"Since the creation of the world His [God's] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." (Rom 1:20)

✣ Lecture III: The Attributes of God ✣

In the previous lecture, we have established the Self-existence of a **Personal** First Cause distinct from the created order and in the present lecture, we will, by the grace of God, explore some Divine attributes, concentrating upon a number of inquiries that arose throughout history and in our modern period.

1. God is Spirit:

"God is Spirit" **(Jn 4:24)** who is beyond corporeity or physical form. St. Paul said, "We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising." **(Acts 17: 29)** he also said, "the Lord is the Spirit" **(2 Cor 3:17)**. God commanded the children of Israel saying, "You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth …" **(Ex 20:4)** This prohibition was given to teach us that the Divine Nature of God is above and beyond any physical form that we see.

✣ Even though God is Spirit, He appeared in physical forms to communicate with His creation. For example, God appeared to Moses the Prophet in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush **(Ex 3:2)** and to our father Abraham as a Man **(Gen 18:2).** In the New Testament, we read about God appearing to St. John the Baptist as a dove **(Lk 3:22)** and on Pentecost as divided tongues, as of fire **(Acts 2:3)**

→ What is Anthropomorphism?

Anthropomorphism is a heresy that portrays the Eternal and Spiritual God in human form possessing a mouth, eyes, hands, and feet and thus reducing the Divine Nature to physical human form. This is due to a false literal interpretation of the many Holy Scriptural analogies and metaphors that God in His condescension has used to paint a self-portrait, which we are capable of understanding. Nevertheless, God explicitly said, "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw **no form** when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female …" **(Deut 4:15,16).** Basically anthropomorphism leads people to act corruptly and make for themselves **a mental carved image** of the Divinity.

→ Is God Male?

Feminism has become a significant component of modern western culture that has come into conflict with Christianity for many reasons, one of them is that Holy Scripture uses male language about God and most of the analogies used for God are male. Does this mean, the feminists wonder, that God is male?

✣ God is Spirit and spirits are above gender, which pertains to the earthly flesh. For example, there are no male or female angels as Lord Jesus Christ pointed out to the Sadducees in **Holy Gospel of St. Matthew 22:30** because angels are spirits **(Ps 104:4).** Moreover, it is clear from the **Holy Book of Deuteronomy 4:16** that the Divinity is not in "the likeness of male or female."

✣ Even though Holy Scripture uses many male examples for God, there are a few female ones as well: "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" **(Is 66:13),** "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you" **(Is 49:15).** Moreover, the Wisdom of God or Lord Jesus Christ **(1 Cor 1:24; Col 2:3)** is personified in the Holy Book of Proverbs using feminine language.

✣ It is written that the letter kills **(2 Cor 3:6)** and therefore all the examples that speaks to us about the Divinity in feminine or masculine manner should not lead us to think that God is either male or female. For instance, St. Paul addresses the whole Church of the Corinthians saying, "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." **(2 Cor 11:2)** thus referring to both males and females whether married or celibate as a chaste virgin bride to our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. God is Eternal:

Moses the Prophet said, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" **(Ps 90:2).** When we say that God is Eternal we mean that He is beyond temporal limits; He has neither beginning, nor end, nor duration by way of sequence or succession of moments. Divine Eternity, therefore, does not mean indefinite duration of time but it means the total exclusion of the finiteness which time implies. The Eternity of God is related to His **Self-existence** and **Infinity.** Since time is a measure of finite existence, thus the infinite must transcend it and even though God coexists with time, His Self-existence is timeless.

✣ For example, we sometimes speak of infinite time or space, meaning thereby time of such indefinite duration or space of such indefinite extension that we cannot assign any fixed limit to one or the other. Actually, since this infinite time and space are made up of parts in duration or extension, they are essentially finite by comparison with God's Infinity.

3. God is Omnipresent:

King David said to God, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me" **(Ps 139:7-10).** Space, like time, is one of the measures of the finite, and as by the attribute of Eternity, we describe God's transcendence of all temporal limitations, so by the attribute of Omnipresence we express His transcendent relation to space. Divine Omnipresence means on the one hand that God is necessarily present everywhere in space as the immanent cause and sustainer of creatures, and on the other hand that He transcends the limitations of actual space and cannot be circumscribed or measured or divided by spatial relations.

→ What is Pantheism?

Pantheism is a false teaching, which claims that God and the universe are one; it focuses on Divine Omnipresence but denies God's **Personality** as well as His **Transcendence** (being beyond time and space). It claims that God is just a sum total of all that exists. The Hindu religion is predicated upon this belief; Christianity however, emphasizes God's Omnipresence without overlooking His Divine Transcendence.

4. God is Immutable:

St. James said that with God "there is no variation or shadow of turning" **(Jam 1:17),** King David also said to God, "…like a cloak You will fold them [the heavens] up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail" **(Ps 102:26,27).** Divine Immutability means unchangeableness. If the Divine Nature changes, it is either a move *away* from perfection (in which case God is no longer perfect) or *toward* perfection (in which case God was not perfect in the past).

→ Did God lay aside the attribute of Immutability during the Incarnation?

