

God:

**Infinity
Illustrated
With Four Words**

Isaiah 59:17

By Lyle Ratzlaff

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Foreword

Many Christians have a favorite or “life” Bible verse. A number of years ago I stumbled upon Isaiah 59:17. I had read it many times during my life, but never had occasion to study it in depth until the late 90’s. It immediately became my favorite.

I am a firm believer that the Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture for the whole body of believers, known as the church, but I also am convinced that He will take individuals by the hand and show us truths from the Word that we need to hear.

That is not to say that He is in the habit of showing us something the world has never seen before. To quote a very famous writer, “*There is nothing new under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 1:9b). God simply wants us to know Him better, so that our walk, our relationship, with Him can grow and mature.

Understanding Scripture can be compared to learning mathematics. In math, we begin with the very basics of addition and subtraction. When those concepts are mastered, multiplication and division become center stage. From there we may add algebra, trigonometry, and geometry. Then it’s on to calculus, linear algebra, and differential equations. No one progresses from addition directly to differential equations without a few additional lessons along the way. The intermediate steps are necessary for comprehension of the advanced levels.

Bible study is quite similar. Many times, we must attain a certain level of spiritual maturity before we will be capable of grasping and accepting some of the more complex, or deep, teachings of God’s Word. Our natural condition is to take the easy road. But we are commanded to not just read the Word of God, but to study it as well. When the Holy Spirit deems us ready, He will show us and encourage the next step in our growth in Christ.

The writer of Hebrews explained it this way, *“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”* (Hebrews 5:11-14).

Isaiah 59:17 was one of those verses that I had read countless times, with no real exceptional interest or notation. Until one day...I guess God decided that I was ready, so He gave me a little nudge and I began a study of this gem of a verse.

Never doubt the depth of Scripture. We can dig as deep as we dare and never reach the bottom. God is beyond our complete comprehension. But contend, we must.

Our infinite God has displayed Himself to us in the Bible. All we need do is read and study it. Everything we need to know about Him is printed for all to see.

This little study of Isaiah 59:17 is not meant to be a definitive theological treatise or thesis. To describe God adequately would require a much larger volume. I consider it a finite glance at an infinite illustration.

God:

Infinity Illustrated With Four Words

*“He put on righteousness as His breastplate,
And the helmet of salvation on His head.
He put on the garments of vengeance,
And wrapped Himself in zeal as in a cloak.”*
Isaiah 59:17

Chapter One: Infinity Defined

On my bookshelf in my office sets my old Webster’s New World Dictionary, published in 1980. I am somewhat partial to the definitions contained therein. Webster’s defines “infinite” as: “lacking limits or bounds; extending beyond measure or comprehension; without beginning or end.”

For most of us, the mere mention of infinity redirects our attention towards the universe. We tend to equate the infinite with the grand scale that we see around us in the cosmos. Technology is consistently reinforcing our understanding that the heavens are without, and beyond, measure. God created a boundless universe as a hint to us of His character and attributes. They are as vast as anything else that our human minds may attempt to comprehend.

Infinity is an exceedingly challenging idea to grasp due to our human limitations. We make effort to compare the infinite to the only thing that we can readily identify with, the finite, and are disappointed when it simply cannot be done satisfactorily. We draw on generalities or vague comparisons to comprehend the incomprehensible, and then shrug our shoulders at the result, or lack thereof, and simply continue on with our lives.

But God is infinite in every aspect of His character and being. He possesses every excellence. And we would do honorably to understand Him as best we can. Scripture hints and encourages us toward the goal of comprehending the loving God who wants us to know Him better. It is an ambitious task, to be sure, but one that is well worth the effort and time (Psalm 8:3-4). Everything that we need to know and understand about God is contained in Scripture. Everything.

To grasp the height and breadth and depth of who God is, we must first understand that, on this side of Heaven, we will never achieve perfect appreciation for the entirety of the character of God. Our best efforts will consistently fall short of the mark. Unresolved questions will always linger and persist as long as we live on this earth (Isaiah 55:8-9).

But, having stated that simple fact, the Bible assures us of numerous things that we can recognize and embrace.

The concept can be reckoned as similar to finishing a diamond into its perfectly brilliant, sparkling state. Every diamond begins as a fairly non-descript chunk of mineral deposit, that, to the untrained eye, might go altogether unnoticed. But in the hands of a professional lapidary, the mineral can be analyzed and painstakingly studied. As the gemologist's work progresses, each facet of the gem is cleaned and polished, resulting in a brilliantly reflective and yet transparent face. Continuing to chip and polish additional facets contributes to bring the true beauty of the stone into perspective, and its genuine value can then be readily experienced by others.

When God first introduces Himself into our lives, we might understand that there is an inherent value in His presence. But it is only after we begin to recognize the individual "facets" of His character, that we truly see the absolute priceless beauty presented to us to encounter and enjoy.

As each character trait or attribute of God is discovered in Scripture, our understanding of Him deepens and our lives and our hearts begin to reflect His beauty. The ultimate result is that the process of learning to know Him will, indeed, change us. God has said, *“So is my Word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it”* (Isaiah 55:11).

Too often, our human tendency is to remain content with just a few “facets”, gazing upon them when we find the time or the need. We might even begin to feel complacent, cognizant that further advancement will require a disciplined study of the Word.

But as the brilliance of the glory of the character of God begins to refract and sparkle and dazzle our spiritual eyes, the moment convinces us that the endeavor was priceless.

Any attempt to describe or define God must originate as an unpretentious task. Care must be taken to make every effort to be as precise and thorough as possible. As we think about God and His infinite character, let’s begin by considering a few of the “fundamentals.”

God is infinitely “Self-existing”

God is without origin. Colossians 1:17 speaks of this fact. *“And He is before all things.”* God has always been. That is a difficult concept to grasp. We are so finite in our existence that we tend to define God down to our level, so that we can understand Him on our own terms. That is indeed a dangerous practice. God is above our thoughts and ideas (Isaiah 55:8-9) and has no need of our input or consideration (Psalm 50:8-15). We do Him a disservice when we “dumb things down” to our level. There will always be aspects of our infinite God that will remain just out of our reach and comprehension. But plenty within our grasp.

The name Jehovah, found in the original Hebrew texts of the Old Testament, occurs nearly 7,000 times in the Bible. It is the appellation chosen by God as His personal covenant name. At its root, the designation carries within itself a meaning that would be translated as “self-existing”.

Recall the Scriptural narrative surrounding the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Moses asked God who he should say sent him to the people of Israel. God’s response was a robust, *“Tell them ‘I AM THAT I AM’ has sent you”* (Exodus 3:14).

The Trinity has existed forever in impeccable harmony, perfectly joyful and complete. But God chose to step out of eternity past and eternity future. He created the universe, breathed life into a lump of clay, and placed mankind in the middle of it all. He then chose to reveal Himself to us, with the express intent to be with us. His name is Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23), “God with us.”

God is infinitely “unchanging”

God is immutable. *“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed”* Malachi 3:6. Who God is has never altered or diminished. In Him is no variance or even slight deviation. All of His attributes remain the same from eternity past through eternity future. His plans never change. His promises never change.

As Christians, we will find this attribute comforting. In an ever-changing world, filled with uncertainty and woe, we can be confident that our God is the same—always! Very little around us in the world is constant. This universe, running like clockwork on a perfectly balanced set of physical laws, has been broken by the curse of sin, caused by Adam’s failure in the Garden. It’s degradation and decline are an ever-present reminder that nothing in this universe is changeless, except God.

Our lives are filled with all kinds of instability in every aspect of our existence, making our embrace of immutability a bit foreign to our way of thinking. The infinite must sometimes simply be acknowledged as fact. And then accommodated, based solely on the concept that the Bible establishes the truth and therefore it is to be accepted without argument or doubt.

Our human nature is designed and engineered to respect unmoving, unchanging continuity. We long for that elusive commodity in our lives. It gives us security, in a very insecure world. Immutability markets well, even in the business world.

On the southern tip of Spain lies a promontory known to the ancient Romans as one of the Pillars of Hercules. Today, we would more commonly recognize it by its current name, “The Rock of Gibraltar”. This huge limestone monolith has stood the test of time and has earned its place as an image used by a large insurance company to reinforce its aspiration to be seen as solid and unchanging.

Their customers, as well as all the rest of us, respect and desire that attribute in anything that we encounter.

