

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

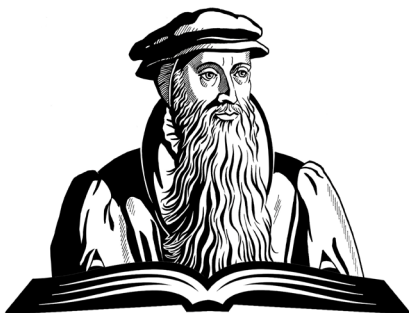
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 1

INTRODUCTION



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~ The Doctrine of God

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 1 INTRODUCTION

It has been rightly said that what comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. This is true, and it should not surprise us. God is first, highest, greatest, and most glorious. Man was created by God and for God, and exists to know, glorify, and enjoy God. When men reverse this order, thinking that God exists for man, rather than the opposite, we end up in idolatry and a world of evil. One of the greatest reasons for the weakness of the church today is ignorance of the living and true God. Shallow or distorted views of God dishonor Him and disable believers, leading to corrupt worship, diminished personal holiness, and a lack of zeal for sacrificial service in pursuing the advance of Christ's kingdom and glory. Nothing is more important than seeing and knowing God. The Lord has given to us the Holy Scriptures so that we might come to a true and saving knowledge of God in Christ.

This series of seven modules, or courses, takes us through an introductory study of systematic theology. In the opening lectures of the first module, we provided an overview of the scope and purpose of these seven courses. The first two modules—the previous one on first principles, where we covered in ten lectures the doctrine of Scripture, and this second one, covering the doctrine of God—provide the basic principles, or axioms, for all that follows in our study of systematic theology. Everything else is built upon them and flows from them. The doctrine of God, of course, logically precedes the doctrine of Scripture, since something must be before it can be known. God is the principle of being, is the foundation of all knowledge. But we started first by treating the doctrine of Scripture, because we know the doctrine of God in systematic theology from His self-revelation in Scripture, through Christ, by the Spirit. This is why, also, the Westminster Confession of Faith begins with its first chapter on Scripture, followed by the second chapter on God and the Trinity.

Well, the purpose of this current module is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself, which is to say, what God reveals to us about God. So if you wish to gain a deeper understanding of who the Lord is, these lectures aim to benefit you. The lectures in this second module on the doctrine of God are, like the others, introductory, not exhaustive; and they're intended to furnish you with a foundation that you can build upon in your further studies. But that is not to say that they will be easy. When we think about the God of glory, we are dealing with deep and difficult matters. And this requires reverence, humility, diligence, and much prayer that the Lord would open our eyes to behold a glimpse of His glory by faith.

As you'll recall from the first module, theology refers to the knowledge of God. So, broadly defined, theology has to do with the study of the knowledge of God and all that He has revealed for us to believe and do. We noted that it is “the doctrine of living unto God through Christ,” thus

addressing both our thinking and our living. But we can also use the word “theology,” in a more narrow and restricted manner, referring specifically to just the doctrine of God, which, of course, is the limited scope of this particular course. This is why this particular topic within systematic theology, called “the doctrine of God,” is sometimes also called “theology proper.” It’s the study of God Himself, in contrast, for example, to the doctrines of man, or the doctrines of Christ, or doctrines of salvation, the doctrines of the church, and other branches of systematic theology.

We’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of God. This introductory lecture needs to be approached, first of all, scripturally. You will recall that in Exodus 33, we read of God removing His tabernacle, which was the symbol of His presence in the Old Testament. He was removing His tabernacle from the camp of Israel and refusing to go up with the people. So Moses went out, entered into the tabernacle, and stood in the door to converse with God. We then read of the interchange that took place. And at the heart of Moses’ pleading with God and interceding for His people, we read these words in Exodus 33:13—Moses says, “Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people.” Then a few verses later, in verse 18, he says, in that same prayer, “And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.”

Let me draw a few things to your attention from this. First of all, more than anything else, Moses craved the presence of God and desired to behold His glory. He understood that there were no prospects of going forward to the promised land without God. The benefits of liberty from bondage in Egypt or the inheritance of a land flowing with milk and honey were nothing in comparison to God dwelling with His people.

Secondly, notice that he considers the ability to know God and His ways to be grace—something precious that was undeserved and unearned. He wants to understand God’s ways, but seeing God’s ways was a means to something higher and better. Did you notice? He says, “Show me now thy way, that I may know thee.” What he wanted most was to know God Himself.

