

God is Relational

by Michael Rudolph

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This is the fourth teaching in our series on “The Foundations of Our Messianic Jewish Faith. The first teaching was the Nature and Identity of God; the second was, the Background and Practice of *Sukkot*. The third was last week’s teaching – Achieving Spirituality, and today is the fourth, which I will call “God is Relational.”

Because the Bible tells us to praise God for Who He is, most foundational series try to describe Who He is under the heading: “The Attributes or the Characteristics of God.” Tozer, a Christian theologian, in his treatise “Knowledge of the Holy,” listed eighteen attributes of God that are often quoted; they are:

- Wisdom is God’s perfect understanding, and ability to know how to apply what is right and true. It follows, then, that God cannot make mistakes rooted in imperfection.
- Infinitude is God’s boundless and never-ending largeness in space, in time, in all other dimensions of existence, and in all of His attributes. Whatever attributes God has are infinite, as well as other attributes of His person.
- Sovereignty is God’s absolute right to create, and to have control over, and to rule all of existence.
- Holiness is God’s separateness distinct identity – separate from his creation. He is the source of all things that are created, and He remains aloof and separate from His creation. State another way, although we are created in God’s image, no part of us is Him.
- Trinity is God revealed as three in one. Three what? There is no answer to that question, but surely not three Gods. Three persons? That sounds like three Gods. There have been many attempts to explain this, but it defies explanation.
- Omniscience is God’s perfect and complete knowledge, so that He has no need, nor can He learn anything, because there is nothing to learn beyond what He already knows.
- Faithfulness is God’s trustworthiness, that anything He communicates is true, and anything He promises will happen.
- Love is God’s care for, and desire to provide the best for His creation. We don’t know what that meant before the creation, but God’s love is active and sacrificial, not devoid of emotion, but not governed by it either. Scripture says that we love because He first loved us. Love is so foundational to all of God’s other attributes, that John wrote in 1 John 4:8: “*God is Love.*”

- Self-existence is what God meant when He answered Moses in Exodus 3:14: *“I am who I am. ...”* *“Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’”* It is a difficult concept because, except for what God created, nothing else exists. Consequently, you cannot understand God’s existence by comparing Him to some other existence. He is everything – the beginning and the end. God always existed, and will forever exist, independent of all else.
- Self-sufficiency means that God needs nothing – never has, and never will. All other beings that have needs, satisfy their needs from God’s resources. God cannot improve because He is perfect in all ways. Although God has no needs, it is clear that He has desires, and we are part of fulfilling His desires.
- Justice is God’s perfect harmony with the morality of His truth; it is that quality of God that gives and withholds according to what one deserves. Here again, without invoking God’s creation, it is hard to talk about God’s justice except to say that God is just – that justice is part of His very being.
- Immutability means that God never changes. Hebrews 13:8 says *“Yeshua the Messiah is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”*
- Mercy is God’s attribute of having compassion for those of His creation who do not deserve blessing. God is not only merciful; He is the embodiment of mercy.
- Eternity means that God has always existed, and will always exist. Eternity may be thought of as the infinity of time (or the absence of time) where God resides.
- Goodness cannot be defined except as the opposite of “badness.” God and His attributes are, by definition, good, and everything else is not good. So, if you want to know what “good” is, don’t try to define it – just look at God.
- Graciousness is unmerited favor, and is related to mercy in that the recipient does not deserve either.
- Omnipresence is God’s ability to be everywhere at the same time.

The list I just read to you is but one of the many compilations of God’s attributes. Other attributes you may come across will mention that God is a provider, a healer, that He is wrathful, He is jealous, He is comforting, and He is creator, He is invisible, He is like-giving.

Another approach to learning about God would be to look at the many descriptive names of God. But this is enough for now, since the only reason I introduced all of these attributes to you is to show you how they apply to what I really want to talk about today, and that is the relational attribute of God.

I think of God’s relational attribute as His main attribute. Why do I say that? It’s because, except for four of the attributes I mentioned, all the others require some kind of relationship,

either within Himself, or with His created beings. The attributes that can stand apart are wisdom, infinitude, omniscience, and immutability. All the rest require relationships.

Let's begin with God's tri-unity; we read in Scripture that He exists as the Father who seems to remain in heaven, His son who travels a bit but spends most of His time with His Father, and the Holy Spirit who seems to be everywhere at once. When the Son came to earth as Yeshua, our Messiah the Father spoke fondly of Him:

Matthew 3:16-17: *"When He had been baptized, Yeshua came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. "And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

That shows that the Father had a relationship with His son Yeshua. And Yeshua likewise spoke about His relationship with His Father; referring to his followers, Yeshua said in John 10:29-30:

"My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one."

And in John 5:19-20 Yeshua also said:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel."

This affectionate talking by the Father about His son, and the Son about His Father, is relationship. We don't get that familial feeling about the Holy Spirit, but rather the feeling that the Spirit is a servant of the Father and the Son. When he was about to be taken up to be with His Father, Yeshua said of the Holy Spirit in John 16:7-9:

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me."

The plural nature of God is seen in many places in the Scriptures, even in Genesis when God refers to Himself as "We," and in plural words used for God, such as *Elohim*.

Let's run through some of the other attributes of God more quickly.

- God's sovereignty suggests the relationship between a king and his subjects. What does it mean to be a sovereign if there is no one to rule over?

