

# We Believe in God

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## Study Guide

LESSON  
THREE

## HOW GOD IS LIKE US



THIRD MILLENNIUM

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## HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video lesson. If you do not have access to the video, the study guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the lesson and study guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

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- **Before you watch the lesson**
  - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
  - **Schedule viewing** — In the Notes section of the study guide, the lesson has been divided into sections that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
  - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the study guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each section and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
  - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
  - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
  - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
  - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

## Notes

### I. Introduction (0:20)

Divine attributes: The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations.

- Incommunicable attributes – the perfections of his essence that make him utterly different from his creation.
- Communicable attributes – the perfections of his essence that are similar to qualities of his creation.

### II. Biblical Foundations (2:34)

#### A. Basic Strategies (4:02)

Three formal strategies medieval Scholastic theologians used for discerning truths about God from nature:

- “the way of negation” (*via negationis*)
- “the way of causation” (*via causalitatis*)
- “the way of eminence” (*via eminentiae*)

Protestants have also emphasized that we need the guidance of special revelation in Scripture to clarify God's disclosures of himself.

**1. Way of Negation (7:34)**

Biblical authors inferred truths about God by contrasting him with creation.

We can't begin to see how God is like us without first realizing how entirely different from us he is.

**2. Way of Causation (9:05)**

Biblical authors discerned how God is like us by comparing him with the good things he's made.

They inferred what must be true about God by noting the good qualities he bestowed on his creation.

Two ways Scripture uses the way of causation:

- direct comparisons

God who:

- "fashioned the ear" and "formed the eye" – can hear and see (Psalm 94:9)

- creates beauty – is beautiful
  - creates order – is orderly
  - gives life – is living
- figurative comparisons

God as:

- a "fire" or "flame" – will "burn and consume" (Isaiah 10:17)
- a "rock," "fortress," "shield," "horn," "stronghold" – will protect against foes (Psalm 18:2)
- an "eagle" – will "hover over [his] young" (Deuteronomy 32:10-11) and "cover ... with his feathers" (Psalm 91:4)

### 3. Way of Eminence (14:28)

Biblical authors noted how God is far greater than anything he has made.

God is similar to human rulers in many ways but he is the “*only* Ruler,” the “King of kings” and the “Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15-16).

The way of eminence in Scripture helps us to remember that God is superior to us, even as he is like us.

## **B. Outlooks on Humanity (17:05)**

The Scriptures teach that human beings are the crown of God's creation (Psalm 8:3-5; Hebrews 2:5-9).

Human beings are the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26).

God calls and equips those whom Christ has redeemed to turn from their sin and be renewed in his likeness (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9; Ephesians 4:22-24).

Scripture frequently reveals who God is by comparing him with human beings:

- Father (Matthew 7:11)
- a gardener (Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1)
- a king (Numbers 23:21; 1 Timothy 1:17)
- a shepherd (Genesis 48:15; Hebrews 13:20)
- a husband (Isaiah 54:5)

Three characteristics theologians have used to compare humans to God:

- intellectual character – humans are intellectually superior to other earthly creatures.

God's mind is far greater than the human mind, but he thinks, plans and reasons, much like we do.

- volitional character – God has endowed us with the ability to make choices.

God's will is far superior to ours, but our ability to exercise our will still makes us like God.

- moral character – our thoughts and choices have moral qualities.

God's moral character is utterly perfect, but human beings are still held responsible for the moral qualities of the choices they make.

### **III. Theological Outlooks (25:48)**

#### **A. Processes (26:52)**

The Bible never gives us a complete, authoritative list of God's attributes, and it never methodically defines or explains them.



Two examples of processes systematic theologians have used to synthesize God's attributes:

**1. Technical Terms (28:21)**

To create faithful syntheses of biblical teachings about God's attributes, theologians have adopted technical terms.

Theologians do not all use the same technical terms in the same ways.

The goal of evangelical systematic theology is to create faithful summaries of the *concepts* of Scripture, not to mimic the diverse vocabulary of Scripture.

**2. Theological Propositions (31:12)**

Theological proposition – a sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim.

Systematic theologians have had to infer theological propositions of God's attributes from every biblical genre:

- Straightforward propositions:
  - "the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8)
  - "God is love" (1 John 4:8)
  
- Descriptions of God:
  - "the Holy One" (Isaiah 1:4) – therefore, "God is holy."
  - "the faithful God" (Deuteronomy 7:9) – therefore, "God is faithful."
  
- Inferred propositions from biblical narrative:
  - account of creation (Genesis 2) – therefore, "God is powerful," "wise," and "good."
  - Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) – therefore, "God is holy," "merciful," and "just."
  
- Figures of speech (metaphors, similes, analogies):
  - God as "father" (Psalm 89:26; Isaiah 64:8) – therefore, "God is good."

- Poetic comparisons:
  - God as "warrior" (Psalm 24:8; Exodus 15:3; Joshua 23:10) – therefore, "God is powerful."
  - God is "light" (Psalm 118:27; 1 John 1:5) – therefore, "God is morally pure."

## **B. Historical Documents (37:30)**

### **1. Augsburg Confession (38:24)**

*"There is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness" (Article 1).*

Power, wisdom, and goodness are commonly identified as communicable attributes — ways in which God is like his creation.

Scripture tells us God endowed creation with each of these perfections, but on a smaller scale:

- power – Psalm 68:34-35
- wisdom – Daniel 2:20-21
- goodness – Psalm 119:68; 2 Peter 1:3-5

## 2. **Belgic Confession (40:21)**

*"There is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ... he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good" (Article 1).*

Both confessions are similar but the *Belgic Confession* adds "just" or "righteous" to God's attributes.