Thirdly, his heart cry was, “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.” Seeing the glory of God was the highest end and greatest privilege possible for Moses. And, amazingly, God granted this request. But God told him that he would have to be hid in the cleft of a rock, that God would cover Moses with His hand, passing by him and then enabling him to see a manifestation of God’s glory from His “hinder parts,” as the passage says. Now you think about this imagery that’s given to us here, because there are lots of other connections. When we have revealed to us the scene of heaven, we discover angels that are thronged around the throne, and they’re worshiping the Lord. But if you look carefully, you read carefully, you’ll notice that their faces are covered, and their hands are covered, and their feet are covered. Here are created beings who are completely sinless, who have never had any sin, and they have this joy of beholding God and praising Him and an intimate acquaintance with Him, and yet they’re covered, they’re shielded, as it were, from the direct gaze of God’s glory. And then you come back to Moses again in the Old Testament. Moses goes into the Tabernacle; he meets with Jehovah; the pillar of cloud descends; God shows his glory to Moses; and when he comes out, the people are terrified. Why? Because Moses’ face glowed. It was illuminated as a result of his communion with God. And so what did the people say? They said, “Moses, we cannot look upon your face; cover your face with a veil”—similar language to what you see with the angels in heaven. And so here in Exodus 33, God is putting Moses into the cleft of the rock, covering him. Why? The Lord says, “No man can look directly upon the glory of God and live.” And yet he is given, nonetheless, a glimpse; he’s given a manifestation of God’s glory.

All of this in answer to Moses' cry, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."

But you'll also notice in that next chapter, Exodus 34, we're told the rest of the story in verses 5 to 7. It says, "And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD." So that's the revelation of God. "And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."

Lastly, notice the response of Moses. Because just after this, in verse 8, we read, "And Moses made haste"—he was quick—"Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped." So what is the first and best response to seeing more of God's glory, and growing in a saving knowledge of Him? Well, we learn from this text that it is to bow down and worship God. This must always be true for us.

Secondly, we need to consider this theme doctrinally, and we'll do this under a few points. First of all, we see the priority of knowing God. In this first lecture, we're introducing the theme of all that we're going to be studying. This is a priority. The priority and chief longing that we saw with Moses—"I beseech thee, shew me now thy glory"—can be traced in the experience of godly saints throughout the whole Bible. Listen to Jeremiah 9:23 to 24, "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, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD." What are we to glory in? We're to glory in knowing God. Well, Paul picks up on this, both in his first and second epistle to the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1:31 and then 2 Corinthians 10:17, we read that "According as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." We see the same thing in the Psalms. One good example is Psalm 27:4—this is David writing, the man after God's own heart—and he says, "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life." Why? "To behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple." David says, There's one thing above every other thing that I want—"to behold the beauty of the LORD." And this theme is woven throughout the whole book of Psalms. Look at Psalm 42 and Psalm 63 and Psalm 84, and countless others. We sing in the Psalms of our desire to know God. Think of Jesus' words in John 17:3: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." Jesus summarizes eternal life in knowing God. You think of Paul and his desire in Philippians 3:8, and again in verse 10: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ." Paul is saying, Here's what I want—everything else is like cargo that is thrown overboard on a ship, in comparison to the knowledge of Christ. He goes on in verse 10, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." What we find in Paul is the same exact thing that you see in what Jesus described and in what the Psalmist describes, as well as what we saw in Jeremiah and Moses and so on. Another example is from the Gospels. The disciples in John 20:20—this is after the resurrection of our Lord—we read, "And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord." Nothing is more important than coming to know God in Christ and to see His glory. This is a priority for us.

The second chapter of the Westminster Confession is devoted to this doctrine of who God is and how we are to understand the Trinity, and I would encourage you to look at that. We'll be referencing it in the lectures that follow. But you see it abbreviated in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which was designed for children to learn these doctrines. And we find, for example, in the fourth question, "What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." How many gods are there? "There is but One only, the living and true God." That's Question 5. Question 6: "How many persons are there in the Godhead? There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory." You see how that Catechism is putting into the hearts and minds of children and God's people this wonderful priority of knowing God.

But we can go further than that. We've established the priority, but you can think in terms of the history of the world, going all the way back to the garden, and all the way forward to glory. Go back to the garden. Man is created by God, made in the image of God, for communion with God. And we're told that he is placed in the garden where God had designed to manifest His presence to His people. And so man has his purpose, his very purpose, as well as his greatest privileges, all wrapped up in nearness to God and in the knowledge of Him. And then we see man's fall, in Genesis 3, and sin plunges man into these desperate circumstances. It results in a loss and a distortion of the true knowledge of God, led to alienation from God, so that, in Genesis 3:8, we read, "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden." Here is Adam—he fears the voice that he previously loved, the voice that revealed the knowledge of God's glory and will to him! Now, rather than being drawn near to the Lord, he's fleeing and he's seeking to hide, foolishly, from the Lord. Natural man is left in this wreckage. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Or in the next chapter, 3:18, "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise." So you see how God, in the garden, had designed man to have a true spiritual knowledge of Him and communion with God, and that was destroyed by the fall. And then we come, of course, to the gospel, and the gospel ultimately leads to glory. The gospel is the saving knowledge of God in Christ—God coming and telling sinners who He is and what He's accomplished, the way in which sinners are restored to fellowship with God, how there is reconciliation that is brought about by Christ to God, how there's a recovery and renewal of spiritual knowledge and righteousness and holiness for the true gospel believer found in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel provides a recovery of the saving knowledge of God. And that, of course, can be traced all the way to glory. What is heaven? And what is the soul—the core—of heaven? It is beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is soaking in the knowledge and a perpetually-growing, eternally-growing knowledge of God. You turn to the end of the Bible. We looked at Genesis 2 and 3. Go to Revelation 21 and 22, the last two chapters. In Revelation 21:3, it says, "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." Here is God dwelling again with His people. In verse 7, "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son." The great reward given to God's believing, overcoming people is God Himself—the knowledge of God. In verse 23, you see it, "And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for

the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” And then chapter 22:4, “And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.” So you can see how the study of the doctrine of God, with all of the individual doctrines underneath that, is absolutely fundamental to biblical Christianity and to a biblical Christian understanding and life. It’s important that we see these grounded doctrinally in our hearts and minds.

But then thirdly, we need to consider this theme polemically. Consider this briefly. What are the objections that people have to the study of the doctrine of God? Well, the first one that you often hear is that this is too abstract; this is very technical; it’s too difficult; it’s too complicated. What people are saying is that they want something easy, something that is immediately understandable, something that doesn’t require effort, something that they don’t have to think hard about and study deeply to be able to understand and to obtain. What does that mean? What are the implications for a person who has this sort of objection? All they really want is a false god. They want a false god, rather than the knowledge of the true God. Because man is finite—limited in his capacities—and sinful, a finite, sinful man cannot ever grasp the glory of an infinite, unlimited, unbounded God. It’s impossible. It’s impossible for man to wrap his mind, if you will, around all that there is to know about the depths of God’s infinite being. I remember one of my sons coming to me, when he was just a very small child, and asking me about time and eternity. He’d heard in sermons about the eternity that is to come, heaven and hell, and he began to ask questions about it. He was coming to see and understand that in eternity, it never ends; that if you can think in terms of our normal measurements, if you get a hundred trillion years into eternity, you’re no sooner to the end than you were at the beginning, because it goes on and on and on, forever. And so he asked some questions, we talked about it, and he went away. He came back a short time later, and he said, “Daddy, when I think about God’s eternity, and I think about, even, eternal life, it makes my brain hurt.” I thought to myself, Well, that’s very good, son. It has to make our brains hurt to think about things that are so big, so grand, so glorious as those that pertain to God Himself. As we’ll learn in this course, God is incomprehensible. We know Him, and we know the believer knows Him truly, but we don’t know Him exhaustively, and we can never know God as He knows Himself. We know our place, our limitations, and we’re willing to have to exert diligent effort in thinking deeply about matters that are not easy for us.

A second objection, similar to the first one, is those who come and say, “Well, what is practical is what is important. That’s all that’s important. Tell me how to live, not what to believe.” Well, this is equally terrible—in some ways even, perhaps, more terrible than the first objection. Tell me how to live, not what to believe? Well, if you’ve worked your way through the previous lectures, you know that what you believe is what determines how you live; that we are not those who have this notion of a religion that serves my interests, that answers my practical questions, and improves my practical life. The believer is being brought to a saving knowledge of God in Christ, and the highest chief end in all of that is to see and know God Himself. That’s an end in itself; that’s a reward in itself; that’s a blessing in itself. And so that comes first, and that is of greatest weight. But it’s also true that without the knowledge of God, your practical life will be a disaster, because much of what is broken and sinful and disobedient and confused in your Christian life can be traced back in one degree or another to an inadequate knowledge of who God is. Coming to know Him informs how we are to live.

