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THE NATURE OF GOD

“God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

To continue our study of the oneness of God, it is essential that we learn more about the nature of God. Of course, our small human minds cannot discover or comprehend all there is to know about God, but the Bible does describe many important characteristics and attributes that God possesses. In this chapter we will discuss some of the attributes of God that make Him God—those forming an essential part of His nature. We will also study some of the ways in which God has revealed His nature to humanity, particularly through visible manifestations.

God Is a Spirit

Jesus proclaimed this truth in John 4:24. The Bible reveals it consistently, from Genesis 1:2 (“And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”) to Revelation 22:17 (“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come”). Hebrews 12:9 calls God the Father of spirits.

What is a spirit? *Webster’s Dictionary* includes in its definition of the word the following: “A supernatural, incorporeal, rational being usu. invisible to human beings but having the power to become visible at will . . . a being having an incorporeal or immaterial nature.”¹ The Hebrew word translated as spirit is *ruwach*, and it can mean wind, breath, life, anger, unsubstantiality, region of the sky, or spirit of a rational being. The Greek word translated as spirit, *pneuma*, can mean a current of air, breath, blast, breeze, spirit, soul, vital principle, disposition, angel, demon, or God.² All three definitions emphasize that a spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). Similarly, Jesus indicated that the Spirit of God does not have flesh and blood (Matthew 16:17). So, when the Bible says that God is a Spirit, it means that He cannot be seen or touched physically by human beings. As a Spirit, He is an intelligent, supernatural Being who does not have a physical body.

God Is Invisible

Since God is a Spirit, He is invisible unless He chooses to manifest Himself in some form visible

to humans. God told Moses, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live” (Exodus 33:20). “No man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18; I John 4:12). Not only has no human ever seen God, but no human can see God (I Timothy 6:16). Several times the Bible describes God as invisible (Colossians 1:15; I Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). Although humans can see God when He appears in various forms, no one can directly see the invisible Spirit of God.

God Is Omnipresent (Everywhere Present)

Because God is a Spirit He can be everywhere at the same time. He is the only Spirit that is truly omnipresent; for all other spirit beings such as demons, angels, and Satan himself can be confined to specific locations (Mark 5:10; Jude 6; Revelation 20:1-3).

Although God is omnipresent, we cannot equate Him with the nature, substance, or forces of the world (which would be pantheism), because He does have individuality, personality, and intelligence.

Solomon recognized God’s omnipresence when he prayed at the dedication of the Temple, saying, “Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee” (I Kings 8:27; see II Chronicles 2:6; 6:18). God declared His omnipresence by saying, “The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1; see also Acts 7:49). Paul preached that the Lord is “not far from every one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts

17:27-28). Perhaps the most beautiful description of God's omnipresence is found in Psalm 139:7-13: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb."

If God is omnipresent, why does the Bible describe Him as being in heaven? Here are several reasons: (1) This teaches that God is transcendent. In other words, He is beyond human understanding and He is not limited to this earth. (2) It refers to the center of God's reasoning and activity—His headquarters, so to speak. (3) It refers to God's immediate presence, that is, the fullness of God's glory and power, which no mortal can see and live (Exodus 33:20). (4) Also, it may refer to the visible manifestation of God to the angels in heaven. It cannot mean God lacks omnipresence, is limited to one place, or is limited to a body.

Similarly, when the Bible says God came to earth or appeared to someone, it does not negate His omnipresence. It simply means the focus of His activity has shifted to earth at least as far as a certain individual or a certain situation is concerned. When God comes to earth, heaven is not empty. He is still just

as much in heaven as ever. He can act simultaneously in heaven and on earth, or at several locations on earth. It is very important that we recognize the magnitude of God's omnipresence and not limit it by our human experience.

Does God Have a Body?

Since God is an invisible Spirit and is omnipresent, He certainly does not have a body as we know it. He did assume various forms and temporary manifestations throughout the Old Testament so that humans could see Him. (See the section on theophanies later in this chapter.) However, the Bible does not record any permanent bodily manifestation of God until Jesus Christ was born. Of course, in Christ, God had a human body and now has a glorified, immortal human body.