From where we stand in the historical narrative of the world, the reality of the immutability of God becomes paramount. If we serve a truly unchanging God, then the distance and difference of time between ourselves and the characters that we read about in the Bible, melts away. The God that they experienced, is exactly the same God that we embrace today.

As we face the perplexities of life, we can compare our God to the God of their day and know without any uncertainty, that He is as real today and as involved in the lives of His people now, as He was then.

But that thought brings a challenge to our hearts as well. An honest appraisal of their reaction to the impact of God upon their lives was to serve God with a fervor that generally stands in stark contrast to our complacency. How can we justify our lack of enthusiasm and zeal? If God is the same “*yesterday, today, and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8), can we do less than our predecessors?

God is infinitely “self-sufficient”

God has insufficiency of nothing. We humans are very “needy” beings. We need water, and food, and companionship, and...we need much. God does not. John 5:26 states, “*For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself*”.

One might venture down the path of asking the question, “Why did God create us? Did He require our presence for some reason?” Our self-sufficient God was not lonely and in a paucity of companionship. He was not unfulfilled and in need of a project or a purpose.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have complete, perfect joy and fulfillment in each other. We exist as a result of the expression of the love of God.

As human beings, we do not fulfill some deep-seated need of God. Rather, He fulfills a deep-seated need in us—that of relationship. His desire is that we experience a finite “dose” of His infinite character now, and infinitely so in Heaven.

God is infinitely “powerful”

The theological term for this attribute is omnipotence. One look at the enormity of creation gives us tremendous insight into the vast ability of God. Day four of the creation story found in Genesis states that God spoke all of the stars into place (Genesis 1:16).

Limitless billions of galaxies overspread our universe, each filled with billions of stars and planets and moons and asteroids and comets and probably as yet undiscovered things...and He casually reminds us of the fact that *‘He created the stars also.’* Almost as an afterthought, he mentions this incredible act of power and majesty. In Psalms 8:3, He refers to this moment as *“finger work”*.

He reminds us again in Job, *“Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above—what can you do? They are deeper than the depths below—what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea. If he comes along and confines you in prison and convenes a court, who can oppose him? Surely he recognizes deceivers; and when he sees evil, does he not take note?”* (Job 11:7-11).

Considering that kind of power may tend to make us a bit fearful at times. Knowing how insignificant we are in comparison to who He is, can be frightening. We must temper that view of God with the fact that He is good, and that, in His love, God is *“able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine”* (Ephesians 3:20). He will always act in accordance with His perfect character.

God is infinitely “all-knowing”

God is omniscient. *“Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please”* (Isaiah 46:9-10).

We stand in awe to consider a Being that possess the ability to know everything that can be known. Not only does God understand the physical realm around us, but He is personally familiar with our deepest thoughts hidden in the darkest recesses of our hearts. We cannot hide anything from Him.

A.W. Tozer said, “God perfectly knows Himself and, being the source and author of all things, it follows that He knows all that can be known. And this He knows instantly and with a fullness of perfection that includes every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time.”

In our world today we have the internet, a gigantic repository of information and knowledge. Accessed easily by our fingertips, we might identify with this “infinity” better than all of the others. We have at least a somewhat parallel example of extreme knowledge.

But again, God’s knowledge and understanding is infinitely beyond the sum total of all of the storage capacity on all of the servers located in all of the data centers that man might be able to construct. It can be comforting to meditate on this truth when we feel hurt, or alone, or even when we might be happy and joyful. Our God knows!

God is infinitely “everywhere”

God is omnipresent. *“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to Heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me”* (Psalm 139:7-10).

We are told in Scripture that God the Father is spirit (John 4:24). His presence in any place at any time is not necessarily the way we would be in any one place at any one time. We are corporeal and therefore limited to one place at one moment. He is not. It is extremely difficult for us to define and comprehend the term “spirit”. Our first thought is to try to apply physical dimensions to an invisible, immeasurable entity. That is obviously an impossible task.

As a child, I attempted to understand this concept from the basic theory that maybe God was somewhere in my vicinity, watching me and my actions. As if He had a physical presence that I simply could not see. But God's presence is far more pervasive and prevalent than we might ever imagine it to be.

At the sub-atomic level of physics, there is a defined and measured, but completely baffling force that science has aptly named "the strong force". It is one of the four fundamental forces of nature, the others being gravity, electromagnetism, and "the weak force." "The strong force" is responsible for binding together the fundamental particles of matter to form larger particles. As the name implies, it is an incredibly intense and robust force that science yearns to understand, but its mystery has not yet been solved.

I personally believe it is the fingerprint of God. Colossians 1:17 tells us that "*in Him, all things consist.*" That sounds remarkably like an answer to a very old physics question.

Our God is everywhere. From the remotest part of the universe, to deep in our hearts and thoughts, God is there. For the Christian, that can be a most comforting thought. We are never alone.

God is infinitely "good"

God is righteous. "*The Rock. His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He*" (Deuteronomy 32:4). God's perfection and righteousness is beyond our comprehension. Isaiah's response when he saw the purity and transcendence of Almighty God, was to cry out in despair, in recognition of how wretched a man he was when examined by the Divine standard (Isaiah 6:5).

We are told that the ancient rabbis would teach their students using a slate and chalk-like method of writing. As a treat for their students, they would at times write Psalm 34:8, using honey on the slate, and allow their students to lick the treat off. *“Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.”*

The psalmist invites us to not just believe that God is good, but to experience His goodness. God is perfect in every way. In Him is not even a speck of wrong or incorrect action or behavior. All that God does, has done, or will do, is beyond reproach in any way. By comparison, we are desperately wicked. We may not commit the most heinous of sins imaginable, but, if we are honest with ourselves, we possess the capability of committing, (or thinking), the most deplorable acts. In Jeremiah 17:9 we find this warning from God, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”*

God is infinitely “loving”

God is love. He is the exact definition of true love (I John 4:7-12). He loved us first, that we would have the opportunity to reciprocate that love toward Him. Not that He needs any acknowledgment in that regard, but that we may have the privilege of identifying with Him in a very personal way.

As Christians, we are to emulate the character of God. The entire Old Testament law can be summed up with a simple phrase: love God and love your neighbor. *One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* (Matthew 22:33-40).

The love of God described in Scripture is not some vague generality of affection or desire. It is specific and directed towards each of us. The Bible is replete with the idea that love is not a noun, but a verb. God's love toward us is manifested in action. His ultimate demonstration was to lay down His life for us as He went to the cross in an astonishing display of what perfect love looks like (John 15:13).

God does not need our affection, but He is deserving of it, and offers us the opportunity to enjoy Him in love.

As strange as it may sound initially, one of the attributes of our loving God is that He has allowed Himself to be emotionally invested in mankind. God experiences empathy. The shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35, focuses our attention on that very attribute. *Jesus wept.* It is one of the most poignant, touching examples of the love of God found in Scripture. The last tears are not wiped away until Revelation 21:4. *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* Not until the wrath of God has been satisfied and judgment meted out and everything set back in order, can the tears of a loving God be wiped away.

And His love for us has no beginning and no end. Psalm 136 affirms this fact probably better than any other place in Scripture. *"His love endures forever,"* is repeated no less than twenty-six times.

God is infinitely "holy"

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty" (Revelation 4:8). The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or merciful, merciful, merciful, or wrath, wrath, wrath. Of all that God is, He is sacred, and set apart, and divine above all else. Isaiah experienced the presence of God in a most remarkable way in Isaiah 6:1-5:

I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

His reaction to the absolute holiness that he saw before him, was to fall on his face in sheer terror of the majesty before him. He fully recognized his frailty and complete lack of any redeeming value before an Almighty God.

The holiness of God is beyond anything that our meager human thought might ever attempt to consider. Like Isaiah, we must fall on our faces in reverent, total abandon of any consideration of ourselves when we come face to face with the spectacle of who God is. We have record in Scripture of moments where this concept was ignored, with great consequences.

In I Samuel 4-6, we have the story of an enormous mistake on the part of Israel. They removed the Ark of the Covenant from the tabernacle and carried it with them into battle against the Philistines. Israel lost the battle that day and the Philistines captured the Ark and took it back to Ashdod, their capital city.

It soon became painfully apparent to the residents of Ashdod that the presence of that strange relic was the source of a devastating and debilitating disease. Their solution, conceived in absolute desperation, was to send it on to another city, Gath, where the hand of God was equally harsh upon those residents in horrendous judgment. So, in complete panic they passed it off to the Philistine city of Ekron, hoping for relief from the disease and pestilence God had inflicted upon them.

