

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

MADE EASY



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INTRODUCTION

The first time Samuel met the professor, he received a dead fish, preserved in yellow alcohol, with instructions to “Look at it.” That was it.

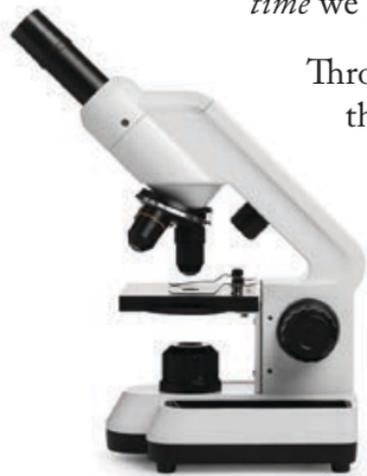
It was the mid-1860s, and Samuel Scudder was a new student of Louis Agassiz, one of the foremost zoology professors at Harvard University. His first assignment for Samuel was simply to stare at the dead fish for a while. Samuel was at a loss, but still he spent a good ten minutes studying the *Haemulon* until he’d seen everything there was to see. When he had finished, though, his teacher was gone! Frustrated, he returned to looking at the fish—turning it over, counting its scales, even pushing his fingers down its throat. Anything to pass the time until the professor returned.

Finally, late in the day, Professor Agassiz came back. Young Samuel proudly recited all the fishy discoveries he had made during the boring, drawn-out day. But the professor frowned and said, “You have not looked very carefully. Look again, look again!” And that became his lesson plan for the next three days. For hours and hours on end, Samuel’s only assignment from the great zoologist was “Look, look, look!”

At the end of that week Samuel realized he’d unexpectedly become an expert on *Haemulon* fish—in an extremely short amount of time! He’d gained more knowledge than he thought was even imaginable, just by taking extended time to “Look, look, look!” at his

subject. And he finally understood the incredible power of intense observation that Professor Agassiz had been trying to teach him. “That was the best entomological lesson I ever had,” Scudder later wrote, “a lesson whose influence was extended to the details of every subsequent study.”¹

Studying God is just a little bit like Scudder’s study of the fish: When we invest the time to “Look, look, look!” we can unearth new discoveries *every single time* we gaze in God’s direction.



Through our sustained glimpses at the attributes of God as revealed in the Bible, we learn about him: his nature, his character, his actions, his priorities, and his preferences. In doing so, we unveil something of who he is and what he does. Our task, though, is not to amass a supposed complete knowledge of God through a study of his attributes—but simply to look

at him with an unwavering gaze. In those moments, we continue to discover anew the splendor of the limitless one whom we worship.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You may want to read the entries in this book consecutively from start to finish. You may prefer to skip around, studying the entries by topic or as they relate to your particular circumstances. The entries are arranged alphabetically—feel free to thumb through as works best for you. This book is designed to be *useful* to you, not to make you conform to it.

The attributes included are not an exhaustive list; they are representative of the most well-known aspects of God and a fascinating place to begin—and from which to continue—a lifelong study of God. Also, the question we’re pursuing in this book is not “What is God like?” but something more akin to what theologian A. W. Tozer asked: “What has God disclosed about Himself that the reverent reason can comprehend?”² Our source for answers to that question will be the Bible.

Here’s what you’ll find in each entry:

Attribute Name

These are best read in the context of one of two phrases: “God who is” or “God who possesses.” When you read the attribute love, you can understand it as “God who is love.” However, when reading the attribute compassion, you can say, “God who possesses compassion.” This distinction will become more natural as you read through the book.

When discussing an attribute, it is important to remember God's Trinitarian nature—the idea that although distinct from each other, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one. Therefore, attributes applied to one person of the Trinity will apply to all three persons of the Trinity.

Category

When studying God's attributes, it can help to think of them in categories, as Bible scholars do. Most attributes fit into several categories, and some categories overlap.



Absolute—These attributes of God are not present in any way in anything he has created.



Emanant—These attributes of God flow through him and are seen in his acts of creation.



Moral—These attributes of God have to do with his righteous interactions with people.



Natural—These attributes of God have to do with the ways he governs the physical universe.



Relative—These attributes of God are present, to a degree, in humans, who are made in his image.



Is—These attributes describe God’s character—who he *is*.



Does—These attributes describe God’s activity in the world and in our lives—what he *does*.

Description

Here’s where you’ll find a few key Scriptures, as well as insight into what the attribute means when applied to God.

Bottom Line

This is a short, final thought that summarizes the attribute.

For Further Study

This lists some Scriptures you can look up to discover more about what the Bible says regarding this attribute.

Related to

This is a short list of some other attributes of God related to the one being described.

All right—you’re ready! Turn the page and begin looking at God through the lens of his remarkable attributes.

AUTONOMY



RELATIVE



IS

“Our God is in the heavens, and he does as he wishes.”

PSALM 115:3

“He does as he pleases among the angels of heaven and among the people of the earth. No one can stop him or say to him, ‘What do you mean by doing these things?’”

DANIEL 4:35

When we say that God possesses autonomy, what we mean is basically this: *God does whatever he wants to do.* This also means that he cannot be coerced into doing anything he doesn't want to do. He answers to no one. In all the universe, God alone is completely independent in his decision making and activity.

