

CHAPTER VI

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

(Introductory)

By the attributes of God is meant those qualities and characteristics of the Divine nature which are essential to God as the Supreme Being. His attributes are His personal perfections without which He would not be the true and living God, the God of the Bible. The Divine attributes explain what God is and what He does.

The greatest and most important of all sciences is theology, the science that treats of God. The being of God is the foundation of all religion. If there is no God, religion is a foolish and unnecessary evil. If there is no God, who is the supreme Lawgiver and Ruler and Judge, then man is not a responsible and accountable being, and the logic is inescapable that every man may do that which is right in his own eyes, insofar as the eternal future is concerned. If there is no God, *"Who will render to every man according to his deeds"* (Rom. 2:6), then every man may act according to his own pleasure without fear of future retribution.

Religion is true or false as it embodies the true conception of the true God. Religion, from re-ligo "to bind back" must have a true God to tie to, or it is worthless. Mere belief in a supreme being is not enough. God must be known in His glorious attributes, and these are revealed to us in the Bible.

Our Proper Study

It has been said that the proper study of mankind is man. But Job felt otherwise. He says, *"Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee"* (Job 22:21). Jeremiah thought that a spiritual and saving knowledge of God is the greatest need of men: *"Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD"* (Jer. 9:23, 24).

Our Savior said, *"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent"* (Jno. 17:3). Daniel tells us that: *"And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he corrupt by flatteries: but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits"* (Dan.11:32). Spurgeon wrote that "Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of

the Deity." May we quote further from this prince of preachers:

"The proper study of the Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can engage the attention of a child of God, is the existence of the great God which he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can comprehend and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self content, and go our way with the thought, 'Behold I am wise.' But when we come to this master science, finding our plumb line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought, 'I am but of yesterday and know nothing'" (Sermon on Mal. 3:6) *"For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."*

A study of the Divine nature should be attended with humility, caution, and reverence. The more we learn about God in His holy Word, the fuller we realize that He is incomparable and incomprehensible. Strikingly did the Puritan John Howe declare: "The notion therefore we can hence form of His glory, is only such as we may have of a large volume by a brief synopsis, or of a spacious country by a little landscape. He hath given us a true report of Himself, but not a full; such as will secure our apprehensions from error, but not from ignorance." The writer is saying that through the study of the Bible we may be saved from error concerning God, but not from ignorance. The finite mind will never be able to fully know the Infinite God. God is the most overwhelming of all truths.

How God is Known

Two things are necessary to man's knowledge of the true God. There must be a revelation of God, and man must have a capacity to know God. One of these without the other will not suffice. The Bible gives a revelation of God, and a regenerated man is the only person who has the capacity to know God. Both of these are the results of the Holy Spirit's work. The Bible was written by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit, and the regenerate man has been born of the Spirit. There is thus, for the believer, a twofold revelation of God; a revelation to him in the word of truth, and a revelation in him by the Spirit's illumination.

Wherever the Bible has not gone, men have searched in vain for the true God. Job asked: *"Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?"* (Job 11:7). Paul tells us that the worldly wisdom knew not God *"For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that*

believe" (I Cor. 1:21). This was after the philosophers of Greece had tried and failed. One of the philosophers being asked the question, "What is God?" required a day to think it over. When the day was up, he requested more time. The reason being asked for his delay, he replied that the longer he considered the question the more obscure it became to him.

But a mere objective revelation of God is not all that is needed. There must also be a subjective revelation. The Spirit must put light in the soul which has been darkened by sin. Many have the Bible who do not know God. *"Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"* (John 3:5); *"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Cor. 2:14); *"All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him"* (Matt. 11:27).

Value of the Study

1. The study of the Divine attributes will go far toward delivering us from error on many doctrinal points. For example, opposition to the doctrine of eternal punishment comes from a perversion of His goodness and a denial of His wrath and justice. Opposition to the doctrine of election comes from a misunderstanding of the grace of God, a denial of human depravity, and a disregard for the sovereignty of God.

2. The study of the personal perfections of the Godhead will give a just view of God. The God of the masses is not the God of the Bible. The God of the imagination is not the true God. A. W. Pink uses strong words but we believe he speaks the truth when he says: "The God of this twentieth century no more resembles the supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The 'god' who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so called Bible Conferences is the figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form 'gods' out of wood and stone, while the millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a 'god' out of their own carnal mind. In reality, they are but atheists, for there is no other possible alternative between an absolutely Supreme God, and no God at all. A God whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits nought but contempt."

3. A contemplation of God in His personal attributes will promote humility and reverence. When

Job got a vision of God, he cried out, *"Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes"* (Job 42:6). When Isaiah saw the Lord on His throne, he cried, *"Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts"* (Isa. 6:5). The better view we have of God, the better will we know ourselves. In the light of His holiness we can better see our vileness. Humility is the effect of being occupied with those sterner attributes of God, such as His justice, wrath, holiness, and power. There has been such a lop sided view of the love of God, and neglect of the wrath of God, that there is little fear and reverence of God today.

4. To be occupied with thoughts about God as He is revealed in the Scriptures will increase our faith. Much that passes current for faith today is either sentiment or presumption. Faith must be based upon a true revelation of God, and we have this revelation in the Bible. The way to have strong faith is to have a great and mighty God. Nobody's faith can be stronger than he believes his God to be. I cannot have strong faith in a God who, I think, is weaker than men. If my God is weak, my faith of necessity will be correspondingly weak. I cannot have much faith in God if I believe He is being defeated on most battle fields. I cannot have much faith in God if I believe He is trying and failing; if I believe His will is being thwarted by the will of men; if I believe He is doing the best He can to accomplish as much good as He can, and to save as many as He can. But if like Job, I believe *"But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth"* (Job 23:13); then with Paul I can say *"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us"* (Eph. 3:20).

What Kind of God Do We Pray To?

Do we pray for the conversion of loved ones or friends or even enemies? Then we must pray in faith that God is able to convict and convert them. But if we are to pray in faith we must believe that God is almighty, that nothing is too hard for Him. We must believe that God is irresistible whether He works in grace or in justice; in salvation or in judgment. With Isaac Watts we must say:

"His very word of grace is strong,
As that which built the sky;
The voice that rolls the stars along,
Proclaims it from on high."

And may grace be given both writer and reader to believe in grace as did Philip Doddridge when he wrote:

"Grace led my roving feet
To tread the heavenly road;
And new supplies each hour I meet,
While pressing on to God."

Classification of the Attributes

The Divine attributes are variously distinguished by theologians. Perhaps the best classification is that which divides them into **communicable** and **incommunicable**. The **communicable** attributes are those which God, in some measure, communicates or imparts to men, as love, power, wisdom, and holiness. The **incommunicable** attributes are qualities that belong exclusively to God, as infinity, independency, and immutability. These qualities distinguish the Creator from His creation.