

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

## The Transcendence & Immanence of God

### Lesson #13

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The doctrines of transcendence and immanence are probably best taught together as they are made clear by contrast. When taught separately it is easy to form a lopsided view of God. Both the immanence and transcendence of God are closely related to other doctrines. For instance, the "knowability of God" presupposes the immanence of God. If God was not immanent He would not be knowable. Immanence and transcendence are not attributes of God but define His relationship to His creation in general and to us in specific. Therefore, it is important to understand both the transcendence and immanence of God if we are to understand how God relates to and differs from us.

#### I. DEFINITION OF IMMANENCE OF GOD

A. Millard Erickson defines God's immanence as,

"God's presence and activity within nature, human nature, and history."<sup>1</sup>

B. Paul Enns defines God's immanence saying,

"The contrast to transcendence. God condescends to enter into personal fellowship and live with those who have repented of their sins and trusted His Son for their salvation."<sup>2</sup>

#### II. DEFINITION OF TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

A. Millard Erickson defines God's transcendence saying,

"God is separate and independent of nature and Humanity."<sup>3</sup>

B. Louis Berkhof says transcendence is,

"That perfection of the Divine Being by which He transcends all spatial limitations, and yet is present in every point of space with His whole Being."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson *Christian Theology*, pg. 302.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, pg. 637.

<sup>3</sup> Millard J. Erickson *Christian Theology*, pg. 312.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof *Systematic Theology*, pg. 60. It should be noted that Berkhof defines the immensity of God as the transcendence of God, so both are essentially the same thing. He points out that "immensity" differs from "omnipresence" in that "immensity" declares that God transcends all space and is not limited to it, and "omnipresence" denotes that God, nevertheless, fills every part of space with His entire Being.

### III. DEFINITION OF IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

Millard Erickson contrasts both transcendence and immanence saying,

"[Transcendence and immanence] . . . refer to God's relationship to the created world. We do not have in mind here God's specific actions with respect to the universe, but rather his status in relationship to it, that is the degree to which he is present and active within the universe (immanence) as opposed to being absent and removed from it (transcendence). . . Immanence and transcendence should not be regarded as attributes of God. Rather, these concepts cut across the various attributes of God's greatness and goodness. . . .in general, transcendence and immanence should be regarded as indications of how God, in all of his attributes, relates to the world."<sup>5</sup>

### IV. ILLUSTRATIONS OF GOD'S IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

- A. Millard Erickson, commenting on Soren Kierkegaard's "dimensional beyondness" (see comment in box below) used this illustration to describe God's transcendence and immanence.

"God is in the same place we are, yet he is not accessible to us in a simple way, for he is in a different dimension. He is on a different level or in a different realm of reality. The many sounds within a given room can serve here as an example. Most of them are inaudible to the normal sense of hearing. If, however, we introduce a radio receiver and tune it across the frequencies of the dial, we soon discover a vast variety of sounds. All of those radio waves were immanent within the room, but in frequencies unheard by the unaided human ear. In like manner, God is near to us; his presence and influence are everywhere. Yet because he is in a spiritual realm of reality, we cannot get from ourselves to him by mere geographical locomotion. It requires a change of state to make that transition, a change which usually involves death. Thus, God can be near, so very near, and yet be afar off as well."<sup>6</sup>

Soren Kierkegaard developed the phrase, "the dimensional beyondness of God," to describe the fact that God exists in a different dimension than we do. Kierkegaard believed God is close to us but not readily accessible to us, because He exists in a different dimension. *Soren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pg. 369.*

- B. A. W. Tozer illustrated the Transcendence of God this way:

We must not think of God as highest in an ascending order of beings, starting with the single cell and going on up from the fish to the bird to the animal to man to angel to cherub to God. This would be to grant God eminence, even pre-

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5 Millard J. Erickson *Christian Theology*, pgs. 301-302.

6 Ibid., pg. 316.

eminence, but that is not enough; we must grant Him transcendence in the fullest meaning of that word. Forever God stands apart, in light unapproachable. He is as high above an archangel as above a caterpillar, for the gulf that separates the archangel from the caterpillar is but finite, while the gulf between God and the archangel is infinite. The caterpillar and the archangel, though far removed from each other in the scale of created things, are nevertheless one in that they are alike created. They both belong in the category of that-which-is-not-God and are separated from God by infinitude itself.<sup>7</sup>

C. Louis Berkhof illustrated the transcendence of God this way:

“We distinguish three modes of presence in space. Bodies are in space circumscriptively, because they are bounded by it; finite spirits are in space definitely, since they are not everywhere, but only in a certain definite place; and in distinction from these God is in space repletively, because He fills all space. He is not absent from any part of it, nor more present in one part than in another.”<sup>8</sup>

## V. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR GOD’S IMMANENCE

- A. Jer. 23:23-24 -- “Am I a God who is near,” declares the Lord, “And not a God far off? 24 “Can a man hide himself in hiding places So I do not see him?” declares the Lord. “Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” declares the Lord.”
- B. Psa. 139:1-15 – “O Lord, You have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. 3 You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O Lord, You know it all. 5 You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it. 7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. 9 If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, 10 Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me. 11 If I say, “Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night,” 12 Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You. 13 For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. 14 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.”

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<sup>7</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pg. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 60-61.