The autonomy of God is intertwined with his authority, his unchallengeable right to exercise his will over anything that he created—which is, indeed, *everything*. Paul described this aspect of God using the image of a potter: “When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into?” (Romans 9:21). The Greek word translated as “right” is *exousian*, and it speaks, not only to the ability to make

a decision, but also to the power to enforce whatever decision is made.³

There are two interesting implications of God's autonomy. First, we learn from both history and Scripture that God is constantly delegating lesser degrees of his absolute authority to humans—from kings and presidents to parents and even to individuals. This leaves open the possibility that his extended authority can be misused by us. That, as you no doubt have seen, can be tragic. Our only hope, then, must lie in complete trust in the promise of Romans 8:28: “We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.”

Second, although no one can tell God what to do, he has chosen to obligate himself to our well-being anyway. As Peter wrote, “He has given us great and precious promises” (2 Peter 1:4). Through his many promises in Scripture, God has made himself *accountable to himself* in order to realize our eternal best interests, regardless of our temporary circumstance. That is both undeserved—and unbelievably kind.

Bottom Line: God doesn't need your permission to do whatever he wants to do in your life and circumstances. He will accomplish what's best for you—whether you agree with him or not.

For further study: Deuteronomy 32:39; Job 42:1–2;
Psalm 135:6; Proverbs 19:21; Jeremiah 32:27;
Romans 9:19–21; Ephesians 1:11

Related to: Omnipotent, Sovereign

BEAUTY



EMANANT



RELATIVE



IS



DOES

“One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”

PSALM 27:4 NIV

“God has made everything beautiful for its own time.”

ECCLESIASTES 3:11

What is beauty, exactly? And why would we say that God—who by definition cannot be seen with human eyes—is beautiful?

Common opinion today is that beauty is entirely subjective or in the eye of the beholder. Yet Scripture indicates that God possesses an objective beauty—regardless of the beholder—that is unmatched by anything we can see or know in this life. David sang of that in Psalm 27 (above), using the Hebrew root word for beauty, *noam*, usually understood as meaning something pleasant or delightful.

Beauty appears to serve no practical purpose in the natural world, offering no protection, nourishment, or any other advantage. The only explanation for it—and

the uniquely human ability to delight in it—is that it reflects a beautiful Creator who is active in our world.⁴

The beauty of God is one of his attributes that describe both something that *he is* and something that *he does*. We cannot look at his personal beauty; we're simply incapable of seeing into that spiritual realm, and it could be that his beauty is so overwhelming that it would be lethal to us (Exodus 33:20). However, beauty is also an emanant attribute of God; it's something that flows from him, through him, and with which he saturates creation. This is why we can weep at the sight of a stunning sunset or marvel at shining stars scattered across our night sky or delight in the laughter of a child. It is also why we, as individual beholders, can find something beautiful that others might consider ugly.

So what is beauty, exactly? It's everything we know as pleasant and delightful, combined with more than we can even imagine to be beautiful. And beauty is only possible because it exists eternally in God himself.

Bottom Line: The beauty in your world is proof of the beauty God possesses—and shares.

For further study: Job 26:13; Psalms 90:17 (KJV); 135:3; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Isaiah 28:5; 33:17

Related to: Glory, Perfect

COMPASSION



MORAL



RELATIVE



DOES

“The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out, ‘Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.’”

EXODUS 34:6

“Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

MARK 6:34

It’s impossible to overstate the fact that when God described himself to Moses, the first word in his description was *compassion*. Compassion, at its heart, is the active desire to alleviate another’s pain; yet, when God called himself compassionate, *he* was the one who had been harmed. Exodus 32–34 gives us the situation.

God had recently freed the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt. Huddled together in the desert, they had been waiting for Moses to speak privately to God, and they got impatient. (They didn’t know that God was, at that time, giving Moses the Ten Commandments.) The Israelites created a false god (a golden calf) and began to worship

that inanimate thing by offering sacrifices, getting drunk, and engaging “in pagan revelry” (Exodus 32:6). This “pagan revelry”—which is a polite way of saying it—was a terrible, terrible sin. Such irreverence cost the lives of at least 3,000 people and caused a great plague.

And then ...

In the aftermath of that horror and betrayal by the people of Israel, God spoke to Moses and said of himself, “The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy!” (Exodus 34:6).

That was more than just a description of deity; it was, and still is, an inviolable promise of God toward humanity. The Israelites had broken trust with God—right after he had set them free. And yes, there were consequences but not the destruction they deserved, because God himself chose compassion instead of retribution. The choice to show compassion over retribution was proved once and for all with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for us.

So when we say that God possesses compassion, it’s not just a pretty way of saying “He’s so nice, isn’t he?” Rather, God’s compassion is a deliberate act on his part. In his compassion, he chose to send Jesus to be sacrificed for us—and it cost him dearly. Which we would do well to remember.

Bottom Line: Our multitude of sins have made us undeserving of God's great compassion; yet he gives it nonetheless. Why? Because from the creation to today, *compassion* is what God chooses to be known for.

For further study: Exodus 33:4; 2 Chronicles 36:15; Psalms 51:1; 86:15; 103:8, 13; 145:9; Lamentations 3:32; Joel 2:13; Matthew 14:14; Luke 6:36; James 5:11

Related to: Grace, Love, Mercy, Patient, Redeemer