

Skeptics like to ask, “*how can a loving God allow anyone to go to Hell?*”, but such questions show a misunderstanding of the nature of God. We can turn the question and ask something else: “*How can a holy, just, and righteous God allow a sinful person into His presence?*” Many people, including nonbelievers and even some believers, understand God to be loving, but their understanding of him doesn’t go any further. He’s more than just a God of love. He can’t tolerate sin in his presence any more than we’d tolerate a dirty, smelly, loud, and sick raccoon living in our home. Misunderstanding the basic nature and character of God leads to lots of theological and ethical problems, because we know God through his attributes.

Now, his attributes are not parts of him the way the attributes we’ve adopted are parts of us. For example, you may realize it’s important and good to be nice and polite, so you adopt this attribute as a part of your overall makeup. With God though, it’s the other way around. For example, holiness isn’t a part of God, but it is something that is true of God’s very nature. These attributes have their source in who God is. God did not adopt these attributes to make up his nature; they flow from it. When we say God is love, we aren’t saying that a part of God is love, but that love is an attribute innately true of God. When God loves, he is not making a decision to be loving; he’s just being himself. So now let’s discuss: *what is God’s nature like? What are his attributes?*

Maybe you’re wondering why we, as believers, are even spending time talking about who God if we already know him. The answer: **Familiarity breeds contempt**. I’m often guilty of this. I often forget the identity of the God who became my father through divine adoption. Adoption is a powerful thing, and being adopted by different parents changes everything. A child raised by loving adoptive parents would likely come out differently than a child raised by abusive parents. What if a child had never been adopted at all? It’s important to know what God is like, to be familiar with this heavenly Father that wants to lavish spiritual blessings on us the way a parent has the impulse to lavish every gift upon his or her baby’s little head. The following is not an exhaustive list, but I hope it helps us start thinking about the nature of God and how he is so relevant to our lives.

God is spirit (John 4:24a). He’s not like us. He’s not a person in that sense; he’s very different from us.

God is unchanging (Malachi 3:6). This verse also mentions the whole Israelite people. The Lord had purposed in his heart that they would not be consumed. So even though they were constantly unfaithful to him, just like us, it doesn’t change the fact that God continues to be faithful to them, just as he is to us. He is immutable, and we can find comfort in this. Other things in life change and evolve and we can’t count on anything else staying the same. We can count on God to stay the same though, and this is tied into his eternity.

God is eternal (Isaiah 43:10). God has no beginning and no end. Questioning and figuring out what caused God and where he came from doesn’t work because when we do so we are trying to put God into space-time. Time is an element inside the created world. If the universe was a cake, time would be an ingredient. He is not made of space because he’s a spirit. The Lord is above creation and outside of time. I know, the more I think about God in this way, the more confused I get. But don’t push this idea too far, because then you get a deist view that says God does not interact with the world. He didn’t bake the cake and then leave to go bake a pie, and we’ll see that soon.

God is holy (1 Samuel 2:2). This essentially means he’s other. Alien. Different. Because of this, 1 Peter 1:16 says we can be made holy because he is holy. There is nothing more like God in creation than us and we are made in his image. We are his image bearers. That leads to the next point.

God is personal. God gets very personal with us and is not just some force in the universe. He gets so personal with us that God the Son even becomes one of us. Likewise, the Bible doesn’t say God is trinity, but we see that throughout Scripture too. In Luke 3 when Jesus is being baptized, all three persons are there. The Holy Spirit is given to us in the same way it was given to Jesus. In fact, God is so personal that he relates within himself. He is a singular God with multiple persons. Within God, we don’t just have personhood, but relationship, intimacy, and love—all of which find themselves originating in God.

God is love (1 John 4:16b).

God is good (Psalm 100:5). We mentioned his steadfastness earlier, and everything he does he is steadfast in. His love and faithfulness endures forever, regardless of your response to him. Even if you're faithless, he's still faithful. Can you imagine if you got adopted and found out your parents were abusive? How much pain that would bring, especially with the vulnerability and abuse that it would entail. Imagine being adopted by a bad god, or one that had bad moods. Luckily, our God does not get into bad moods. The only problem with his goodness is that we are not good and we rebelled against this good God. We can't get it right; just look at the world. Even when we try really, really hard, we lose. And when we win, we get proud of those wins, and that pride can be pretty bad. But it's by his mercy that we can be with him.

God is both just and merciful. We wouldn't want a God that's only merciful. Things happen in this world that need to be punished. We want vengeance for things happening in the world: child soldiers, situations like those in countries like North Korea and Syria, native women in Canada that just disappear and resources that would go after finding a white Canadian woman not being used, etc. Our Lord is just. He will not leave these things unpunished and he has righteous anger. But like I mentioned earlier, we're also bad. We also desire the mercy side. They would together and one would cancel out the other if it wasn't for Jesus. Jesus absorbs all of God's wrath towards our sin so that God can be perfectly just by taking it all out on himself while still offering us mercy.

There are tons of verses that describe these two attributes of God, but we can also find this tension between being just and merciful from the Lord's own mouth in Exodus 34:6-7. Here we see the holding back of his hand and the giving of blessings at the same time. We see his sense of justice in the idea of sins having consequences to the third and fourth generations here, because our sins have consequences beyond ourselves. They affect others and that's part of the natural consequences of our choices. They have this reach. He's not going to go in and fix every implication of our poor decisions, nor do a miracle every time. God isn't actively nailing our kids. He's slow to anger, but that anger is a righteous anger that rises up against evil. We like this tension of justice and mercy.

God is Creator (Nehemiah 9:6). He likes making stuff. He liked making you. He wants to fix you and restore you to the way you were intended to be. He didn't make you a winded toy or robot that automatically did everything right. You have the ability to accept or reject God; to choose or to not choose him. He's done all the work and is now standing there with arms wide open towards you.

God is an all-consuming fire (Hebrews 12:26-29). Our God is dangerous. It's like C.S. Lewis' depiction of God as Aslan the lion. It was probably Lucy that, upon hearing Aslan was a lion, said he doesn't sound safe and asked if Aslan is a safe lion. And then it was probably Mr. Beaver that responded that he's obviously not safe because lions aren't safe. Silly Lucy. But Aslan is a good lion. God is quite the same. If we enter his presence and are not holy, we're burned. In the Old Testament there are people that want to see God's face, but God tells them they will die if they see him. Approaching him is not safe outside of the covering of Jesus' blood.

I don't know if it's blasphemous or not, but I liked what someone shared once about this image of all people ever burning for eternity at the final resurrection. There are those that will be burning with the glory of God, with all the light and heat and power from being made like Jesus. Then there are others that will burn in darkness in ways Hell is described in the Bible. The Lamb rules over everything, including Heaven and Hell. All these things are under his feet. It seems pretty scary, but there's nothing attractive about a tame God either. We want someone powerful, dangerous, and able to protect us as someone we'd follow and believe in.

There's a God out there that loves you. His intentions towards you are to adopt you. There's a great deal of time and effort and personal cost to himself to restore you to what you were intended to be and what your heart longs for. There's more for you than the daily routine and cycle that our culture teaches us. There's a God that wants to be your Dad. He is spirit and fire and dangerous, but he is good and burns with love. He *is* love and he loves you. He is other. He is weird and different. He's holy and just, but also merciful. He is merciful to you through Jesus. We are given this gift of adoption and he wants us to respond. He wants you as his child and to bless you with every spiritual blessing in the Heavenly realm, and he can change you if you let him. What a wonderful God we serve.