- C. Acts 17:27-28 – “. . .that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’”
- D. Rom. 1:20 – “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

## VI. **SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR GOD’S TRANSCENDENCE**

- A. Job 11:7-9 -- “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? 8 “They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? 9 “Its measure is longer than the earth And broader than the sea.
- B. Isa. 55:8-9 -- “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. 9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.
- C. John 8:23-24 – “And He was saying to them, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. 24 “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.”
- D. Rom. 11:33-36 – “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? 35 Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

## VII. **SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR BOTH GOD’S IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE**

- A. Psa. 113:4-9 – “The Lord is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. 5 Who is like the Lord our God, Who is enthroned on high, 6 Who humbles Himself to behold The things that are in heaven and in the earth? 7 He raises the poor from the dust And lifts the needy from the ash heap, 8 To make them sit with princes, With the princes of His people. 9 He makes the barren woman abide in the house As a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord!”
- B. Isa. 57:15 – “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.”

- C. Eph. 4:6 – “. . .one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

It is important to keep in mind that the transcendence of God says that God is apart or separate from His creation. This implies that God has no location but is beyond spatial parameters. Yet, the Bible often mentions God in specific locations. This paradox will be discussed under the omnipresence of God in another lesson.

### VIII. ERRORS CONCERNING THE IMMANENCE OF GOD

- A. Millard Erickson mentioned this error,

"Where immanence is over emphasized, we lose the conception of a personal God."<sup>9</sup>

- B. Error -- God is everything (pantheism) and is defined by His creation.
- C. Error – If you over emphasize God's immanence you blur the distinction between the work of God and the work of evil men and demons, making God the cause of evil.

"One way of understanding Pantheism is to remember that pantheism says creation minus God equals nothing and God minus creation equals nothing. The correct view of God says creation minus God equals nothing but God minus creation equals God in all of His fullness."  
*Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, pg. 303.*

### IX. ERRORS CONCERNING THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

- A. Erickson also points out this error,

"Where transcendence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of an active God."<sup>10</sup>

- B. Error -- God is unknowable because He is only transcendent.
- C. Error -- God is so far off that He is absent and uninvolved in His creation.

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<sup>9</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 302.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pg. 302.

- D. Error -- Many have claimed to have direct and casual or even flippant encounters with the transcendent God. Consider what the Scriptures below teach us about those who have had real encounters with God.
1. Exod. 3:6 – “He said also, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”
  2. Isa. 6:1-5 – “In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”
  3. Ezek. 1:28 – “As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.”
  4. Dan. 10:5-17 – “I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. 6 His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult. 7 Now I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, while the men who were with me did not see the vision; nevertheless, a great dread fell on them, and they ran away to hide themselves. 8 So I was left alone and saw this great vision; yet no strength was left in me, for my natural color turned to a deathly pallor, and I retained no strength. 9 But I heard the sound of his words; and as soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground. 10 Then behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. 11 He said to me, “O Daniel, man of high esteem, understand the words that I am about to tell you and stand upright, for I have now been sent to you.” And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. 12 Then he said to me, “Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. 13 “But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia. 14 “Now I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision pertains to the days yet future.” 15 When he had spoken to me according to these words, I turned my face toward the

ground and became speechless. 16 And behold, one who resembled a human being was touching my lips; then I opened my mouth and spoke and said to him who was standing before me, "O my lord, as a result of the vision anguish has come upon me, and I have retained no strength. 17 "For how can such a servant of my lord talk with such as my lord? As for me, there remains just now no strength in me, nor has any breath been left in me."

5. Rev. 1:10-18 – "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. 14 His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades."

## X. APPLICATION OF THE IMMANENCE OF GOD

- A. God's immanence teaches us that He is near. He works His will in many ways. He is not limited to working through *direct* means to accomplish His perfect plan in your life. He may use persons, circumstances, weather, demons, and organizations to accomplish His will in your life.
- B. Because God's nature is revealed in creation (natural revelation), we should have an appreciation for all God has created because it reveals God to us (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20).
- C. Because God is near (immanent), we can always be sure that He hears our prayers, will never leave or forsake us, and is watching over us.
- D. God can be found by those who seek Him because He is immanent.

It is sobering to remember that when one seeks to know the immanent God, he will find God to be transcendent. When one begins to know the transcendent God, he begins to fear Him.



## XI. APPLICATION OF THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

- A. The Scriptures (special revelation) and creation (natural revelation) are two means by which we can know the transcendent God. Therefore, we should regularly read the Word of God and consider what creation teaches us about God, that we might know Him better.
  
- B. The fact that God is transcendent and yet saves sinners, reminds us that we are saved by grace, and not by works. There is no way a finite creature could come to know a transcendent God, apart from the grace of God. Mankind has no ability to reach the transcendent God apart from God's grace and condescension.
  
- C. Knowing God is transcendent reminds us that we can always know God better, that the study of God is an infinitely deep ocean whose depths can never be completely fathomed.
  
- D. Understanding the transcendent God should create a holy fear in us. Look at the texts below and consider the value of fearing the transcendent God.
  - 1. II Chron. 19:7 -- "Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe."
  - 2. Job 28:28 -- "And to man He said, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; And to depart from evil is understanding.'"
  - 3. Psa. 34:11 -- "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord."
  - 4. Psa. 111:10 -- "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever."
  - 5. Prov. 9:10 -- "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."
  - 6. Prov. 23:17 -- "Do not let your heart envy sinners, But live in the fear of the Lord always."
  - 7. Acts 9:31 -- "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase."



*How shall polluted morals dare  
To sing Thy glory or Thy grace?  
Beneath Thy feet we lie afar,  
And see but shadows of Thy face.*

Isaac Watts

*Lord of all being, throned afar,  
Thy glory flames from sun and star;  
center and soul of every sphere,  
Yet to each loving heart how near!  
Lord of all life, below, above,  
Whose light is truth, whose warmth is love,  
Before Thy ever-blazing throne  
We ask no luster of our own.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes