

The Names and Attributes of God

By Jay Rogers

Who is God?

It is hard to imagine a more profound and important question. It is a question that leads to many more questions.

*What is God like? How does he exist?
Can we know absolute truth? Or is truth relative?*

These are important questions because the correct answers determine who is a Christian and who is not. Simply, we have eternal life only because we know God. And if we know God, then we know who He is and what He is like.

The fundamental importance of this question, “*Who is God?*” was driven into my heart in 1991 when I met young people in Moscow who had traveled from all over the former Soviet Union to attend a Christian youth conference. Some were from the Far East and had come half way around the world to be there! Many of the students had lived their whole lives in cities that had no evangelical churches. Many had never met true believers in Jesus Christ. The only churches they had ever seen were represented by buildings – the Russian Orthodox churches. For years, most churches had been sparsely attended, even in cities of millions of people, because of atheistic communism. Some students had come from cities in Siberia that were founded after the communist revolution. In some of these cities, there were no churches at all.

For the first time in my life, I met people who had never heard the name of Jesus Christ. They had come into adulthood never having thought much about God. In Soviet schools, God was presented as a primitive myth or superstition. Jesus Christ was presented as a historical person, the founder of a world religion. They did not believe in God because they had never heard nor read anything about Him. In order to preach the Gospel to these young people, they first had to understand the names and attributes of God.

It is hard for a Christian from the West to understand this, but most cultures in the world have not yet been influenced by Christianity. Belief in God dramatically colors our view of the world around us. There are billions of people in the world who either do not know God or have a false idea of God. In the East, people are likely to be influenced by Monism or Eastern mysticism in their idea of divinity. In the West, the average person has become infected by an anti-Christian modernist view. Westerners tend to think of “God” in terms of deism, rationalism, nihilism, or existentialism. Modern philosophy denies the objective reality of God and declares truth and morality to be relative and subject to our personal understanding. Thus God is falsely created in man's own image.

All the philosophies of mankind ask the same obvious questions about reality. Did something or someone exist before the creation of the universe? In the beginning of time, was there a prime reality, a great uncaused first cause? How did man come to exist in the universe? What is man? How do we know we exist? How do we know what is real? What happens to us after we die? Is there an absolute difference between right and wrong? Where is history taking us?

Man's philosophies have proposed many interesting arguments and solutions, but most conclude that ultimately we can never know for sure the answers to these questions. Modern philosophy teaches that God is unknowable; there are no absolutes; reality is a matter of individual perception. Without realizing it, most people in the modern world have picked up this relativistic philosophy. They are uncritical, open-minded, accepting of every idea. Life is a process without meaning. There is no ultimate purpose in life. There are no absolutes.

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that the existence and character of God is knowable and unchanging. We can know God exists, who He is, and what He is like. Truth and morality are based on God's character and revealed in His eternal Word – the Bible.

When first I came to know God, I realized that He wasn't just a figment of my imagination, because He was nothing like what I imagined Him to be! When we first come to know God, we need to be reeducated as to who God is and what He is like. Here I will briefly relate the view of God presented by Christianity.

The Names of God

“Who is God?” To answer this question, it is logical to ask, “Who does God say He is?” For the answers, we must look to the Word of God. The Bible contains many names of God which give us an idea of His nature and character. God is the same in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew and Greek names of God in the Old and New Testaments are intimately related to His nature and character. His names, nature and character are forever unchanging.

This needs a little bit of explanation to the modern mind. In these days, when the majority of people assume God to be a vague, easy-going Benevolence, it is sometimes difficult for people to view the God of the Old Testament, Jehovah, the God of righteousness and moral perfection, as the same God of the New Testament, Jesus Christ, the God of love, who came physically to earth to live as a man and die for us so that our sins may be forgiven. But we see from the Hebrew and Greek names of the Old and New Testaments that He is the same God. We will see this further as we look at God's attributes.

Old Testament Names of God

'El or **'Elohim** – “God” or “Gods.” *'El* is used as a prefix to many other names of God. *'Elohim* is the plural name which indicates the Trinity. This is used when God swears an oath, makes a covenant, or calls things into being. It indicates the immutability and agreement of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

'Elyon – “Most High” God. This name points to God's exalted nature. He is a God who is to be revered, worshipped and feared. He is a strong and mighty God.

'El-Shaddai – “Almighty” God. This name stresses divine greatness, but also indicates power over nature for the good of man or “Providence.” The Almighty makes the powers of nature serve His purposes. This is a source of comfort and blessing for God's people. This name is often used to indicate that God is a loving Father who enters into relationship and friendship with His people.

'El-Olam – “Everlasting” God. This is a seldom used name, however, it indicates that God exists for all eternity. He is the God of all ages. The word *olam* has the sense of something “secret” or “hidden.” *Olam* is sometimes translated as “forever.” Hence the idea of God existing outside of time in a place man cannot fathom. Since God is forever, this indicates that He is all-patient and all-wise.

'Adonai – “Lord” God. He is the King, the Ruler and possessor of all creation. This name indicates that God is the controller and boss of His people. When we recognize God as Lord, we are giving up our rights. We are no longer our own. We are bound to do His will and obey His commandments.