In sheer terror of the power of God that had been displayed in the previous two locations, the residents of Ekron refused entry into their city for this obviously dangerous spoil of war and, after some careful deliberation, chose to send it back to Israel with peace offerings in hopes that they might be able to avert the drastic physical illnesses accompanying the Ark.

They placed the Ark on a newly made cart hitched to two cows who had just calved, and pointed them toward Israel. Scripture states that the two cows calmly strolled along, straight to their intended destination, much to the relief of the watching Philistines and great joy of the people of Israel.

The cart carrying the Ark came to the town of Beth-shemesh, and in joy and celebration of its return to Israel, the people of the town cut up the cart and sacrificed the cows in praise to God.

But some of the people looked inside the Ark.

The King James version recounts that God put to death 50,070 men of that city for their irreverent act. The absolute holiness of God will not be diminished by the mistakes of mankind. God will always be holy, holy, holy.

One day in Heaven, when all has been made right and sin has been dealt with eternally, we will see and experience the blinding glory and holiness of our Maker. On that day, though, we will not die or suffer penalty, but will worship in pure appreciation and awe of who God is. What a day that will be!

Chapter Two: The Context

Prophecy maintains a steady audience. We will enthusiastically consider the message of anyone who claims, and proves, to accurately foretell future events. It is part of what has made the book of Isaiah such a historically respected portion of God's Word. An understanding of the immediate, as well as distant future, is a desire shared by everyone. Sponsor a symposium on eschatology in your church, and you will discover a greater audience than you may have ever seen before.

Much of the book of Isaiah is written in a poetic form. The original Hebrew is an astonishingly beautiful crafting of words and phrases that accurately relay the information God desired to communicate to the reader. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme like so many poems in our culture. The method used by the ancient authors to produce the lyrical intent of poetry, was to use words of contrast, similarity, or comparison to generate an attitude of thoughtfulness and response from someone reading the passages.

Warnings abound throughout the text, aimed at those nations who have failed God miserably. His message of doom and judgment is difficult to read at times. For those in His crosshairs, the predictions are dire. For others, like Israel, who have attempted to follow, but failed, and then repented, the passages speak of a time when they will again be ushered to a premier location on the world stage, and in God's heart.

The message of restoration of the nation of Israel has prompted many of Jewish descent to hold this manuscript in the highest regard and hope. Shortly after World War Two, archeologists stumbled upon numerous ancient scrolls in the caves near Qumran. The nearly 1,000 texts are commonly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is not a coincidence that the only Biblical text found in near perfect entirety among the Dead Sea Scrolls was the scroll of Isaiah.

In Jerusalem today, you can visit the Shrine of the Scroll and encounter a facsimile of that very scroll of Isaiah completely unrolled and visible. A subtle reminder that God is still wooing Israel to Himself and will bring the entire nation to salvation one day (Romans 11:26).

Isaiah finishes his book with praises to God for what will happen in the future. The last chapters are positive and generate hope and confidence in our hearts. We yearn for what God has planned for the end of time and beyond. He speaks with joyful anticipation of the restoration of Israel and their relationship with Himself for all of eternity. And the blessings that will mean for Israel, as well as the entire world (Romans 11:15).

But just prior to that refrain, is the fifty-ninth chapter.

Verse two begins by establishing a basic truth well known in our New Testament era: that our sin drives a separating wedge between us and the God that so desires a relationship with his children. *“But your iniquities have separated you from your God...”*

The following verses then amplify the warning of impending, catastrophic judgment upon anyone who resists God and His laws of morality and decency and love.

Fifteen verses into the chapter, the subject suddenly changes to a more positive note. Salvation becomes the center of discussion and concern. Do not miss the subtlety of how this passage develops to be “New Testament-like.” That is not a coincidence.

Sandwiched in between the condemnation and commitment we find verse seventeen. It is a “stand alone” thought in the original text with deep context and connection to our Christian walk today and our understanding of who God is.

We remember well Paul's epistle to the church at Ephesus. In the sixth chapter, he begins developing an analogy concerning what a Christian should put on when getting ready to face the world. He mentions the belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness, as well as the sword of the Spirit, among other things. He is talking of spiritual warfare and its reality and effect on us as Christians as we walk this earth. Countless sermons have been delivered, centered upon the truth found in Ephesians 6:8-10.

Few are aware that Paul actually borrowed that analogy from an Old Testament passage. Isaiah first introduced the parallel in his prophecy in chapter fifty-nine, not to describe what a believer or follower of God should wear, but from the thought of what God wears. No other verse is as concisely comprehensive in scope as is this poetic stanza describing God and His majesty.

In one verse, thirteen words in the original Hebrew text, God reveals to Isaiah a most unique description of Himself that rivals anything else found in Scripture. In four pieces of clothing, four words, really, God defines the foundational aspects of who He is in a way that is found nowhere else in the Bible.

Isaiah 59:17 may be the most noteworthy verse encountered in Scripture, and, unfortunately, also the most unknown and unrecognized. In our human nature, our usual attitude is to see ourselves as the center of attention, and the most important consideration at hand. The truth is that the magnificence of God is always center stage and should be our focus. We are but a miniscule aspect of consideration compared to Him.

The theme of the Bible can be accurately described as "God's plan for the redemption of man." But we must remind ourselves that the most important word in that phrase is "God" and not "man." This work is an effort to ameliorate that issue.

Chapter Three: Why This Verse?

Consider concrete for just a moment. Used commonly in construction projects of all kinds, our casual familiarity with this substance generally garners little, if any, analysis. Most people would tend to look at a concrete sidewalk and simply agree that it is solid, smooth, and quite walkable. Consensus concerning its surface texture, color, and thickness could be achieved with little argument. Little children may attempt to traverse a section of sidewalk, avoiding stepping on any apparent cracks. On occasion, we might even find a scrawled signature that someone added while the mixture was still wet and soft.

Pursuing this analogy a bit further, our attempt to characterize and illustrate God is much like contemplating that sidewalk. A concrete sidewalk has at its core foundational particularity: sand, gravel, cement, and reinforcement steel. It is those key fundamental elements that form the basis upon which all other observation depends.

It is difficult to describe the technical and structural aspects of concrete without referencing its integral makeup first. The ratios of sand, gravel, and cement are paramount to determining strength and durability. Added metal reinforcement gives the slab the flexion it needs to avoid cracking and crumbling under stress.

Those key ingredients can each be analyzed for their makeup and technical condition, but with the understanding that when placed in the cement mixer, they blend in harmony. Once set and cured, they form what we affirm to be a concrete sidewalk.

God's attributes, His character, can be defined and studied in much the same way. I believe Isaiah 59:17 illustrates for us the four key foundational elements upon which the entire library of God's personality, traits, and nature stand.

Isaiah describes for us, the “sand, gravel, cement, and steel reinforcement” of who God is. We are introduced to righteousness, salvation, vengeance, and zeal. That simple concept makes this verse unique in all of Scripture.

Any attempt to isolate the elements of God’s character is a limited endeavor. We can determine their individuality to a degree, but they all work so entwined and simultaneously, that the definitions and explanations overlap significantly.

The enormity and complexity of God is beyond our full comprehension. In Genesis 1:28, God commanded man to “*fill the earth and subdue it.*” Humans beings are imbued with a God-given desire to ascertain, to understand, to comprehend, that which is placed in front of them. It is entirely within our nature to gather up our finite tools of discovery and explore the infinite before us.

And explore, we will. It is our highest calling to know God and His character and attributes. It is out of that knowledge that all of our behavior and belief follows. Jeremiah 9:23: *‘Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, **that he understandeth and knoweth me**’* (emphasis mine).

I fear that in our churches today, God is all too often not the center of our focus. We become distracted with our programs and social agendas, and miss the God of the Bible. God desires that we know Him and develop a relationship with Him. Emmanuel, God with us, has an expressed desire that we continue to walk closely with Him always. “*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8).

A. W. Pink wrote: “The god of this century no more resembles the Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The god who is talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday school, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible conferences, is a figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. The heathen outside the pale of Christendom form gods of wood and stone, while millions of heathen inside Christendom manufacture a god out of their carnal minds.”

Hosea 6:6 probably says it best. *“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”* Said God!