- Holiness means being set apart for God. We can aspire to that (because we are not God Himself), but what does it mean to say that God is holy? Can He be set aside for Himself? Well, yes, if you remember that the Son Yeshua was Holy unto His Father. So holiness suggests two relationships -- God with Himself, and us with God.
- God's Faithfulness suggests a relationship between The Father, Yeshua, and the Holy Spirit who work together and trust one another. It also suggests a relationship with us, where numerous times, Scripture urges us to trust God because He is faithful. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us to "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths."
- God's self-existence suggests a relationship with others who are not self-existing, but who must rely on God for their identities.
- God's self-sufficiency means that He needs nothing, but it is brought up in Scripture as a way of reminding us that we are not self-sufficient, and that we must relate to God as both our physical and spiritual provider.
- God's Justice is both a promise of His justice, and an exhortation for us to learn justice from Him, and do similarly unto others.
- Mercy, Goodness and Graciousness are relational in that He shows those attributes to us, and expects us to emulate Him when we relate to our fellow man.

It might be difficult to see why Eternity and Omnipresence are relational. It is because, in both their cases, they have no meaning unless, by comparison, there are mortals who lack them.

We are used to talking about our relationship with God because we perceive our need for that relationship. However, it would be well for us to consider it from God's point of view as well. We have said that God is self-sufficient, so why did He create man, and why does He care so much if his creation sins? I have heard it said that he created man so that he could fellowship with man, and my prior response has been: "Why would a God who is so high above us fellowship with the likes of us?" In other words, I doubted that God's desire for fellowship was the reason.

I'm now looking at it differently, and I'm not so sure that my previous dismissal of the premise was correct. After all, almost all the things we know about God are His relational qualities, and other than the angels that we know very little about, God's entire outlet for relational fellowship was within His own Tri-unity – that is, within Himself. Of course, I am limited in my understanding, but it would seem right that a God whose very being is relational would desire – even yearn for relationships – even with profoundly lesser beings such as we. So let's build a case for it.

God created angels, but for purposes other than for relationship, so in that way they were not created in God's image. Now God is wherever God is – let's say everywhere – but there is, as yet, no creation such as we know it, and God who is bursting with the qualities of love, grace,

compassion, and goodness, has no outlet for it – no way to express it except by creating beings who mirror those qualities. So He creates man in His image, not meaning physically in His image, but with His attributes – especially the capacity to love. God began by creating one man, but that was not enough for man, because man needed peer companionship in the same way that God had peer companionship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So God created woman, and gave man the capacity to reproduce in order to expand his opportunities for relationship.

But the man Adam damaged his relationship with God by disobeying Him. Adam wanted to be more like God than God granted Him; he wanted to know about evil which is the opposite of good. It was not a loving act toward God and God was deeply disappointed with Adam, and we know about what happened as a result. People sometimes ask whether God made a mistake by allowing Adam to have the free will of choice to either obey God or disobey Him. After all, God could have created Adam without such choice, so that Adam was incapable of breaking his relationship with God. But really, God couldn't have, if He wanted to have a true relationship with man, because relationship requires voluntariness. The removal of choice diminishes the quality of any relationship. So God did not make a mistake; he set things up in a way that exposed Him to the possibility of disappointment, and He was, in fact, disappointed.

God had lots of options, but He was already relating to His creation, and He had compassion on Adam and mankind. Instead of destroying the world and starting over, God brought to bear another of his attributes – justice – to allow man an honorable and just way back to having fellowship with God. Eventually, the population of men grew, each in God's image, so that each man had and still has the choice of keeping faith with God (which means firming up the relationship), or sinning against Him (which means doing things that violate the relationship). We can violate our relationship with God by sinning against Him directly, or indirectly by harming our fellow man and not using our godly attributes to bless him.

So this is why the *Sh'ma* is so central. It is because loving God and loving man are the big umbrella of our entire relationship with God, and that relationship is the only reason we are alive. The reality of this relationship answers a question for me that I have wrestled with for some time. If God wants something done or something to happen, why doesn't He just do it instead of insisting that we pray for it? We are told that we must pray according to God's will and not according to our own. Why is this? Well, I think that understanding the primacy of our relating to God is the answer. God is less interested in the outcome of a given situation than in fostering unity between Him and us.

As mighty as God is, we hurt Him every time we breach our relationship with Him by committing sin; He has given us that liberty, and time to get ourselves to the place where we will choose Him over other gods, and over ourselves. And by the way, the reason that Yeshua's sacrifice for us on the cross was so awful for God, is that for the first time, albeit momentarily, God broke relationship with Himself. Our part is to honor God's sacrifice by not continuing to hurt Him, so let's conclude with a few Scriptures that will embed our relationship with God in our minds:

Matthew 22:37-40 *"Yeshua said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment.*

And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

John 13:34-35 *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Romans 13:8-10 *"Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."*

Luke 4:16-21 *"So He [Yeshua] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

Genesis 5:24 says: "And Encoch walked with God." That is what having a true relationship with God is all about.

Questions for the Congregation

1. What do we mean by the tri-unity of God?
2. What does the tri-unity of God have to do with relationship?
3. Scripture admonishes us to be holy as God is holy. What does it mean that God is holy?
4. Give an example of how God has been faithful in your life.
5. Through what means is God omnipresent?
6. What is meant by God's sovereignty?
7. Why does God care if man sins?
8. Can we hurt God?
9. What damages our relationship with God?
10. What enhances our relationship with God?