Yahweh or Jehovah – “I AM” God. This is the greatest name of God, the one which was held most in reverence by God's people, Israel. This name indicates that He is the one and only true God. This name was first revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. God declared himself to be “I AM THAT I AM” because Moses wanted to tell the Egyptians what name the Hebrew God is called. This indicates to the pagan nations of the world, who worshipped many false gods, that Jehovah is the only true God who exists. In many translations of the Bible, the capital form, “LORD,” is used to indicate Jehovah.

Jehovah Sabaoth – “God of Hosts.” This is a common form of the name of God in the prophetic books of the Bible. This fuller form calls up a vision of the King of Glory surrounded by a host of angels. It is often used in the prophetic books to speak of a victorious God, the supreme King of heavenly hosts, who has triumphed over all His enemies.

Immanu'el or ***Emmanuel*** – “God with us.” The word is literally the Hebrew for “with us [is] God.” This name is only used twice in the Old Testament (Isa. 7:14;8:10) and once in the New Testament (Matt. 1:23). It is used to prophesy the coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God as a man, or literally, God with us.

New Testament Names of God

Theos – “God.” This is the common Greek word for any pagan god, but in the New Testament, this form takes the place of *'El-Yisrael*, the “God of Israel” in the Old Testament. Most often it is used with a possessive pronoun, such as “my God,” “your God,” or “our God.”

Kurios – “Lord.” The name is applied to God and specifically Jesus Christ. *Kurios* takes the place of the Hebrew *Adonai* and *Jehovah*. God is the possessor and ruler of all things especially His people.

Pater – “Father.” The name Father is also used in the Old Testament to indicate that God is the Father of His people, Israel. In the New Testament, it points specifically to the first person of the Trinity, the Father of Jesus Christ. It also is used in the sense that God is the Father of individual believers who have been adopted into the family of God. Children of God have the legal rights of sons and daughters and may rightfully call God “our Father.” *Pater* is sometimes used to designate God the creator of all things.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit – The Trinity is mentioned throughout the New Testament to indicate the unity of the Godhead. The one true God of Israel, *'Elohim*, is the same as God the Father, God the Son Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit.

Scriptural passages that use these names are helpful to understand the context of the meanings. We can also see clearly how the Hebrew names of God in the Old Testament correspond to the Greek names of the New Testament.

The Attributes of God

According to the Bible, God is infinite, personal, Triune, transcendent, immanent, omniscient, sovereign, and holy. Here are some brief definitions of each of these attributes.

God is infinite – He is everywhere. He cannot be measured or understood by finite man. He called all reality into existence. The name, “I AM THAT I AM,” (Exodus 3:14) was given to man to indicate that God exists in a way that nothing and no one else can exist. God is the first cause of all things, the primary reality and the only self-existent being.

God is personal – We refer to God as *He* not *It*. He is not simply a force, energy or substance, but a person. God has a personality. God is self-conscious and self-willed. God thinks and acts.

God is Triune – He is not only personal, but actually three persons in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three “persons” or personalities who are neither three gods, nor three modes, parts or aspects of God, but coequally and coeternally one God. The *Trinity* may seem like a mysterious paradox to us, but it is important to understand God as a personal being in eternal relationship with Himself and with man. He is a God who we can know personally. To Christians, He is both our Father and Brother, and His Spirit lives within us.

God is transcendent – He is from another world outside our own. His nature is other-worldly. God is beyond our thinking and imagination. He cannot be represented by anything in our world. He is not like man or anything else He created. He is above all.

God is immanent – He is also with us. God is everywhere. We can sense His presence all around us. God is present in our material world and reflected in the image of man. This may seem to be a contradiction to His transcendence, but God is spiritual and not material. He is with us in a way we do not understand. God is above all things, and at the same time He is in all things sustaining the whole universe.

God is omniscient – He is all-knowing. God sees the beginning and end of history and fathoms all eternity. God is the ultimate source of all knowledge and truth. All truth is God's truth no matter where it is found. He knew us as individuals, before time began, when we were being formed in the womb, he foreknows all the circumstances of our lives, the time and manner of our death, and where we will spend eternity.

God is sovereign – He is all-powerful. This is a further aspect of God's infinite nature. God rules over the whole universe and is able to give attention to all details of history. All specific events in the entire universe are under his control. All creation and history are under His authority.

God is love – He is benevolent and good. God's ultimate purpose towards man and all creation is to favor us and draw us into a loving relationship with Him. He makes the ultimate sacrifice to make this love relationship possible. All His actions towards His people are motivated by this love.

God is holy – He is absolute righteousness. There is nothing evil in Him. He is compared to pure light, which darkness cannot overcome. Holiness is the greatest and all-encompassing attribute of His character. Because God is infinite, it is impossible for one attribute to be greater than another. However, God's holiness encompasses all His other attributes. He is holy God, holy love, holy sovereign, holy grace, holy Trinity, etc. He is holy in everything He is and does.

Further definitions of God may be given. The Bible gives many names and attributes of God. Since God is infinite, we will never have complete knowledge of Him in this life. But there have been some adequate and succinct statements that adequately cover the names and attributes of God. One of these is found in chapter two of the Westminster Confession:

“There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory, most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty.

“God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them; he is the alone foundation of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature; so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.”

“In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”