Outside of temporary manifestations of God and outside of the New Testament revelation of God in Christ, scriptural references to the eyes, hands, arms, feet, heart, and other bodily parts of God are examples of figurative language or anthropomorphisms (interpretations of the nonhuman in terms of the human so that humans can understand).

In other words, the Bible describes infinite God in finite, human terms in order that we may better comprehend Him. For example, the heart of God denotes His intellect and His emotions, not a blood-pumping organ (Genesis 6:6; 8:21). When God said heaven was His throne and earth was His footstool, He described

His omnipresence, not a pair of literal feet propped up on the globe (Isaiah 66:1). When God said His right hand spanned the heavens, He described His great power and not a large hand stretching through the atmosphere (Isaiah 48:13). “The eyes of the LORD are in every place” does not mean that God has physical eyes in every location but indicates His omnipresence and omniscience (Proverbs 15:3). When Jesus cast devils out by the finger of God, He did not pull down a giant finger from heaven, but He exercised the power of God (Luke 11:20). The blast of God’s nostrils was not literal particles emitted by giant heavenly nostrils but the strong east wind sent by God to part the Red Sea (Exodus 15:8; 14:21). In fact, literal interpretation of all the visions and physical descriptions of God would lead to the belief that God has wings (Psalm 91:4). In short, we believe God as a Spirit does not have a body unless He chooses to manifest Himself in a bodily form, which He did in the person of Jesus Christ. (See chapter 4.)

Some say that in the Old Testament God had a spirit body “visible” to other spirit beings such as angels. They raise this hypothesis because human spirits seem to have a recognizable form visible to other spirits (Luke 16:22-31) and because some passages indicate the angels and Satan could see a visible manifestation of God in the Old Testament (I Kings 22:19-22; Job 1:6). However, God did not need a spirit body to do this because He could have manifested Himself at various times to other spirits just as He did to humans. One key verse of Scripture implies that ordinarily God is not visible even to spirit beings unless He chooses to manifest Himself in some way: “God was manifest

in the flesh . . . seen of angels” (I Timothy 3:16). At the least, if God did have some type of spirit body He certainly was not confined to it like other spirit beings are confined to their bodies, for then He would not be truly omnipresent. For example, God’s omnipresence means He could have appeared simultaneously to people on earth and to angels in heaven. Also, we must realize that in New Testament times God has chosen to reveal Himself fully through Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:9). There is no possibility of separating God and Jesus, and there is no God visible outside of Jesus.

God Is Omniscient (All Knowing)

Psalm 139:1-6 teaches us that God knows everything, including our movements, thoughts, paths, ways, and words. Job confessed, “I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee” (Job 42:2). God has complete knowledge of everything, including foreknowledge of the future (Acts 2:23). Like omnipresence, omniscience is an attribute that belongs solely to God. He is “the only wise God” (I Timothy 1:17). The Bible does not identify any other being (including Satan) who can read all the thoughts of people, foresee the future with certainty, or know everything there is to know.

God Is Omnipotent (All Powerful)

God calls Himself the Almighty many times throughout the Bible (Genesis 17:1; 35:11, etc.). He has all

the power there is, and no being can exercise any power unless God allows it (Romans 13:1). Again, only God is omnipotent, for only one being can have all power. I Timothy 6:15 describes God as “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.” The saints of God in heaven will proclaim “Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Revelation 19:6). God beautifully describes His great omnipotence in Job 38-41.

The only limitations God has are those He willingly places on Himself or those resulting from His moral nature. Since He is holy and sinless, He abides by His own moral character. Therefore, it is impossible for God to lie or contradict His own Word (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18).

God Is Eternal

God is eternal, immortal, and everlasting (Deuteronomy 33:27; Isaiah 9:6; I Timothy 1:17). He is the first and the last (Isaiah 44:6). He had no beginning and will have no ending; other spiritual beings, including humans, are immortal as far as the future is concerned but only God is eternal in the past and future.