Chapter Four:
“He put on righteousness as His breastplate...”

“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.”
Psalm 97:2b

Foundations are key elements in any construction project. Engineers will often conduct soil tests to determine compaction coefficients to ensure adequate support for the applied weight of the proposed structure. If the underpinning is questionable, the entire edifice supported by its existence is at risk. A wise builder will carefully follow the blueprints containing that all-important engineer’s stamp, and will expend great effort to meet the standards set forth. He, or she, will make sure that the building site has been properly excavated to allow the initial footings and foundational elements to be set solidly on unwavering ground.

When we talk of the righteousness of God, we are dealing with a deeply seated, key foundational element of who God is. Think of it as one of the great corner stones of the character and attributes of God.

Righteousness and justice are inexorably linked in both the Old and the New Testaments. Throughout the entire Old Testament, the translators looked at the original Hebrew word, “tsadaq,” and translated it as either “just” or “righteous”, with no apparent guidelines regarding which of the two words they chose in any particular passage. Note that in Nehemiah 9:8, and Nehemiah 9:33, we find the identical word in the original Hebrew, but translated differently in the KJV; one as “righteous”, one as “just.” In the original language, the word carries within itself a hint of the concept of something being straight and unwavering.

Sincerity could easily be added to the definition. The righteousness of God is sincere and unwavering. Scripture adamantly proposes that to be true (Jeremiah 9:24).

In the New Testament, they treated the Greek word “dikaios” with the same freedom. The righteousness of God is virtually synonymous with His justice. His behavior and actions are always perfectly right and just—but by His standards and not ours.

When we as humans begin to consider the righteousness and justice of God, our fallen nature may tend to recoil from His absolute purity. Our hearts are much more confident recognizing the much more palatable attributes of love or kindness or mercy.

Cultivating a relationship with a God who cannot even look upon iniquity (Habakkuk 1:13), whose wrath against sin is terrifying (Romans 1:18), often leaves us with questions and concerns regarding justice. We dread judgment, especially Divine judgement, because it is far more formidable than that of man. But it is that righteousness, that justice, that displays for all the firmness and consistency of God’s character.

For the Christian, God’s righteousness needs to be viewed as comforting and consoling. As Abraham “bargained” with God concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, his comment found in Genesis 18:25 is notable. *“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”* Of course, He will!

Jeremiah referred to the Lord as *“the Habitation of justice”* (Jeremiah 50:7). His people may always come to Him and find shelter in His righteousness during the storms of judgment. God will never do wrong as He interacts with our lives. He will never sin (Zephaniah 3:5).

God is not defined by the terms “righteous” or “fair”, but righteousness and justice are defined by who He is. He is the standard of determination. He is not measured by our understanding or comprehension. “God does not do some righteous or just things, but rather, everything that He does is righteous and just.” A subtle, but profound statement.

Righteousness, in my Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, is defined as “just, morally right and fair.” When applied to God, it is a statement of being, not an appraisal of action and behavior. God has done, and always will do, what is right and fair and just. He is the author, His own guide, of morality, justice, and right behavior.

Our common misunderstanding of the justice of God lies in our preconceptions of what the world that we live in has defined as fair and equitable. The term “fair” is a culturally defined response. What one people group accepts as fair, may be entirely at variance with how another might view the same action. I grew up in a culture that, fifty years ago, accepted in-school spankings, even physical restraint in extreme circumstances. One day I watched in wide-eyed amazement as an absolutely incorrigible second grade classmate was gagged and securely bound, hands, feet and torso, to the teacher’s chair, and then wheeled to the principal’s office for the administration of final punishment. That same act today, would most probably have garnered prison time for my frustrated teacher.

Our definitions of righteousness and justice may change dramatically. God is unchanging (Numbers 23:19).

Humanity tends to define what is right simply by looking at circumstances. Stealing from a bank is universally seen as a very wrong behavior. But we must ask ourselves the question, “Why is it inappropriate?” Is it because we simply do not appreciate our things being taken away from us in that fashion, or is there a higher factor involved?

Our behavior cannot be motivated by our personal conscience and morality. God unequivocally said, *“Thou shalt not steal.”* Only God’s standards remain unchanging and unwavering.

Because God is righteous, He is fair and equitable in all that He does. His interaction with humanity reflects this idea well. God cannot abide with sin, and because He is righteous, He will treat all sinners accordingly, as they deserve. Thus, we see judgment and punishment throughout history, but also in our personal lives as well (Hebrews 12:6).

Society constructs machines of justice to ensure that order in our daily lives does not descend into chaos. Our leaders are appointed or elected to serve in that capacity. We have lawmakers, enforcers, judges, and jailers. All serve the society to which they belong by fulfilling their performance obligations.

But God does not exist for our benefit or well-being. He is not appointed to serve us in any capacity. He is independent and self-sufficient. He owes us nothing. We were created for His pleasure (Revelation 4:11), and the economy of righteousness and justice that He established to surround His creation is completely His design and construct. It exists simply at His discretion and choice.

We must avoid the temptation to define God and what we believe He should do by consulting our cultural norms and practices that we have established by our own intellect.

Imagine an invading army that marches into a nation’s boundaries and begins mercilessly killing everyone they come across. Men, women, and children are massacred. No one is left alive. Even the animals are not spared as the slaughter extends to them. The invaders take everything of value and possess the land as their own. We might look upon this scenario in horror and disgust.

But in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, we read, “*However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.*”

How do we square this kind of command with our sense of right and wrong and justice? We don’t. It is God’s justice, His righteousness, at work. His is the standard by which we must live. We must adapt to, and adopt, His justice and righteousness.

The will of God is the highest rule of justice. In Scripture we find the description of the Trinity as “*righteous Father*” (John 17:25, “*Jesus Christ the righteous*” I John 2:1), and the Holy Spirit presence to convict the world “*of righteousness*” (John 16:8). God is absolute and complete and the highest definition of what is right.

Martin Luther once said, “God is a Being whose will acknowledges no cause: neither is it for us to prescribe rules for His sovereign pleasure—or call Him to account for what He does. He has neither superior or equal, and His will is the rule of all things.”

"All the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing, and He does what He wants with the army of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can hold back His hand or say to Him—What have You done?" (Daniel 4:35). Why is that question forbidden? God is infinitely righteous, and therefore, everything He does or commands falls into that category. All that He decrees is righteous and just, simply because He speaks it. His righteousness is absolutely permeating.

Consider the moment that Abraham laid Isaac on the altar and raised his hand with the knife to slay his only son. How could he have done such a thing? Did the law of God or of nature authorize murder? Absolutely not! But Abraham understood that the God that He served was pleased to command that he obey, and on that account alone, it would be a righteous act.

Shortly after His baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus in praise and adoration of the Father proclaimed, *"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, because this was Your good pleasure"* (Matthew 11:25-26). Note the words He used. He described the Father as the *"Lord of Heaven and earth"*, that is, He is sovereign and supreme over all that is, and therefore has indisputable right. But also notice the reason given for his choices and actions. *"Because it was your good pleasure."* No other explanation is given, and none is needed. God's behavior is in and of Himself. His only rule is His own perfectly, infinitely right and just, "good pleasure."

God's justice demands that He act consistently. There is a great cost to sin, a price that must be paid. Paul refers to it as a wage. It is not something bestowed on the sinful in random fashion, but it is earned and rewarded in exact precision and with careful accounting. The wages of sin was, is, and, always will be, death (Romans 6:23). It is impossible for us to comprehend how God can be righteous and just and yet offer salvation as He did.

Imagine a father who had an only son who was totally obedient and respectful in every way. Now suppose that father put his son on trial for a crime that he did not commit, and then punished him for offenses for which he was not responsible. Even condemning him to a brutal, heinous physical death, in the harshest method known to man—all the while knowing that his son was completely innocent! Would that be "right?" Would that be "fair?"

Nothing in all of history has been more right and just! God subjected Jesus to unimaginable punishment to pay for our sin and offer us salvation and eternal life, never once compromising His infinite righteousness.

The ultimate question that falls to us to answer, “How shall we respond?” Our choice is of eternal consequence. May we respond appropriately.

Chapter Five:
“...and the helmet of salvation on His head.”