God is righteous (Psalm 7:9), and human beings can be righteous on a creaturely scale (Hosea 12:6; 2 Timothy 3:16).

## 3. **Westminster Shorter Catechism (42:10)**

*"God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth" (Question 4).*

The *Catechism* includes the attributes listed in both confessions but adds:

- "being" – the being or existence of creation is dependent on, but similar to, God's being (Genesis 1:1; John 1:3).
- "holiness" – God's holiness is reflected in various aspects of creation (Ephesians 4:24).
- "truth" – truth or "faithfulness" is also granted to human beings (Psalm 25:5).

These documents don't include every communicable attribute that theologians have assigned to God, such as:

- knowledge (Colossians 1:10)
- mercy (Luke 6:36)
- love (Deuteronomy 7:9)

### C. **Organization (45:45)**

The biblical focus on the similarities between God and humanity has been crucial to organizing God's communicable attributes.

Three main ways that human beings are uniquely like God (as noted in three historical documents):

- intellectual attributes
  - Augsburg Confession ("wisdom")
  - Belgic Confession ("wise")
  - Westminster Shorter Catechism ("wisdom")
  - Individual theologians ("knowledge")
- volitional attributes
  - Augsburg Confession ("power")
  - Belgic Confession ("mighty")
  - Westminster Shorter Catechism ("power")
  - Individual theologians ("sovereignty ")
- moral attributes
  - Augsburg Confession ("goodness")
  - Belgic Confession ("just", "righteous," "good")
  - Westminster Shorter Catechism ("holiness," "justice", "goodness," "truth")
  - Individual theologians ("mercy," "love")

There is remarkable unity in evangelical systematic theology over what should be considered a communicable attribute of God.

## **D. Implications (51:46)**

### **1. Expectations of God (52:10)**

To have biblical expectations of God, we need to keep in mind the distinction between his attributes and his historical manifestations.

- attributes – God's qualities without limits, unbound by time and free of all variation.
  
- historical manifestations – when God displays his attributes while engaging his finite, temporal and changing creation.

This distinction is true of all three traditional categories of communicable attributes.

- Intellectual:
  - God is always all-knowing and wise (attributes).
  - God manifests his knowledge plainly, and at other times he does not (historical manifestations).

- Volitional:
  - God is always powerful (attributes).
  - God sometimes displays great power and at other times does not (historical manifestations).
  
- Moral:
  - God is always good, holy, just, true, loving, merciful, gracious (attributes).
  - Sometimes his goodness is plain to see; sometimes it is difficult to discern (historical manifestations).

## 2. **Imitation of God (57:53)**

The Scriptures call us to imitate God's communicable attributes. For example:

- Jesus told his disciples to imitate the mercy of God (Luke 6:36).
- Paul instructed his readers to imitate God's goodness (Ephesians 4:32).
- Peter called his audience to imitate God's holiness (1 Peter 1:15-16).

We're to conform our minds to the mind of God; our wills to the will of God; our moral character to the moral character of God.

God's faithful people must learn to imitate God in the light of all that he has commanded in Scripture.

We submit ourselves to Scripture knowing that the Holy Spirit is preparing us for the day when we will be fully conformed to Christ (1 John 3:2-3).

#### **IV. Conclusion (1:03:53)**









## Application Questions

1. What have you learned about God's character as he has revealed it through his creation?
2. Scripture serves as eyeglasses to enable us to see God's character. Choose two narratives, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, that you find most striking in their display of God's character. Why do these two narratives resonate with you?
3. How does it encourage you in your Christian walk to know that we can become more like God in his communicable attributes? How does it challenge you?
4. Choose one of God's communicable attributes identified in the lesson. Find texts in the Bible where Jesus exhibits this quality. With Jesus' example in mind, consider how this particular attribute should impact your life and ministry. If time permits, repeat this exercise with each of the communicable attributes listed in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.
5. Because we are all created in God's image, John Calvin noted in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that we cannot know ourselves until we know God. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.
6. How can studying God's communicable attributes help us understand and apply the theological propositions found in Scripture to our lives today?
7. What role should historical documents like the Westminster Shorter Catechism play in our ministries and worship services?
8. Is it right for followers of God to expect things from him? Explain your answer.
9. What is the difference between God's attributes and his historical manifestations? How does this distinction help us avoid creating false expectations of God?
10. Scripture calls us to conform our minds to the mind of God, our wills to the will of God, and our moral character to the moral character of God. Give some examples of how we can imitate God in these ways in a variety of circumstances.
11. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?

## Glossary

**Augsburg Confession** – The foremost confession of faith of the Lutheran church written by German Reformer Philipp Melancthon; first presented on June 25, 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg

**Belgic Confession** – Confession of faith written by Reformer Guido de Brès in 1561 in the Netherlands; one of the doctrinal standards of the Reformed Church

**Calvin, John** – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

**communicable attributes** – Characteristics of God that can be communicated to his creation in some measure (e.g., wisdom, power, goodness)

**divine attributes** – The perfections of God’s essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations

**First Cause** – Theological term for God as the Creator and ultimate cause behind everything that happens in history

**historical manifestations** – The ways God involved himself with the unfolding of biblical history

**incommunicable attributes** – Characteristics of God that cannot be communicated to man (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity)

**sovereignty** – Theological term that refers to God's continuing rule and complete authority over all creation

**theological proposition** – An indicative sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim

**via causalitatis** – Latin phrase for "way of causation," meaning to learn about God by observing the good things he has created; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

**via eminentiae** – Latin phrase for "the way of eminence," meaning to learn about God by noting how God is greater than his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

**via negationis** – Latin phrase for "the way of negation," meaning to learn about God by contrasting him with his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

**Westminster Shorter Catechism** – A traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, originally published in 1647