

► **Understanding the Reading**

Find each word in the text. Based on the meaning in the text, write a definition for each word. Do not use a dictionary.

1. heresy (¶ 2)

2. immanence (¶ 3)

3. pantheism (¶ 3)

4. transcendence (¶ 4)

5. deism (¶ 4)

PART V: Theological Vocabulary

What Words Have Christians Used to Talk About God?

► **Pre-Reading**

1. Examine Figure 3.2 on the next page. Circle the terms that are new to you.
2. What are five adjectives used in paragraph 1 to describe God's greatness?

3. Scan paragraph 1, p. 103. Which words describe God's goodness?

► Reading

In this section we will examine the major categories of the attributes of God found in *Christian Theology* by Millard Erickson (1988).

Study the following theological vocabulary items:

- Underline the most important information about each theological concept.
- Write the words you need to remember on vocabulary cards or in your vocabulary notebook.
- You may refer to other theological resources to expand your understanding.

Greatness	Goodness
Spirit Life Person Infinitude <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Omnipotence • Eternity • Omnipresence • Omniscience Immutability	Moral Purity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holiness • Righteousness • Justice Integrity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuineness • Truth (Veracity) • Faithfulness Love <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benevolence • Grace • Mercy • Persistence

Figure 3.2: The Attributes of God

Category 1: Greatness

1 The God we worship is a great and awesome God. The psalmists and other biblical writers proclaim his greatness. We recognize his greatness for who he is in himself, as well as in his relationship with his people. Theologians speak of him as *absolute*. By this they mean that he is complete in himself, unlimited, and unrestricted by anything except his own nature. These attributes of God tell us about his greatness.

Spirit

2 The most basic aspect of God's greatness is the fact that he is spirit. He is like the wind which moves but cannot be seen. When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman beside Jacob's well, he said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). Jesus rejected the notion of the priority of a particular place to worship God because God is not the sort of being who can be limited to one location. Nor does he have the limitations that we have with a physical body.

Life

3 God's greatness is characterized also by life. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he identified himself as "I AM." This, his personal name by which he identified himself regularly in the Old Testament and to which Jesus himself referred, implies that he is the living and true God. Existence is his very nature, and he has always existed. He is also the source of life for all other living beings.

Person

4 The statement "God is spirit" could leave us with some vague notions of an influence of good, or an impersonal ideal or force.

Therefore, it is important to note that the Bible shows God as a personal being. Not only did he identify himself with a name, but we see him revealed as one who knows, wills, feels, and acts. He is to be treated as a personal being who is to be loved and valued not for what he does for us but for who he is.

Infinitude

(5) God is unlimited or infinite. He is infinite in his being and perfections. All finite objects have a location, are bound by time, and have only limited knowledge and power. In contrast, God is not limited by any of these things. We must note the unlimited nature of God in each of these areas.

(6) Omnipotence. We see God’s infinity in his power. He often refers to himself in Scripture as “God Almighty” (Gen 17:1). Jesus declared that “with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). God is able to do all that is proper to his nature. This characteristic of God is referred to as the omnipotence of God.

(7) Eternity. God is not limited by time. He is the one who always is: he was, he is, he will be. We may, therefore, describe God as eternal. Just as the Old Testament opens, “In the beginning God ...” we find similar wording and ideas in the New Testament. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1).

(11) God is exalted above all we can know or think. Yet he reveals himself as a personal being capable of fellowship with humans, one whom we can love and worship, and to whom we can pray knowing that he hears and answers.

(8) Omnipresence. God is equally present at all times and in all places and with all his creatures. Psalm 139 is an awesome expression of God’s presence everywhere. This characteristic of God gives us comfort, as the words of Hebrews 13:5 express: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

(9) Omniscience. In addition, God is in no way limited in his knowledge, understanding, and judgments. He not only knows all things but sees them in their proper perspective. He is, therefore, omniscient. He is not, however, a mere knowing spectator in human affairs. His omniscience cannot be separated from his omnipotence and omnipresence.

Immutability

(10) According to the testimony of Scripture, God never changes. He is not subject to any process of development. He can neither increase nor decrease. God’s nature does not change because he is already perfect. He is faithful to his promises, and we can entrust our souls to a faithful Creator (1 Pet 4:19). Speaking of Christ, the writer to the Hebrews insists that he is “the same, yesterday, today, and forever” (13:8). The unchanging character of God is often referred to as immutability.

► **Understanding the Reading**

1. In each blank, write the name of the attribute of God’s greatness that most closely matches the description given.

Example: God is the source of existence for all other living beings _____ life

1. God does not change. _____
2. God is all powerful. _____
3. God does not have a physical body. _____
4. God is unlimited in all areas and ways. _____
5. God is everywhere present at the same time. _____
6. God knows, thinks, feels, and decides. _____

7. God is without beginning or end. _____
8. God knows everything. _____
2. For each item,
- Read the verses listed.
 - Using the first letter of the word as a clue, fill in the blank with the attribute of God that is described in the verses. (For most items, the name of the attribute is not used in the Scripture references.)

Example: Psalm 102:26–27; James 1:17

I immutability

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| 1. John 4:24; Acts 17:24 | S _____ |
| 2. Jeremiah 32:17; Matthew 19:26; Psalm 147:5 | O _____ |
| 3. John 5:26; Exodus 3:14 | L _____ |
| 4. Romans 11:33; Hebrews 4:13 | O _____ |
| 5. Jeremiah 23:23–24; Psalm 139:7–12; Matthew 28:19–20 | O _____ |
| 6. Psalm 90:1–2; Revelation 1:8 | E _____ |
| 7. Exodus 3:14; Exodus 20:2 | P _____ |

► Reading (Continued)

Study the following theological vocabulary items:

- Underline the most important information about each theological concept.
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Category 2: Goodness

11 The God of the Bible is not only a God with qualities of greatness but one who is good, one who is loving and can be trusted. We can say that God’s goodness is characterized by his moral qualities, by his integrity, and by love.