God Is Immutable (Unchanging)

God’s character and attributes never change: “I am the LORD, I change not” (Malachi 3:6). It is true that God sometimes repents (changes His course of

action in relation to humans), but this is only because they change their actions. God's nature remains the same; only His future course of action changes to respond to the changes of humans. For example, the repentance of Nineveh caused God to change His plans to destroy that city (Jonah 3:10). Also, the Bible sometimes speaks of God repenting in the sense of grieving or sorrowing rather than in the sense of changing His mind (Genesis 6:6).

God Has Individuality, Personality, and Rationality

God is an intelligent being with a will (Romans 9:19) and reasoning ability (Isaiah 1:18). He has an intelligent mind (Romans 11:33-34). That God has emotions is indicated from the fact that humans are emotional beings, for God created them in His own image (Genesis 1:27). The essential emotional nature of God is love, but He has many emotions such as delight, pity or compassion, hatred of sin, and zeal for righteousness (Psalm 18:19; 103:13; Proverbs 6:16; Exodus 20:5). He is slow to anger, but He can be provoked to anger (Psalm 103:8; Deuteronomy 4:25). God can be grieved (Genesis 6:6) and blessed (Psalm 103:1). Of course, His emotions transcend our emotions, but we can only describe Him by using terms that describe human emotions. (For further proof that God is an individual being with personality and rationality, see the discussions in this chapter of God's omniscience and His moral attributes.)

God's Moral Attributes

“God is love” (I John 4:8, 16). Love is the essence of God; it is His very nature. God has many other qualities and attributes, many of which stem from His love.

God's Moral Nature

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| 1. love | (I John 4:8) |
| 2. light | (I John 1:5) |
| 3. holiness | (I Peter 1:16) |
| 4. mercy | (Psalm 103:8) |
| 5. gentleness | (Psalm 18:35) |
| 6. righteousness | (Psalm 129:4) |
| 7. goodness | (Romans 2:4) |
| 8. perfection | (Matthew 5:48) |
| 9. justice | (Isaiah 45:21) |
| 10. faithfulness | (I Corinthians 10:13) |
| 11. truth | (John 17:17) |
| 12. grace | (Psalm 103:8) |

These moral attributes of God are not contradictory but work in harmony. For example, God's holiness required an immediate separation between God and humans when they sinned. Then, God's righteousness and justice required death as the penalty for sin, but God's love and mercy sought pardon. God satisfied both justice and mercy by the death of Christ at Calvary and the resulting plan of salvation.

We enjoy the benefits of God's mercy when we

accept the atoning work of Christ and apply it to our lives through faith. When we accept and obey by faith God's plan of salvation, God imputes the righteousness of Christ to us (Romans 3:21-5:21). Therefore, God can justly forgive us of sin (I John 1:9) and can restore us to communion with Him without violating His holiness.

The death of the innocent, sinless Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us satisfy God's justice and holiness. If, however, we reject Christ's atonement, then we are left to face God's judgment alone. In this case His holiness demands separation from sinful humans and His justice demands death for sinful humans. So justice and mercy are complementary, not contradictory, aspects of God's nature, as are holiness and love. If we accept God's love and mercy, He will help us satisfy His justice and holiness. If we reject God's love and mercy, we must face His justice and holiness alone (Romans 11:22).

Of course, the preceding list does not exhaust the qualities of God. God is transcendent and no human can comprehend Him fully. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For 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). "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?" (Romans 11:33-34).

Theophanies

One way that God revealed Himself in the Old Testament and dealt with humans on their level was through the use of theophanies. A theophany is a visible manifestation of God, and we usually think of it as temporary in nature. As we have seen, God is invisible to humans. To make Himself visible, He manifested Himself in a physical form. Even though no humans can see the Spirit of God, they can see a representation of God. Below are some ways in which God chose to manifest Himself in the Old Testament.

God appeared to Abraham in a vision, as a smoking furnace and burning lamp, and as a man (Genesis 15:1, 17; 18:1-33). In this last instance, God and two angels appeared in the form of three men (18:2) and ate food provided by Abraham. The two angels left to go to Sodom while God remained to talk to Abraham (Genesis 18:22; 19:1).

