

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 7: Can I depend on God?

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Each January as we turn the page of a calendar and another year begins, with each birthday we celebrate, and with other milestones, we sense again that time is passing, much is changing, and we as well as all else visible will not be here forever. We feel deeply about these changes and wistfully sing about good times auld lang syne, of old long since past.

How comforting it is at such and all times to know that God is eternal, everywhere present, and unchanging. In theology these first two characteristics of God are aspects of an attribute called the infinity of God. By infinity is meant that every dimension of God's being cannot be measured or limited.

God is eternal.

God's infinity regarding duration is referred to as eternal and not limited by time. The Bible reveals God as always being in existence; it never speaks of him as having a beginning. The very first verse of the Bible begins with God already in action ("In the beginning God created..."); it assumes and does not explain his existence or where he came from. Moses prayed, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." (Psalm 90:1,2; cf. 102:12; Daniel 6:26.)

The human mind, baffled by its innate limitations and the constrictions of time and space, strains unsuccessfully to comprehend how God could not have a beginning, since everything else does. Yet, is it not logical and satisfying to maintain that what is limited and finite is incapable of comprehending everything, especially that which is unlimited and infinite? As we discuss elsewhere in this series, God is perfect. Therefore, we would expect that he would be beyond time, for if he were time-bound he would be limited, imperfect, and incomplete. Thus, Peter says, "do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. (2 Peter 3:8) It follows that he is also not limited by space.

God is everywhere present.

God's infinity regarding space is referred to as his immensity or omnipresence. He is everywhere at the same time and with his whole being. God is wholly present in Germany, in Zambia, in China, in Mexico, and in the United States, as well as on planes and ships en route, on the same occasion and always. He fills all of space with each aspect of his being. All parts of the universe are in God's presence, but he is not in their presence as pantheists believe, as we observe when we consider God's immanence.

Consider also Psalm 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.” The prophet Jeremiah quoted God saying, ““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.” (23:24; See also Deuteronomy 4:39.)

These texts teach or remind us that God is aware of all in which we are engaged and encountering. As many quickly sense, God’s presence everywhere means he observes what we are doing and should not be doing, thus we are informed of the need to repent, which is healthy and helpful. We can also be encouraged with the awareness that God’s being everywhere present, and thus aware of all that is occurring in our lives, means that we are constantly close to his all-sufficient and readily-at-hand care.

In these verses God speaks in a figure, for he is even bigger than the universe. In the words of the outstanding Presbyterian theologian, William Shedd, “If God were literally contained in the universe, the universe would be more immense than he is.” He then quotes the medieval theologian Anselm, “Nothing contains thee, but thou containest all things.” In 2 Chronicles 2:6 King Solomon stated this reality with a rhetorical question: “But who is able to build a temple for him, since the heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain him?”

Of course God’s immensity also means we, who are finite, cannot comprehend everything about God, who is infinite. It is perfectly logical to conclude that the limited cannot comprehend the unlimited. We cannot say all that could be said about him. He has revealed only that which we can know and need to know about him. To assume we can know all about him, or that we do, would be most arrogant. In fact, he quells any such thinking in passages as this one where he says, ““For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

God is everywhere present and he loves you; don’t ever think he’s abandoned you. That thought is not from God and is not true. None of the greatest challenges I’ve had in my life, have ever come close to my wife Carol’s dying of a very disabling disease. In the loss of my precious wife of 48 ½ years in our strong and Biblically profound one flesh marital bond, I have experienced the greatest sadness I have ever felt, but *I never felt abandoned by God; far to the contrary, I have sensed his presence and all-sufficient help every moment* before, during, and constantly after Carol’s passing.