Mutability or change is attributed only to the Human Nature of Our Lord Jesus Christ, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature" **(Lk 2:52).** The Divine Nature did not undergo any change due to the Incarnation as we confess saying that the Divine Nature was united with the Human Nature without mingling, confusion, **alteration**, or separation.

→ Can God Suffer?

The Divine Nature cannot be said to suffer, this is called the Impassibility of God meaning that God could not undergo anything that could be spoken of as "passion." Nevertheless, during the Incarnation, the Divine Nature was united (w/o mingling, confusion, alteration, or separation) with the Human Nature of Lord Jesus Christ during the passion of the cross. This can be likened to the union of fire and iron. During the hammering of the iron, the iron bends while the fire is united with it. The same happened when Lord Jesus Christ died, the human spirit was separated from the human flesh yet the Divinity, which never dies was not separated from either.

5. <u>God is Omnipotent:</u>

God said to Moses the Prophet, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty…" **(Ex 6:3),** and the Nicene Creed says, "Truly we believe in One God, God the Father the Almighty." The belief in an "Almighty" or Omnipotent God is thus an essential element of the Orthodox Christian faith. But what does it mean to speak of God being "Omnipotent"? The simple commonsense answer is to say that God can do anything.

→ <u>Can God create a stone that is too heavy to lift?</u>

If God cannot create such a stone, the idea of total Divine Omnipotence would seem to be denied. Yet if God could create such a stone, then there is something else which God *cannot* do – namely, lift that stone. And so, again, God turns out not to be Omnipotent.

✣ The belief in Divine Omnipotence means that God is able to do anything that does not involve obvious contradiction. For example, God cannot make a square circle or a round triangle, which is a logical self-contradiction.

✣ Once God has opted to do certain things or to act in a certain manner, then other possibilities are excluded. For example, if you say, "God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it", you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless and empty combinations of words do not suddenly acquire a meaning because we prefix to them the two other words; "God can". It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but non-entities. Then, God cannot do anything that is *logically* impossible.

✣ God cannot do anything that is inconsistent with His Divine Nature and Character. For instance, to sin is to fall short of a perfect state. Hence, to be able to sin is to be able to be deficient, which cannot be reconciled with Divine Omnipotence. It is because God is Omnipotent that He cannot sin.

- "He [God] **cannot** deny Himself" **(2 Tim 2:13)**
- "It is **impossible** for God to lie" **(Heb 6:18)**
- "God **cannot** be tempted by evil" **(Jam 1:13)**

→ <u>The Problem of Evil and Pain:</u>

If God were good, he would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were Almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, according to some, God lacks either the goodness, or power, or both. This is the problem of pain and evil, in its simplest form. Can the presence of evil or suffering be reconciled with the Goodness of God and His Omnipotence?

✣ God in His Goodness, created everything "good" **(Gen 1:12,25,31).** Free will is a "good" thing that God had granted to His creatures. Evil is the direct consequence of the misuse of freedom. Nevertheless, evil is temporal and ultimately goodness will prevail for ever, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" **(Rev 21:1),** and St. Paul said, "the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" **(Rom 8:21)**

✣ Divine Omnipotence and Goodness intervenes and changes evil into good. For instance, Joseph the Righteous said to his brothers, "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." **(Gen 50:20).** Indeed, "all things work together for good to those who love God" **(Rom 8:28).**

✣ Concerning pain and suffering, St. Paul said, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" **(Rom 8:18).** "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" **(2 Cor 4:17,18).**

Q: If God created everything "good" as it was documented in the Holy Book of Genesis, then what is the meaning of the following verses: "I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and <u>create calamity</u>; I the Lord, do all these things." (Is 45:7) – "If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?" (Amos 3:6). Is calamity a "good" thing?

A: First of all, the verse of Isaiah the Prophet is meant to emphasize the existence of ONE God, because some nations believed that there were one god for evil and another for good, "That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity: I the Lord do all these things." **(Is 45:6,7)**

Secondly, both verses do not mean that God is the cause or the source of calamity but they mean that no calamity occurs without God's permission. This is obvious from the story of Job the Righteous where Satan was the cause of Job's calamities (by God's permission) yet Job said to his wife, "shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" **(Job 2:10)** considering the adversity as coming directly from God even though it was Satan's work.

Finally, yes, calamities may be "good" as in the story of Lazarus and the rich man **(Lk 16: 19-30)** for the temporal calamity of Lazarus was the cause for his eternal comfort as our father Abraham said to the rich, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and your are tormented" **(Lk 16:25).** Indeed, "we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" **(Acts 14:21).** Another example is the sickness of St. Paul **(2 Cor 12:7)** that was protecting him from pride due to the abundance of revelations that he had experienced.

6. <u>God is Omniscient:</u>

It was said about God "there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" **(Heb 4:13).** God is Omniscient or All-knowing; He has the most perfect knowledge of all things.

→ <u>Does God foreknowledge affect our decisions?</u>

A distinction must be made between Divine Knowledge and Divine Will. For example, God "desires all men to be saved" **(1 Tim 2:4),** yet not all men will be saved and God knows that, but those who are going to perish will lose their salvation because they misused their free will not because God knew about it. *(See Lecture V of Soteriology: Predestination in The Orthodox Perspective)*