Moral Purity

12 When we say that God is characterized by moral purity, we mean that he is absolutely free from anything that is evil or wicked.

13 **Holiness.** God is holy and there is none in all creation like him. The song of Moses and the children of Israel asked, “Who is like You—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Ex 15:11). As the holy God, he is perfect, pure, and separate from any kind of defilement. He is the standard for our moral character. To the children of Israel, he said, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy” (Lev 11:45).

14 **Righteousness.** As the God who is holy, he is the source and standard of what is right. His law is a true expression of his

nature and is as perfect as he is. Psalm 19:7–9 implies that God commands only what is right and good for those who follow him. Righteousness involves a way of living and thinking that is in harmony with God’s nature and standards.

15 **Justice.** Just as God himself acts in conformity with his law, so he administers his kingdom in the same way. Because God controls his universe in accordance with his nature, that which he ordains and permits is fair. In spite of seeming inequalities, the teaching of the Bible is that God is just and will vindicate his dealings with humanity. He does not show partiality or favoritism. And we are to treat others in this same way.

Integrity

❶ There are three attributes of God which are classified as integrity and which refer to the matter of truth. Jesus, the Son of God himself, said, “I am ... the truth” (Jn 14:6).

❷ **Genuineness.** The God of Israel, in contrast to all the false claimants to deity, is the true God. It was during the exile that Israel was finally cleansed of its attraction to idolatry and took seriously the command to have no other gods. He is the true and only God, and there is no other. And he is what he appears to be. “The LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King” (Jer 10:10).

❸ **Truth (Veracity).** The God of Israel is not only the true God; he is truthful. He represents things as they really are. Anything else, lying or any other kind of falsehood, is contrary to his nature. In Titus 1:2 the apostle Paul describes God as the one “who does not lie.” Those who are his people are to reflect his character by being truthful in what they say and even imply.

❹ **Faithfulness.** The God who is genuinely true and who tells the truth also proves himself to be true by his faithfulness. That God keeps all his promises is shown throughout Scripture. Even when his people have sinned and he sends punishment, God remains dependable, faithful. It was in just such a situation that the biblical writer said, “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:21–23). His people are to reflect the quality of faithfulness in their relations with others.

❺ God himself is the source of all goodness. Throughout the Scriptures his goodness is displayed in his nature and actions. 1 John explicitly speaks of God’s love both as a quality of his nature—“God is love” (4:8)—and as manifested in his actions—“This is love ... that [God] loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10). The same qualities of goodness that are in God’s nature are to be reflected in the lives of his people.

Love

❶ God’s very nature is defined as love by the apostle John. “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love ... And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). How is God’s love characterized?

❷ **Benevolence.** God is a benevolent God who is concerned for the welfare of those he loves. His benevolence is seen in his care of the whole human race, even of all his creation. It is seen most clearly and supremely in his initiative to provide salvation through Jesus Christ.

❸ **Grace.** We see and experience God’s love through his attribute of grace. He deals with his people on the basis of his own goodness and generosity, not on the basis of human merit. Both the Old and New Testaments resound with descriptions of a gracious and merciful God.

❹ **Mercy.** God’s mercy is shown in his compassion for those with both physical and spiritual needs, regardless of what they deserve. The word is used to speak of kindness and help given by the stronger to the weaker because of a special relationship. God, the stronger, shows mercy to his people, the weaker, because of the covenant into which he has entered with them to be their God and they his people.

❺ **Persistence.** We see God’s love in his persistence. His patience or long-suffering was apparent with Israel and continues to be so with us. For God “is patient ... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The Bible often characterizes this attribute of God by describing him as “slow to anger.” He is willing to postpone deserved judgment.

► Understanding the Reading

1. In each blank, write the name of the attribute of God's goodness that most closely matches the description given.

Example: God does not lie.

truth, veracity

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|---|-------|
| 1. God gives his love as a free gift to those who do not deserve it. | _____ |
| 2. God is the true and only God. | _____ |
| 3. God is concerned about the well-being of all people. | _____ |
| 4. God is patient and is willing to postpone deserved judgment. | _____ |
| 5. God is pure and without sin. | _____ |
| 6. God keeps his promises. | _____ |
| 7. God is the standard for right living. | _____ |
| 8. God treats all people with fairness, according to his perfect law. | _____ |
| 9. God shows kindness—both physical and spiritual—to those who recognize their need of him. | _____ |

2. For each item,

- Read the verses listed.
- Using the first letter of the word as a clue, fill in the blank with the attribute of God that is described in the verses.

Example: Matthew 5:45; Deuteronomy 7:7–8

B enevolence

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| 1. Psalm 7:17; Romans 3:21–22 | R _____ |
| 2. Jeremiah 3:12; Romans 12:1 | M _____ |
| 3. Psalm 86:15; 2 Peter 3:15 | P _____ |
| 4. Deuteronomy 32:4; Romans 3:25–26 | J _____ |
| 5. Leviticus 11:44–45; 1 Peter 1:15–16 | H _____ |
| 6. Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:24 | F _____ |
| 7. Jeremiah 10:10; John 17:3 | G _____ |
| 8. Psalm 57:10; Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:8, 16 | L _____ |
| 9. Exodus 34:6; Ephesians 2:8–9 | G _____ |
| 10. 1 Samuel 15:29; Titus 1:2 | V _____ |