

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

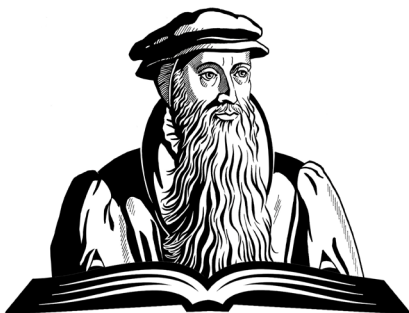
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 2:*

### THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

*Lecture 10*

### PREDESTINATION



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

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Rev. Robert D. McCurley is minister of the Gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

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*Module 2 ~ Lecture 10*

## PREDESTINATION

When God says in the Bible that natural, unconverted men are dead in trespasses and sins, many people find themselves puzzled. They may respond by saying, “I don’t feel dead, I don’t seem dead. Look at me blink and eat and run and so on.” The problem lies in their failure to recognize that men have both a body and a soul. Their body can be alive and active, while simultaneously their soul can be dead. Then what are the indications that a person’s soul is dead in sin? Well, the easiest thing is to think in terms of the parallel with the body. Those who are spiritually dead cannot see the light of God’s truth. They cannot hear by faith the Word and believe it. They do not taste and savor the wonder of God’s love in Christ. They cannot respond to the truth or run in the way of God’s commandments. Like a dead corpse, they are spiritually lifeless.

Well, this paints a grim picture of reality. People left to themselves are far worse off than they imagine—they’re hopelessly lost. The unconverted are not just sick or weak, they’re spiritually blind, ignorant, and dead in sins. That means that if left alone, they cannot possibly respond to the gospel and be saved from their sins, any more than a person in a grave can respond to someone shouting at them. What the sinner needs can only be provided by God. He must show the initiative in supernaturally giving them spiritual life. Otherwise, the dead sinner will die in his sins and suffer the eternal death of divine punishment in hell. But thanks be to God that He is pleased, graciously and mercifully, to choose a people for Himself, to seek and save them, to give them life, and to secure their complete and eternal redemption in Christ Jesus.

The series of lectures in this second module on systematic theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the earlier lectures, we explored what the Bible teaches about God, both in His unity and in His trinity. But in the latter part, in lectures 9 through 12, we are turning our attention to all things outside of God—namely, creation. You’ll recall that in the previous lecture, we took up for consideration the doctrine of the decrees of God. We saw that the divine decree determines everything that happens outside of God, from initial creation, through God’s governing providence in history. But before we turn to the doctrines of creation and providence, we’re going to consider the doctrine of predestination. And in doing so, we move from the broader concept of God’s decree, to a narrower consideration of the divine decree in relation to God’s purpose in redemption. In expounding predestination, we will follow the pattern that we have used in all of our lectures.

We’ll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our further consideration of the doctrine of predestination. We read in Ephesians 1:4–6, these words: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, where-

in he hath made us accepted in the beloved.” Paul continues, in verses 11 and 12, by saying, “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ.” So Paul opens his epistle by highlighting the spiritual blessings and privileges that believers receive in Christ. In doing so, he stretches his mind backward into eternity before the beginning of the world, and then he stretches his mind forward to the believer’s heavenly inheritance in the world to come, and he encompasses everything else that is in between these. But I want us to focus especially on his reference to the saving blessings recorded in the past. We read that God “chose” His people in Christ (verse 4), that God “predestinated” believers to salvation (verses 5 and 11). Notice that God is the one doing the choosing and predestining. He takes the initiative. He decides whom He will save.

Secondly, we also see that God made this determination “before the foundation of the world”—before the beginning of time, before the creation of the earth, before any people actually existed. He did not decide to convey these saving privileges after He saw what individual people would do.

Thirdly, this is further reinforced by the words of the text in verse 5. We read that God predestined a people “according to the good pleasure of his will,” and in verse 11, “according to the purpose of him, who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” So the reason behind God’s predestinating to save a people is rooted in His own good pleasure, His own will, and His own divine purpose. It’s not based on man’s will, or man’s disposition or action.