A third objection is that we only need knowledge of salvation itself. “Tell us, yes, about sin; tell us, though, about Christ and what God has done to accomplish salvation; tell us about how sinners are brought into that salvation, and that’s enough for me.” This, too, is a problem. Because if that’s

the way that a person thinks, then they don't understand what salvation is, nor do they understand what salvation entails. Salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins or eternal life. Salvation is coming into a saving relationship with God. What husband would say, "I don't want to know my wife. I don't want to learn about her. I don't want to understand her." You would say, "Well, then you don't love her." You would say, "This is terrible, ungodly behavior and thinking on the part of a husband." How much more for the believer who is wed to his or her heavenly Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, and brought to love Him? Love demands a desire to know the One that is loved, and to be able to behold Him, and to think about Him, to hear all that He has to tell us about Himself in His own Word. This is salvation, and ultimately, of course, glory. Glory is taken up, in heaven, with a growing depth of the knowledge of God and the sight of His glory. To say, we only need to know of salvation itself, is to say that you don't know what salvation is at all. And so that's not an appropriate objection either.

Fourthly and lastly, we need to consider this practically. We can draw some practical applications even from an overview or introduction like the one we're considering. First of all, the study of systematic theology entails a humble act of devotion to living unto God, which leads, of course, to worshiping Him and serving His glory. And so the top practical application that flows from the doctrine of God is worship. That's what we saw with Moses. That's what we see with the angels—the angels' chief privilege and preoccupation is with worshiping God. And redeemed sinners, who are brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, are given the privilege of angels, which is to praise, to adore, to worship God. This will be, of course, as I've noted, the preoccupation of the believer in heaven. We can say with the words of Exodus 15:11, "Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" The first practical application is worship.

Secondly, the knowledge of God leads to growth in godliness. Think of the words of 2 Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass"—or mirror, "the glory of the Lord"—beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord—"are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." You see Paul's point. We behold in the "glass"—or mirror—of God's Word, the glory of God, and we're transformed by the Holy Spirit into His likeness. In other words, we become like what we worship. Psalm 115 talks about this. Idolaters become like the idols that they worship. God's people become like the living and true God, who they worship. And so our reading of the Bible, our singing of Psalms, our listening to the preaching of God's Word, our taking the Lord's Supper, all of these means are ways in which we come to behold the glory of God and through which the Spirit sanctifies His people.

Thirdly, there is great comfort and strength that the Lord provides in the doctrine of God in times of trial. Isaiah lived in a difficult time. The church was a disaster, the nation was under great threats. And you come to Isaiah 40, and the Lord provides answers for His people there. In chapter 40, He's describing many of the ways in which God's people are to find hope. And in verse 9 it says, "O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!" What did Israel need in the face of looming trials and acute difficulties? The Lord tells Isaiah, Tell them to "Behold your God!" And you think of how this comes out in Isaiah. When you behold God, what happens? He's the King that is sitting high above the circle of the earth, and we're told that He looks upon the nations as "dust in the balance," as "less than nothing," that the inhabitants are as "grasshoppers." When we take in the sight of God and the sight of His majesty, all of a sudden these enormous mountains and trials—big nations with all of their

threats, big people with all of their power—they're reduced to their proper size; they're infinitesimally small; they're seen as insignificant. You get to the end of Isaiah 40—I'll leave it to you to read that—where there is great encouragement given that God's people will be strengthened in the midst of their trials.

Fourthly, the doctrine of God provides for us the source of greatest pleasure. This comes out in Psalm 16:8, "I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." And then listen to the words of verse 11, "Thou will shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore." The doctrine of God actually provides God's people with the sweetest, most delectable, most wonderful pleasures that are to be experienced in this world, all of which are a foretaste of what the believer will enjoy in God's immediate presence in heaven. Is the doctrine of God practical? Yes, it is extremely practical, as we'll see.

Well, in this introductory lecture, we have established from the Scriptures the importance of the doctrine of God within biblical Christianity, and for the individual believer's thinking and practice and experience. In the remainder of the lectures throughout this second module on systematic theology, we'll be delving into a more detailed consideration of who God is and what God has revealed of Himself to us. As we prepare to do so, we must humble ourselves like Moses and plead with Him, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."