*“But God’s firm foundation stands bearing this seal:
‘The Lord knows those who are his.’”*

II Timothy 2:19a

On September 18, 1793, with great crowds looking on, George Washington ceremoniously laid the cornerstone for the edifice we now know as the United States Capital Building. From the historical documentation, we can confirm that the several ton stone, accompanied by a silver plaque, was laid below ground at a basement level. But from that point, the archival record fades into a misty, foggy memory.

During the intervening years since this memorable event, historians, engineers, and architects have been searching for this physical piece of our nation’s past. With all of the renovations and changes that have occurred on this famous structure, the exact placement and location of that cornerstone remains a mystery. From 1893, when the official search originally commenced, until now, the geocache of stone and silver has proved elusive to discovery. But the search continues.

God is not so casual or perfunctory. He declares in Scripture the emphasis He places upon the free gift of salvation as He presents to us a beautiful engraving, written upon The Cornerstone: *“The Lord knows those who are His.”* A touching reminder that the offer of salvation for each of us is a very personal one, and permanent in every respect.

It is no coincidence that our Savior is referred to as the Precious Stone in Isaiah 28:16, *“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation.”*

Before the account of creation found in Genesis, even before time itself, God has existed eternally. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit continued in perfect, joyful harmony, in need of nothing, desiring nothing. They were complete perfection, beyond anything that we can imagine in our physical human state, displaying love eternally and beyond description (Psalm 90:2).

Somewhere in the vast expanse of what we would describe as “eternity past,” the Trinity made plans for this world and its inhabitants. No detail was too small to be overlooked. Everything was planned to magnificent perfection. God knew that there would be a need for His intervening salvation if mankind was to survive his failures (John 17:24).

So, He made a way. He devised and arranged everything before the first speck of dirt, or first drop of water was created in the vast nothingness (I Peter 1:20) at Christ’s command (Colossians 1:16). Why he did so is the great mystery of the ages. We deserved nothing, and yet, in His love, He saw a need and fulfilled it in an absolutely amazing fashion (II Timothy 1:9).

In our day, we look towards the past and marvel that anyone could see the future with the accuracy that God has demonstrated. We struggle to understand that God did not simply foretell the future, but He intrinsically orchestrated the events of this world to suit His plans. And yet, somehow, extending to everyone the opportunity to make decisions with unconditional and unencumbered free choice. “*The LORD says to Israel, Long ago I predicted what would take place; then suddenly I made it happen*” (Isaiah 48:3).

“*Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?*” (Isaiah 40:21).

Scripture is masterfully structured and presented to us in a way that allows us the opportunity to recognize and take hold of truths regarding God. He ingeniously presents Himself often by relaying to us various names for Himself. A quick internet search reveals that there are nearly a thousand names, designations, and titles of God written into the fabric of the Bible. From “Abba”, which means “Father,” to “Zur”, which means “Rock,” we find them to be descriptive and reliable definitions of who God is. The name which may be the most fitting for our discussion here, is “Emmanuel,” which translates roughly as “God with us” (Matthew 1:22-23).

Many places we find this profound truth spelled out in detail for us to consider. God is indeed with us. *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”* (Joshua 1:9). The very last words of Jesus as He ascended into Heaven were *“surely I am with you always, to the end of the age”* Matthew 28:21).

From eternity past, God saw fit to express a desire to be with us. It was born of love and is the only reason we exist (Matthew 25:34). And He has continually ordered the events of our lives to bring us to Himself. *“The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in Him.”* (Psalm 37:23). That desire to be with His creation extends from eternity past all the way into eternity future where, if we have accepted His gift of salvation, we will spend our forever with Him in Heaven (John 3:16).

“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things” (I Peter 1:10-12).

Note the last phrase of that passage: *“even angels long to look into these things”*. Kenneth Wuest, in his scholarly work with the ancient Greek language, points out an interesting concept found in these unassuming few words. The Greek word translated as *“long to look into”* is one associated with the world of education. It quite literally ushers us into the realm of the angels of Heaven and gives us some first-hand insight into their education and learning. The insinuation of the passage is that they are intrigued and fascinated by this concept of the salvation of man and are studying it, and as a result, seeing the love of God displayed in real time, as He deals with men and women on this earth.

Their interest in this beautiful aspect of God is based on their conflicting experience. Having witnessed Satan sin against God, they saw him cast down to the earth and forced to wander for millennia (Ezekiel 28:12-18). They understand that his final destination is a burning, torturous place called Hell (Revelation 20:10). And they also know that all of the angels that followed his lead, will suffer the same excruciating punishment (II Peter 2:4). In a vast differentiation from man (Hebrews 2:16), they recognize that those errant angels are offered no recourse, no redemption, no mercy, and no grace. Their doom is sealed and unalterable.

And yet, *“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? He was created a little lower than the angels, but you have crowned him with glory and with honor...”* (Psalm 8:5). What a perplexing thought for the angels of Heavens to consider, that someone who is clearly, presently considered to be beneath them, is granted a gracious gift that they will never be offered. The University of Heaven, class of **Love 101**, is in session.

God’s desire to be with us runs deep within His heart.

He succinctly orchestrates every event that transpires on this earth with the ultimate aim to draw His created beings to Himself in love (Titus 1:2). His name is Emmanuel, after all.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (Ephesians 1:3-6).

Somehow, in a way that we will never understand this side of Heaven, God has adamantly assured us of the truth that we have been chosen from before the foundation of the world to be granted citizenship in Heaven. And yet God guarantees that we have complete choice in the matter (John 3:16). The delicate balance may seem contradictory or paradoxical if we do not admit that God's methods and abilities dwarf ours.

When Adam and Eve failed to obey Him, God was not surprised. He expected it. He orchestrated it. And yet they had complete, unfettered freedom to make their choice as they did. And His plan, born of love, immediately became center stage.

God hates sin (Psalm 5:4)...

1. Because it separates us from Him (Isaiah 59:2)
2. Because it blinds us to the Truth (I John 2:11)
3. Because it enslaves us and destroys (Romans 6:16)
4. Because it robs our love from Him (James 4:4)

His hatred of sin can be clearly seen in the depth and impact of the curse that He subsequently pronounced upon man, as well as the entirety of creation (Genesis 3:14-19). Sin resulted in a curse so massive that “*all of creation groans*” (Romans 8:22) in anticipation of a promised redemption that will one day come.

But what was the sin? They simply disobeyed God and ate from a tree that they were instructed to ignore. A seemingly minor infraction, with absolutely huge repercussions. How often we fail to comprehend God's complete disdain for sin, regardless of its size or description.

Genesis 3:8 hints to us that God would come down to the earth and walk in the Garden of Eden and spend time with Adam and Eve. Remember, His name is Emmanuel, "God with us."

God desires us to know Him and have a continuing, sustained relationship with Him (James 4:5). That avidity started with Adam, and reaches each of us today in a very personal way. John 3:16 says that "*God so loved the world*", but you and I may righteously replace "*the world*" with our own name. Had you or I been the only person in all of history to recognize the love of God and commit their life to Him, Jesus would have gone to the cross for us alone, to pay the dread price for sin.

My mathematical background plagued me for many years until I came to understand the true aspects of the love of God. Here is where I went wrong. Just for the sake of a lively argument, let's assume that one billion people will come to know the Lord in all of history. We know that Jesus spent approximately six hours on the cross, and then gave up His life. Six hours is 21,600 seconds. Divide 21,600 seconds by 1,000,000,000 people and you arrive at the conclusion that Christ spent .0000216 seconds on that cross for me.

We CANNOT calculate the expense God paid for our lives in that fashion. He did it all for each one of us, as if we were the only one on His mind, His only concern. Our salvation is of immense importance to our God. His desire is for us to be with Him, and that required an incredible plan with flawless execution (and yes, I did include the reference to execution on purpose).

Salvation is found among the foundational elements of God's attributes because of its importance, but also its scope. Salvation, from our side of the equation, may look quite unassuming and relatively transparent. And it is. We simply must believe and accept His offer of life and relationship. As we study the incredible effort and fulfillment of the many promises made in Scripture, we find that God's side of the equation is astonishingly demanding.

What I mean by that is that the process of salvation was, and is, immense. We see the creation of the universe with its billions upon billions of stars, and realize that it registers barely a mention in the account of creation in Genesis 1. In the English translation that I use frequently, the statement is a relatively unassuming, "*He made the stars also.*" No follow up comment or declaration of, "Hey, look at what I just did!"