God appeared to Jacob in a dream and as a man (Genesis 28:12-16; 32:24-32). On the latter occasion Jacob wrestled with the man and proclaimed, "I have seen God face to face." The Bible also describes this appearance as "the angel" (Hosea 12:4).

God appeared to Moses in a cloud of glory and in fire on Mount Sinai, spoke to him face to face in the Tabernacle, and revealed to him His back (partial glory) but not His face (all His glory) (Exodus 24:12-18; 33:9-11, 18-23). These references to God's face and God's glory probably are metaphoric of the presence of God and could apply to many different types of manifestations.

God manifested Himself in the sight of all Israel through thunder, lightnings, a cloud, a voice of a trumpet, smoke, fire, and earthquakes (Exodus 19:11-19; Deuteronomy 5:4-5, 22-27). He also showed His glory and sent fire from His presence in the sight of all Israel (Leviticus 9:23-24; 10:1-2).

Job saw God in a whirlwind (Job 38:1; 42:5).

Various prophets saw visions of God (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1:26-28; 8:1-4; Daniel 7:2, 9; Amos 9:1). To Ezekiel He appeared in the form of a man, enveloped in fire. To Daniel He appeared in a night vision as the Ancient of Days. Many other verses of Scripture tell us that God appeared to someone but do not describe in what manner He did so. For example, God appeared to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Samuel (Genesis 12:7; 17:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9-15; I Samuel 3:21). Similarly, God descended on Mount Sinai and stood with Moses; revealed Himself to seventy-four leaders of Israel; came down in a pillar of cloud and stood in front of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; came at night to Balaam; and met Balaam on two other occasions (Exodus 34:5; 24:9-11; Numbers 12:4-9; 23:3-10, 16-24).

In addition to the appearances mentioned above, the Bible records other manifestations that many believe were God Himself. In Joshua 5:13-15, a man with a sword appeared to Joshua and identified himself as the “captain of the host of the LORD.” This title and the fact that he did not rebuke Joshua for worshiping him (unlike Revelation 19:9-10; 22:8-10) suggest that this was really a manifestation of God. On the other hand, the wording of this passage leaves open the possibility that Joshua did not worship the captain but

worshiped God for the captain's appearance.

The Angel of the LORD

Some of the numerous appearance of "the angel of the LORD" seem to be theophanies. The angel of the LORD appeared to Hagar, spoke as though he were God, and was called God by her (Genesis 16:7-13). The Bible says the angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in the burning bush but then says God talked to Moses on that occasion (Exodus 3; Acts 7:30-38). Exodus 13:21 says the LORD went before Israel in a pillar of cloud, while Exodus 14:19 says the angel of God was with the pillar of cloud. The angel of the LORD appeared to Israel in Judges 2:1-5 and spoke as God. Judges 6:11-24 describes the appearance of the angel of the LORD to Gideon and then says the LORD looked on Gideon. Again, the angel of the LORD appeared to Manoah and his wife, and they believed they had seen God (Judges 13:2-23).

Other visitations of the angel of the LORD do not indicate whether they were manifestations of God Himself or not, although frequently people assume that they were. Examples are the appearances to Abraham at Mount Moriah and to Balaam (Genesis 22:11-18; Numbers 22:22-35). Sometimes the angel of the LORD is clearly not a manifestation of God but an angel identified as a separate being other than the LORD God. Examples are the appearances to David and to Zechariah (II Samuel 24:16; I Chronicles 21:15-30; Zechariah 1:8-19). (See chapter 7 for further discussion.) The angel of the Lord

in the New Testament apparently is nothing more than an angel and certainly is not Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:20; 2:13; 28:2; Acts 8:26).

In analyzing all these verses of Scripture, some say that the angel of the LORD is always a direct manifestation of God. However, some of the instances mentioned above do not support this view, and two of them actually contradict it. Others say the angel of the LORD is a manifestation of God in some instances and not in others. This second view seems to be consistent with the Scriptures.

