating the commandment to make images of God and portray what he is like. For example, if you've ever read Charles Dickens' wonderful novel *The Tale of Two Cities*, the hero in that novel is clearly a Christ-figure because what he does is he dies in the place of the condemned prisoner. He allows the condemned prisoner to escape and he goes to the guillotine and sacrifices his life. He is a Christ-figure. I think in the movie *Avatar* the hero Jake is a Christ-figure. He becomes incarnate as a Na'vi on this planet and he becomes the savior of that race. He is a Christ-figure. I don't see anything wrong with that because it is not meant to be a literal sort of portrayal of what God is like. These are literary symbols as it were.

Student: I agree. I wonder if it would be correct to say that what God wants for us is not to create a portrayal of him that seems to be all-encapsulating that we actually direct our worship to.

Dr. Craig: That is certainly true. These prohibitions against graven images are with respect to worship in particular. You shouldn't have in your church images of God which

⁵ 25:13

are used in worship in any way. Aslan, whom you mention, is of course a Christ-figure. He also dies for the sake of the people to save them.

Student: Is there any distinction between God the Father and Jesus in his corporeal sense?

Dr. Craig: OK. I am inclined to think there is because when we portray Jesus in a painting or in a movie or film, we are not portraying his divine nature but his human nature and that was truly and unequivocally human. So it seems to me that there is nothing the matter with images of Jesus.

Student: But the Sistine Chapel is not a place you should go?

Dr. Craig: There you've got Adam with God the Father creating Adam and God looks like a body-builder extending his finger out to Adam. I think that as wonderful as Michelangelo's paintings are that these are a violation of these commandments against images of God.

Student: We talked about not being able to see God. You also mentioned that you didn't think that our other senses could understand him either. But I see a few different places in Scripture where it does seem like man can audibly hear God's voice like Moses at the burning bush, the calling of Samuel into service as a young boy, at Jesus' baptism, and the calling of Paul on the road to Damascus, for example. My question is: do you think that those were them hearing him directly through their spirits? Or is that a true audible thing that they heard with their ears?

Dr. Craig: It seems to me it is undeniable those were genuine auditory experiences that these people had. They heard the voice. But I guess the way I would see that is that it is not as though you actually hear God's voice, because God doesn't have any vocal cords. I would say he doesn't have a voice. He doesn't push air out through a larynx and produce a sound. Rather, what God can do is cause sound waves in the air that are then an audible voice that communicates his message to you. I think that is very, very different. What you are hearing then are these sound waves miraculously produced by an incorporeal God who doesn't himself have vocal mechanisms to have a voice.⁶

It would be similar to the theophanies, I think, where (I am getting ahead of myself) you have this visual experience of a being on a throne or the back of God in Moses' case. I would see these as something that God causes but you are not actually seeing him. As I say, I am getting ahead of myself.

Student: We'd have to treat Jesus as different in terms of this physical manifestation because if that weren't true then anybody who saw Jesus and lived with him would die. He walked the earth.

⁶ 30:07

Dr. Craig: Yes, or it falls into the error called Docetism which is an early heresy that said that Jesus didn't really have a physical human nature but that it was just illusory. That is a heresy. We don't want to say that. We've got to affirm the physicality and corporeality of Jesus' human nature.

Student: Can you tell us a definition of how you are using the word incorporeality?

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I will get into this more next time. It is the idea that God doesn't have a body. He doesn't have a corpus. Incorporeality would mean God doesn't have a body. He is pure spirit. You, I think, according to the Bible, are a composite of body and soul. But if your body were to die and be laid in the ground your soul would become a disembodied spiritual substance. That is what God is. He is an unembodied spiritual substance. He is incorporeal. You would be incorporeal, too, once your body died. But you would be not unembodied; you'd be disembodied at that point. But again I am getting ahead of myself. These are the issues that we will get into next time when we try to make sense of this biblical data.⁷