But as the subject of our salvation is approached, His discussion takes on a completely different tenor. We find words and phrases that tell us that this element we refer to simply as "Salvation", is a highly complex and extremely difficult achievement. Even for God. To use our common vernacular, it may well be the most difficult thing He has ever done, if that is even appropriate to say.

Colossians 1 explains in detail that Jesus is the creator of the universe. When we read the words in Genesis, "*And God said...*", we understand that it was Jesus who stepped out into nothing and spoke everything into existence. He created all that is and holds it all together in the palm of His hand. If He withdrew His mighty power, everything would disappear in an instant.

That same creator God, Emmanuel, had a desire to be with us and lowered Himself to our level and became as human as any one of us might be (Philippians 2:5-8). Our human condition cannot fully comprehend how incredibly far that step down brought Him. Philippians 2 contains a few hints to consider.

First, *“He made Himself of no reputation.”* Jesus emptied Himself of every Heavenly prerogative and prepared to face the onslaught of this world system without exercising any of those rights. As Jesus was being arrested in the Garden just prior to His crucifixion, He told Peter to put his sword away and reminded Him that if He so desired, He could call twelve legions of angels to deliver Him from His fate (Matthew 26:53), a right He chose to not exercise.

Secondly, *“He took upon Himself the form of a servant.”* The humility displayed in the life of Christ is beyond comprehension. As they were finishing the Last Supper in that upper room, the Creator of the universe wrapped a towel around His waist and began washing His disciple’s feet. He could have boasted about His eternal glory, but, instead, He ministered to those eleven men in a very visceral way, tenderly washing their dirty, smelly feet.

Thirdly, *He was made in the likeness of man.”* A God who before was not subject to physical pain, now suffered intensely. A God who never slept a moment in his existence, would fall asleep at the end of a difficult day. A God who had all of the Heavenly host worshipping at His feet, was now subject to mere mortal men as they spat in His face and slapped Him, and much, much worse.

As the world prepared Him for the crucifixion, the excruciating physical toll upon His body is difficult to consider. The descriptions included in Scripture are blunt and harsh. In typical fashion, the thoroughness and intensity of the Roman judicial system cannot be erased from our imagination.

As God prepared Him for crucifixion, the spiritual component to this moment in time is noteworthy. As Jesus cried out on the cross, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*, we come to the conclusion that there was a moment when God turned away, and Jesus was completely, totally abandoned and alone. We cannot comprehend the total emptiness felt by Jesus at that moment.

With God's love completely withdrawn and His eyes turned aside, we see Jesus crying out, utterly, completely, forsaken.

As Emmanuel, He came to reveal God to man. He became someone that we could handle and touch and readily identify. His humanity is a priceless gift that has been offered to us. And I read nowhere in Scripture where He ever says that He finally leaves the form of man and reverts back to His "old self."

The step into our condition was a permanent one, never to change in any way—because He wanted to be with us. Emmanuel.

He has gone on before us in a grand display of what He has planned for those who, in this life, follow after Him. He has promised that our physical bodies will be changed, and made entirely perfect and immortal and unchanging. We will quite literally live forever in a body that will never fail or falter.

Absolute righteousness demands a tremendous price to be paid for even the smallest of sins. The deserved wage that is earned and invariably awarded, is death. Harsh by our standards, but our guidelines and principles are of little concern. God's justice is the defining measure of right and wrong and any and all befitting punishment.

God took that punishment upon Himself, as a substitute. The contrast is striking. Psalm 8:3 states, *"When I consider the heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You have set in place..."* Compare that finger work to the strength found in His arm. Isaiah 40:10-11, *"See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."*

God clearly sees His work of the salvation of mankind as a much larger undertaking than the “simple” creation of the universe.

His attention and focus as He flawlessly designed and performed the entire plan of the redemption of man cannot be overlooked or given a meager stance in the realm of God’s actions and accomplishments.

Salvation rests solidly in the number one position. It is an achievement that God points to with determination. He performed an absolutely incredible feat when He supplied redemption for all. The question then still remains, though, “Who will accept His gift?”

The final chapter in the story of salvation of man is Heaven. Our eternity with Him is sealed in His promise. He has never neglected to fulfil His promises, nor will He ever fail. Those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ will, without any doubt, spend eternity celebrating the presence of God. Emmanuel. God with us.

Chapter Six:
“He put on the garments of vengeance...”

*“A jealous and avenging God is the Lord.
The Lord is avenging and wrathful.
The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries,
He reserves wrath for his enemies.”*
Nabum 1:2

As we continue our analysis of the key foundational attributes of God, Isaiah draws our attention to His vengeance. And we will again consult my Webster’s dictionary for some sage advice. Vengeance, by definition, is the “return of an injury for an injury or offense, in punishment or retribution.” Wrath focuses our attention more upon the extreme emotion that accompanies the punishment. We often use the terms interchangeably, but there is a subtle and important difference. God exercises vengeance with wrath. An accurate, and absolutely frightening statement (Romans 12:19).

“So”, you may ask, “What does that have to do with me? I’m a Christian. I have been forgiven. Why should I even be interested in, or concerned about the vengeance of God?” Because vengeance is a primary, elemental aspect of His character. If we fail to recognize this attribute of God, we miss much. And being a foundational element of who God is, much of our comprehension of Him must be filtered through His lens of a vengeful “Judge, Jury, and Executioner.”

Vengeance is a direct result of sin. God hates sin (Psalm 11:5). But do we fully understand that sin is also injurious to Him? David in Psalm 51:4 said, *“against thee and thee only have I sinned.”* Let’s take a few moments and contemplate that statement. Too often we appraise our sin to be of miniscule consequence to God.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. We tend to account our sin on a “horizontal level.” What I mean by that is that we count our mistakes and acknowledge their effect on those around us. “My little lie to my wife didn’t make her life much worse.” Or, “My road rage anger in the car as I drove through town with my kids wasn’t anything that anyone else might have done.”

We see our sin as merely having a “horizontal” dimension or effect, directed only upon those who are the recipients of our irresponsible behavior. David understood that sin is defined as sin because it offends the absolute righteousness of God. Sin is always “vertical” first. God has set the standard of what is right and what is wrong. When we fail to uphold that standard, we fail God personally. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband to cover his missteps. But David acknowledged that his sin was directed at God first and foremost.

Remember that the sin of Adam and Eve was to ignore the direct command of God regarding a very simple, seemingly innocuous fruit tree. The crushing judgement of God following that “little” mistake should send shivers up and down our spine if we truly understand the implications. Anything that fails to meet God’s standard of right and wrong garners a huge penalty—death (Romans 6:23). The absolute perfection in the Garden of Eden was completely shattered that day they ate a little piece of fruit.

Many Christians look at the vengeance and wrath of God with little respect. Their inclination is to attempt to ignore it or insinuate an apology for His uncouth, harsh, behavior. At the very least, God would be so much more palatable as a God if He were not so demanding in regard to righteousness. Do we view and consider this character trait of vengeance with delight? Or do we hold a secret resentment deep in our hearts that we have to acknowledge that we serve such a vindictive God?

God's challenge is clear as He declares to the world His character in Deuteronomy 32:39-41. *"See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand. I lift my hand to heaven and solemnly swear: As surely as I live forever, when I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh: the blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the enemy leaders."* Rejoice, you nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people."

Statements such as that do not fit well into the politically correct environment that our society is attempting to promote and establish. What the world may define as unnecessary, unprovoked violence, God sees through the filter of vengeance. It makes us uncomfortable to think of God in these terms. We make not like it, but the reality of what is contained in Scripture cannot be ignored. The wrathful vengeance of God is a part of the perfect nature of God's character.

Faithfulness demands that we speak truth in our world today. We must speak as plainly about Hell as we do about Heaven. John the Baptist warned his audience to *"flee from the coming wrath"* (Matthew 3:7). Jesus commanded His followers, *"But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him"* (Luke 12:5). Paul, in his second epistle to the church at Corinth stated, *"Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men"* (II Corinthians 5:11).

As a young man, I recall the day when we might describe a preacher as a "Hell fire and brimstone" kind of guy. Where has that message of punishment gone? It is a Biblical truth that must be included as a part of the message of the Gospel.

Many so called “famous” preachers of our era have chosen to focus upon the love, and mercy and grace of God, and ignore the reality of impending judgment and doom for those who ignore “*so great a salvation*” (Hebrews 2:3).