When I reenter our house after having been away for a while, I sense the cavernous emptiness without Carol there. I’m keenly aware that there is no other person in our home, and no pets either, but I’m also keenly aware that I’m not alone. God is with me. No matter where I go, God is there, and I constantly receive his completely adequate and

abundant help, directly in my mind and heart or through others, especially the church. One of the main reasons why I have this sense of God's continual presence is due to praying continually (NIV), without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17 NRSV, KJV, ASV) That is, as I go through each day, I thank God the Father for the countless good experiences he gives me; I pray for others' needs that come to my attention; I ask him to help me in difficult decisions. These are often only one or two sentences at a time. I have longer periods of prayer in the morning and in the evening. Continually communicating with God enables us to keep in close touch with him and in constant awareness of his presence...wherever we are.

If you ever question God's presence, look around you for at least one thing you see that is good. There you see the hand of God the Father, the giver of every good and perfect gift. (James 1:17) In fact, while you're looking for that one good thing, you'll notice many others as well! They are all there because God put them there and is sustaining them. (Nehemiah 9:21; Psalm 55:22; Isaiah 46:4; 1 Corinthians 1:8)

God is unchanging.

In the future we can expect many changes, but not with God himself. "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end," declares the Psalmist. (102:25-27) The Scripture also says, "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind." (1 Samuel 15:29) The author of Hebrews adds that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (13:8)

God's unchanging being pertains to his essence, characteristics, purposes, consciousness, and promises. This doesn't mean he won't cause changes to occur in human circumstances, especially when his people pray. (James 5:16) However, these differences will occur in everything outside God's being, yet still all within his purposes; he himself won't change.

More Practical Benefits for Us

These attributes of God provide many blessings for us; space permits identifying just a few. Since God is *eternal*, we have no fear that he'll die and leave us to fend for ourselves. He is King of kings, Lord of lords, and CEO of CEOs. However, unlike all other kings, lords, and CEOs, who even before they pass away others are waiting in the wings until they can take over and undo much if not all their predecessor has done, no one will ever take over for God, because he will never pass away! We never have to worry that God would leave us and we'd be taken over by some malicious being, for God is from everlasting to everlasting. (Psalm 90:2)

Further, due to his being eternal, he knows about all that has been in the past; he knows the future; and there is nothing in either dimension that he is not aware of or that he has

not taken account of in his plan of redemption for us and for the world. He is never surprised, caught off guard, or flabbergasted.

His *being everywhere* means there is no place we will be going that he is not already there; indeed, he is with us on the way! In no circumstance in which we ever find ourselves will we be prevented from the possibility of receiving his help. We will never have to search to find him; he will never be lost and not found.

The Lord's *unchanging* character assures us that he keeps his promises and we can count on him to be and do as he has revealed himself in his Word. Unlike all the gods of this world, which have been made in sinful man's image, we need never worry about God acting like humans, e.g., victimizing us by capricious or whimsical acts as the Greek and Roman gods were perceived as doing. We never have to fear that we'll wake up some morning and discover that he had a bad night and has it in for us!

To meditate on these and the other characteristics of God that we're considering in this series provides a great blessing, giving us unsurpassable joy and peace of mind. Such contemplation also helps us think and speak rightly about who God is and what he is like in the witness that is part of our calling (Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15) and to avoid and help others avoid the widespread contemporary confusion concerning God.

We can be greatly comforted! "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." (Malachi 3:6) When we are honest and examine ourselves, measuring our deeds against God's criterion (and not measuring ourselves against a norm-based standard whereby we compare and contrast ourselves with other people), we observe and confess that we are sinners and not worthy of being in the presence of God who is most holy. We sin every day, either by commission, what we do, or omission, what we don't do that we should. Our sin offends God. Nevertheless, he has offered us forgiveness in Christ, and though we still sin, because he does not change, in Christ we can have peace with him, "the peace of God which transcends all understanding." (Philippians 4:7, 9)

While we are still in this phase of our lives, living in a world where there is still plenty of sin and evil, we can encounter much unpleasantness. Nevertheless, since believers in Jesus Christ are the descendants of Jacob (Galatians 3:29, Jacob being Abraham's grandson), we can look forward to an eternity of joy in the Lord's forgiveness and fellowship, and in his service that exists even now and will be manifest fully in the future.