A third view, however, is that the angel of the LORD is never the LORD but always a literal angel. To support this last view, one would emphasize that angels are mouthpieces, messengers, and agents of God. In other words, it is proper to say “the LORD said” or “the LORD did” even though He said or did something through the agency of an angel. Under this view, a description of an act by God in the account of an angelic appearance is simply a shorthand way of saying God acted through the angel. Since the biblical writers make clear at the beginning of the accounts that an angel was the direct agent, no ambiguity or discrepancy needs to exist. In this view, the people that acknowledged the visitation of God were either mistaken in their belief that they had seen God Himself, or more plausibly, they recognized that God was using an angel to speak to them and therefore addressed God through the angel. There is another way to reconcile this third view with verses of Scripture that identify the angel of the LORD with the LORD Himself: namely, the angel visibly appeared but the LORD was also invisibly present. Therefore, references to the

LORD acting or talking could mean literally the LORD and not the angel.

In summary, it is evident that the angel of the LORD in the Old Testament was not always God Himself. A person can plausibly argue that the angel of the LORD was never an actual theophany, but he cannot seriously contend that the angel of the LORD was always a theophany. The simplest explanation is that the phrase “the angel of the LORD” sometimes refers to a theophany of God but at other times denotes nothing more than an ordinary angel.

A trinitarian scholar summed up the predominant view as follows:

In the Old Testament the angel of the LORD might be only a messenger of God (the Hebrew word itself means messenger), distinct from God himself (2 Sam. 24:16), or he might be identified with the LORD himself speaking in the first person. . . . It is typical of Old Testament theophanies that God cannot be sharply drawn. . . . God is free to make his presence known, even while humans must be protected from his immediate presence.³

Melchizedek

Many regard Melchizedek as a theophany (Genesis 14:18). Hebrews 7:3 says he was without father, mother, and descent. This could mean that he was God in human form, or it could mean simply that his genealogical origin was not recorded. Hebrews 7:4

does call him a man. Regardless of whether one considers him to be an ordinary man or a theophany of God in the form of a man, he was a type or foreshadowing of Christ (Hebrews 7:1-17).

The Fourth Man in the Fire

One supposed theophany is the fourth man who appeared in the fire when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were cast into the furnace (Daniel 3:24-25). The heathen king Nebuchadnezzar said, "Lo, I see four men loose . . . and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25). However, in the original language (Aramaic) there is no definite article before *Son*; that is, there is no *the* before *Son* in this passage. The NIV and TAB render this phrase as "a son of the gods." The king was using heathen terminology and had no knowledge of the future arrival of the only begotten Son of God. Most likely the king saw an angel, for he described this manifestation as an "angel" (Daniel 3:28). It appears that the phrase "sons of God" can refer to angelic beings (Job 38:7). At the most, what Nebuchadnezzar saw could only be a temporary theophany of God. Certainly, this was not a view of the Son of God described in the New Testament, for the Son had not been born and the Sonship had not begun. (See chapter 5.)

Are There New Testament Theophanies?

The New Testament records no theophanies of God in human form outside of Jesus Christ. Of course,

Christ was more than a theophany; He was not just God appearing in the form of a man but He was God clothed with real and complete humanity. The angel of the Lord in Matthew 1:20, 2:13, 28:2 and Acts 8:26 seems to be an angel and nothing more; there is no evidence to the contrary. It is clear in these passages that the angel is not Jesus Christ. This fits in well with the conclusion that the angel of the LORD in the Old Testament was not always the LORD Himself. The only possible New Testament theophany is the dove at the baptism of Christ. (See chapter 7 for a full discussion of the dove and the special reason for its appearance.)

Why this lack of New Testament theophanies? The reason is that there is no need for them. God is fully expressed in Jesus Christ. Jesus fully declares and reveals the Father (John 1:18). Jesus is the express image of the invisible God, the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3).

Conclusion

In the Old Testament God chose to reveal aspects of His nature to humans through various theophanies. In the New Testament era, the progressive revelation of God through theophanies culminated and found perfect fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who is more than a theophany. This leads us to chapters 3 and 4 and to the great truth that Jesus is the one God of the Old Testament.

ENDNOTES
CHAPTER 2

¹*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged, 2198.

²James Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1890).

³William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 41-42.