The reality of the vengeance and wrath of God may best be expressed in the acknowledgment of the existence of a place called Hell. Our society tries to make light of it by mentioning it in songs, or poems; by distorting the Biblical narrative concerning this heinous place that God engineered in response to sin. They joke that they plan to be “down there drinking with their buddies and ignoring those stuffy old saints in Heaven who obviously don’t know how to have a good time.” Hell has become the monumental superlative. We talk about the “boss from hell”, or the “vacation from hell”, or the “mother-in-law from hell.” Or we foolishly use the name “Hell” as a curse word in all kinds of applications.

The world has chosen to believe that a loving God could not, and would not, commit someone to such a heinous, eternal punishment, burning in Hell forever. And they are very wrong!

Romans 2:5 hints that there most likely will be degrees of punishment in Hell. Degrees of despair may be a more apt description. Paul states that, “*But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.*”

To “*store up*” in this verse is the same Greek word Jesus used when He urged His followers to “*Lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven...*” (Matthew 6:20). Here is a sobering thought that we cringe to consider. For the Christian, each day is an opportunity to lay up treasures in Heaven. For an unsaved individual, each day is an opportunity to store up wrath in Hell. A lifetime of sin will accrue to a disastrous total. God is a very careful accountant!

Jonathan Edwards delivered several sermons on this very issue of degrees of suffering in Hell. Consider this quote carefully: “The damned in Hell would be ready to give the whole world if they could have the number of their sins one less in this life.”

God absolutely, profoundly, with every part of His Being, hates sin! And standing side by side with that comment, we must also acknowledge that God is a God of vengeance!

When we consider the Biblical description of Hell, we find these attributes mentioned Scripture.

1. Darkness. (Nahum 1:8, Matthew 8:12, Jude 13) Hell is described as a complete lack of light. Blackest darkness, so dark it can be felt, and feared.
2. Gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:12, Matthew 25:30, Luke 13:28) The intense suffering that will accompany anyone in Hell will result in the grinding, gritting of teeth due to the extreme pain and unending torture there.
3. Fire. (Isaiah 66:24, Matthew 25:41, Revelation 14:10) Fire there is described as ever burning, but not fully consuming. It is everlasting and unquenchable. Its intensity never falters.
4. Separation from God. (Matthew 5:45, Luke 6:35, Romans 2:4) In what may be the greatest punishment of all, God has declared eternal separation from Him is awaiting those in Hell. They will always be aware that there was an alternative, but they chose to ignore it and go their own way, to their eternal damnation.

The souls in Hell will be very much aware of their situation. They will never sleep or receive the slightest relief or reprieve for all of eternity. There is no exit from that horrendous place of torment. God has described Heaven as so amazing and incredible that *“It has not yet entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him”* (I Corinthians 2:9). The implication of Scripture is that the adverse may also be true. It has not entered into our hearts and minds just how frighteningly awful Hell will actually be. What a sobering thought.

Many years ago, I had a pastor who, every year at election time, would personally invite, with an engraved, mailed, invitation, everyone running for office to his church for a special Sunday morning service. His requests stretched from the President of the United States, all the way down to the city dog catcher. And his sermon was invariably the same, with the unchanging title printed each year in the church bulletin: “People I Wish Could Visit Hell for One Minute.”

Directed towards any political celebrity who might venture to visit that day, as well as the average person sitting in the pews, his premise was solemn and composed. With a finger pointed toward the congregation gathered, he would begin talking about the horrors of Hell. Mid sermon, he would skillfully segue towards the truth that if we, as members Christ, could visit Hell for just sixty seconds, our view of life and what is important on this earth would be profoundly changed.

As God led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, they witnessed the mighty arm of the Lord bring the nation of Egypt to its knees. God’s vengeance in wrath was poured out on the Egyptians in a way that the world had never seen. The final blow occurred as the people of Israel marched through the Red sea on dry ground, with the waters walled up on each side of them. Pharaoh’s army attempted to follow, but God saw fit to drown the entire force of Egypt, causing the waters to return suddenly to their original place.

Thousands of dead bodies of men and horses washed up at their feet as the torrent of water finally subsided. Every Israelite who entered the sea that day crossed without issue. Every Egyptian warrior who entered, died in appalling tragedy. Moses’ response to such a sobering display of the wrath of God is found in Exodus 15.

Regarded as the first song recorded in Scripture, it is significant that the subject of this song is the mighty, awful, fearful hand of a vengeful God. Eighteen verses extol the magnificence of God's burning anger, His righteous judgement, and the just punishment suffered by Egypt.

Interestingly, that song will be sung again at a future time. John records in Revelation 15:3 that there are those in heaven who will one day sing "*the song of Moses and of the Lamb.*" The book of Revelation is a detailed account of the final judgment of God upon the earth and sin. That day of reckoning will be an unimaginable apocalypse of wrath unmatched since the beginning of the earth (Matthew 24:21).

We have already seen what God's wrath and judgment of sin can look like. In the days of Noah, He totally annihilated everything living on the face of the earth, except those eight people in the Ark and the animals they carried with them. The devastation is beyond comprehension. It is mathematically very possible that there could have been billions of people who died in that flood. Are we prepared to acknowledge that kind of judgement? Will we be prepared to see it come again, but this second time with a severity that the world cannot even begin to imagine?

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Deuteronomy 32:35). We are reminded of the sobering reality that the God we serve is righteously Judge, Jury, and Executioner. And He will fulfil His duty and obligation to Himself. After all, it is a foundational key element of His character and being. *"He wears the garments of vengeance."*

Chapter Seven:
“...and wrapped Himself in zeal as in a cloak.”

“Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Isaiah 9:7

Everything that is God, all that describes His character, attributes, personality, actions or behaviors—all that He is, is covered by a very special mantle. That which envelopes the sum total of God, that which influences every aspect of who He is, that which defines Him, and guides the course of His thoughts and actions, is an amazing attribute known as zeal.

We must admit that God displays various emotions in the pages of Scripture. We see His anger in Romans 1:18, compassion in Psalm 135:14, love in I John 4:8, hate in Psalm 5:5, and joy in Isaiah 62:5. Those emotions, as well as others, define God’s personality and character. He is not some unemotional, undefinable, being who simply sits on a throne and watches the events of the world with a blasé attitude. His perfect emotional makeup is rooted in His holy nature and He will never express Himself in a sinful way. With exceptional enthusiasm He inserts Himself into the affairs of this world to establish His perfect will. That same zeal is also addressed to each of us in perfect love. He is deeply engaged and interested in each of our lives.

Our emotions, on the other hand, often lead us astray. Our sin nature can be easily influenced by the world around us. We were made to be like Him (Genesis 1:27), but, repeatedly, we fail to imitate our Creator. We live on an emotional rollercoaster with good days and bad.

God's emotions differ from ours in one important aspect, His are perfect and unchanging—always. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Without emotion there is no zeal. Zeal overtakes an emotional attachment or influence and augments and develops it into an incredible passion and enthusiasm. It produces an energetic, unrelenting pursuit of a goal or cause. Zeal, quite literally, describes the manner in which God consummates everything. Scripture contains no references to a God who acts half-heartedly, who completes things with scant care or concern, or who has limited interest in a proposed idea or action. On the contrary, God acts with infinite interest, infinite involvement, and infinite engagement—always.

Aptly, zeal could be considered “the forgotten character trait of God.” In comparison to the other better-known attributes of God like love, or mercy, or grace, very little has been written about this marvelous aspect of who God is. We either assume His enthusiasm to be present, with little thought to the consequences of its reality, or we simply ignore that God could be so emotional and perfect, and embrace zeal always.

Either way, Isaiah 59:17 brings this thought center stage and forces us to consider this fourth foundational aspect of who God has revealed Himself to be. He is a God of profound zeal.

In the original language, the word translated as “zeal” is often, based upon context and usage, translated as “jealousy.” We agree that zealous and jealous rhyme, but are we as confident in the truth that these two words are actually closely related to each other? There is an emotional aspect to both of these words. One centers upon envy, the other, enthusiasm.

Jealousy, in our human hearts, initiates when we inspect someone else's life. It usually shows itself as envy, or suspicion. It is rarely defined with a positive connotation. Zeal is born of nearly the same emotional context. With one great difference. Zeal takes the emotional concern and elevates it to a very positive, passionate response.

A deep burning desire in the heart could be described as jealous or zealous, depending on circumstance and direction of thought. Jealousy is a fire that destroys that which is good. Many relationships and marriages have been consumed in a conflagration when jealousy was allowed to live and thrive.

Zeal is a fire of cleansing, restoration, and rehabilitation. The Greek word translated as "zeal" is also the word used to describe something that is not just hot, but boiling. History is filled with those who sought to change their government into something better, prodded on by their zeal. Our country would not exist today as it does were it not for the founding fathers' zeal and dedication.

When applied to the character of God, zeal embellishes and amplifies all that God has ever done or ever will do. He is infinitely zealous.

We can begin in Genesis, the account of the creation of the universe. There we read, "*And God said, 'Let there be light.'*" And as the narrative continues, we find that light came into being and that God said that it was "*good.*"

The word "*good*" here, in context, means something far more than "acceptable," or simply "OK." The entire electromagnetic spectrum, along with time, as well as all of the laws of physics—all came into being with one command! These things are tremendously complicated, but work in perfect, predictable and observable unison. They were created without flaw in all aspects.

Absolute perfection requires more interest and attention and enthusiasm than we can ever imagine. It requires divine zeal.

As we contemplate the vast expanse of the universe, we are humbled at the abilities of a God who simply spoke the entire cosmos into existence. Why would God create stars so distant that we will never see or visit them in our history? Why the attention to detailing them each in an exclusive fashion with unique characteristics, and even going so far as to name each one? (Psalm 147:4) Intense enthusiasm and desire; also known as zeal.

Infinite zeal is responsible for the most calamitous judgement the world has ever seen, the flood of Noah's day. We saw the entire world deluged in wrath as the vengeance of God, covered by zeal, brought judgement upon a world so entrenched in sin that they no longer had respect for themselves, or a desire to know God. Everyone, and everything, died the day God's patience ended.

Israel was called by God to be His special people on this earth for all of eternity. He has showed all who are watching that He has purposely placed them as *"the apple of his eye"* (Deuteronomy 32:10). We have seen His keen interest and work on their behalf. His careful eye is always watching over Jacob (Deuteronomy 14:2). We have seen zeal in action as He has many times over, manipulated and guided the world with respect to his chosen ones (Ezekiel 20:34-38).

As He judged the nations of the world through history, prodding every step of their ways and actions, He did so with fervency (Psalm 110:6). *"Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. I will break them with a rod of iron and dash them to pieces like pottery"* (Psalm 2:8-9). God is not content to simply disrupt their convenient way of life or cause them irritation and annoyance. This passage makes it quite clear that He is set on absolute annihilation. It stands as an acceptable definition for any dictionary regarding the topic of zeal.

Zeal instigated God's plan for the final redemption of man, pursuing us with an unmatched desire that we should develop a relationship with Him. God has such an intense interest and aspiration for us that He sent His only Son to die an excruciating death and pay for our sins so that we might have the opportunity to spend eternity with Him. God, laying aside all His heavenly prerogatives, voluntarily stepped down to our level to offer Himself as payment for our mistakes. Zeal perfectly explains John 3:16.

God loves every human being who has ever lived or will ever live. Even those who have rejected Him completely (Romans 5:8). His zeal demands that He be intensely interested in even the smallest detail of our lives, whether we are saved or not. He sees even the smallest sparrow fall, He counts the hairs on our heads (Matthew 10:29-32). That can be explained no better than with a reference to intensity and interest—zeal.

His plan of redemption stretches all the way back before the founding of the earth (Ephesians 1:4), and was executed with such precision and attention to detail that it stands as a testimony to the zeal of God. For quite literally thousands of years, He patiently, and with precision, brought His plan into view. Here is where my background in mathematics steps up and gives a bit of insight to this concept of zeal.

Mathematical probability is a strange, but useful tool. Vegas has become wealthy understanding it. Insurance companies stake their business models on understanding it. But the average person ignores it completely, to their own hurt.

If God were to foretell of someone to be born in the distant future, and accurately predict eight very specific things about that person, the odds of those 8 predictions coming true would fall somewhere around 1 in 10 to the seventeenth power.

That is an astronomically huge number! Liken it to covering the entire state of Texas in silver dollars two feet deep, marking one with a red dot. Ask an individual to fly over the state in a helicopter and pick one silver dollar at random. The chances that they would pick the marked silver dollar are 1 in 10 to the seventeenth power!

There are between 50 and 450 (depending how you count them) individual prophecies concerning the coming Messiah of God. And God succeeded in getting every one of them “spot on” perfect regarding His Son. He didn’t have to show us that many prophecies beforehand, but His zeal compelled Him to do so.

Our Christian walk is steeped in His zeal. He has an intense interest in even the smallest of details in our lives. God has given us a solemn promise that we will spend eternity with Him. But while we walk this short time on earth, in this New Testament era, He has given to us a part of Himself, the Holy Spirit, to quite literally live inside us. What a gift! He is our Comforter, our Councilor, our Deposit and Guarantee. To have God so near in this fashion is an incredible thought. One of His names is Emmanuel, after all. God with us in a way so unique and complete, everything else pales in comparison. And zeal made it happen.

Eschatology, the study of the future as it relates to God, is filled with the superlatives of what God has planned for us one day. Heaven is above description. It is beyond our ability to comprehend at this point. And forever is an incredibly long time.

“Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the LORD will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:7).

This is without a doubt my favorite verse in the Bible dealing with Heaven and our future with God forever.

Note how it ends with an acknowledgment regarding the role of the zeal of God. While that is important to realize, the first phrase proves something astonishing.

*“Of the **increase** of his government and peace there shall be no end”* (emphasis mine). God says that His kingdom and the beauty surrounding it will be ever increasing throughout eternity. Do we believe that? Does God possess the necessary power and ability to construct a Heaven that increases each day? We are not talking about size here. Think of it all in this fashion. Day One in Heaven will be the most amazing thing we have ever experienced up until that moment. As incredible as that will be, I believe with all my heart that it is promised in Scripture right here that Day Two will be even better! Need I go on to express how much better Day Three will be? It is a “done deal!” *“The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this.”*

Zeal, the often-forgotten foundational character trait of Jehovah, must not be overlooked when we seek to comprehend and appreciate our infinite God. It plays an infinite role in defining who God is and His actions in this world in general and in our lives specifically.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

How then can we conclude a discussion of the foundational attributes of an infinite God? Let's once again visit that sidewalk we discovered early in our discussion. We have analyzed the "sand, gravel, cement, and steel reinforcement" of the character of God. Once mixed well and poured into a mold, we wait patiently for the all-important chemical reaction to take place. Within hours, the material has cured, and we have something that is no longer defined as sand, gravel, cement, and steel. We have a foundation described as concrete, solid and immovable. It has become something we can stand upon and have confidence that it will support anything in our lives that we can place upon it.

I recall a little storybook that I simply loved as a child. Its narrative centered around a little tugboat called "Scuffy" and the amazing adventures he had each night as my parents would obligingly reread the familiar saga. Even though I knew the story well, I still sat in wide-eyed wonder as the drama would unfold before me on the pages of that Little Golden Book.

Why do I not read the Bible with that same "wide-eyed, childlike wonder"? Job 38:7 tells me that the angels shouted for joy as they watched the universe unfold before them during the moments of creation. Do I read Genesis 1 with that same kind of awe? In the eleventh chapter of John I find the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Are there tears in my eyes when I get to verse thirty-five? When I read of the return of Christ in Revelation 19, do I tremble in anticipation of witnessing His blazing glory and the host of heaven following after Him? Sadly, I must admit, I'm much too sophisticated for that. I read with the same blasé, non-descript, emotionless attitude that is inherent in most of us.

The Bible was written in zeal. The verses and stories effervesce with the enthusiasm and interest of God Himself. An infinite God details everything that we need to know about Him in just a few pages of Scripture. In my Bible, it totals 1,109 pages. That in itself is astonishing. He reveals His righteousness in marvelous explication, He physically demonstrates His plan for our salvation, and He portrays in certain and precise detail His vengeance in wrath upon sinners and sin, in history, as well as in a day yet to come.

As we contemplate all of the additional character traits of God or examine and ponder the infinite nature of God, all of our discoveries and understanding of Jehovah stand firmly on the foundation formed of the four key attributes of who God is.

God is our foundation. Jesus is our Cornerstone.

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

(Psalm 118:22-23)

“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”

(I Corinthians 3:10-11).

May we always:

Respect His Righteousness
Rejoice in His Salvation
Revere His Vengeance, and
Recognize His Zeal.