Lastly, we see the end of all of this. God’s predestination results in the “praise of the glory of His grace” (verses 6 and 12). Predestination accentuates the grace of God. Salvation is a gift from God bestowed out of His own good pleasure. Because the choice of salvation originates with God, all the praise and glory go to God. If man could lay claim to some of the credit of his salvation—his wise choosing of God, then man would have a share in the glory. But it is not so. God reserves all of the glory for Himself, from first to last, and magnifies that glory through His sovereign grace in choosing to save an undeserving people.

In this lecture, we’ll explore an introduction to the doctrine of predestination, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of predestination reveals the majesty and power and love of God, thus humbling us and stirring our hearts to adore and praise Him for His wonderful mercy.

Secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of this matter of predestination. All that we learned about the divine decree applies to the matter of predestination. Like the decree, predestination is eternal, it’s immutable, it’s not conditional, and so on. This doctrine is simply stated in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, paragraphs 3 and 4, which says, “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.” Thus far the language of the Confession. So in seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must have firmly fixed in our minds.

First, let’s define our terms. Predestination is God’s decree determining the eternal destiny of all men. God, by His divine will, foreordains—He predetermines; He decides beforehand who will be saved and who will not be saved. We can think of predestination as consisting of two sides: election (God choosing whom He will save) and reprobation (God’s choosing whom He will not save). We’ll consider both of these. The doctrine of election refers to God’s sovereign decree to redeem



a people for Himself. So when you hear the word “election,” think “choosing”—God’s choosing. By way of illustration, in the political realm of many countries, the citizens “elect,” or “choose,” their government officials. Maybe that will help you remember, election is God choosing to save sinners. Now, this is fleshed out in that same chapter in the Westminster Confession, chapter 3, in paragraphs 5 and 6, if you want to reference those. But as we saw in Ephesians 1, the source of God’s choosing is His own good pleasure. We read elsewhere in Romans 9:11, “For the children being not yet born”—this is referring to Jacob and Esau—“for the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth.” So God’s decree to elect His people is eternal and unchangeable. In Romans 8:29–30 we read, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” In terms of God’s eternal and unchangeable decree to elect, you can also see 2 Timothy 2:19 or what we noted from Ephesians 1. As we see in the Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 6, it says, “Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.”

Election is also unconditional. Romans 9 talks about this. But if you look at Acts 13:48, it says, “And when the Gentiles heard this,”—that is, the gospel—“they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” Again, Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 5 says, “Out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto; and all to the praise of His glorious grace.” So it’s reinforcing what we’re seeing in the Scripture, that God did not make His choice based on anything He saw in man, or conditioned on anything that He saw would happen in the future. Indeed, Jesus says in John 15:16, “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.” The Lord is showing that He’s the one who unconditionally chooses His own people; it’s not the reverse.

But this also means that divine election is exceedingly gracious. Romans 9, which is devoted to this doctrine, says in verses 15–16, “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion and whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of Him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.” So God is the one who is showing His gracious, merciful, condescending love, in pursuing to choose and save a people. We see this in action with Lydia, in Acts 16:14, where we’re told that, “A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshiped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” God’s graciousness is magnified against the backdrop of men’s spiritual deadness and inability. Again, Jesus says in John 6:37 and 44, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. . . . No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise Him up at the last day.” So election speaks of those chosen by God unto salvation.

On the other side, conversely, the doctrine of reprobation refers to God’s decree to leave the rest of mankind to perish in their sins. Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 7 says, “The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.” Or as you see in Romans 9:18, “therefore hath He mercy on whom he will have

mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.”

For the sake of clarity, reprobation includes two facets. First, there is what theologians call preterition, which means “to pass by” or “to pass over.” Preterition is the sovereign, unconditional decree to pass over the non-elect, or reprobate, and to leave them in their sins. You saw this language in what I just cited from Westminster Confession of Faith. So on one side, you have preterition. Second, there is condemnation. The sinfulness of men is the active ground which damns them. What actually condemns men to hell is their own sin. They only receive what they have merited and deserve. In reprobation, God ordains them to be left under His just wrath. So we think of predestination as consisting of election and reprobation. And when we think about God’s decree of reprobation, we can think of preterition (His passing by, leaving the reprobate to themselves) and condemnation (it’s their own sin which damns them). John Calvin wrote, “No one who wishes to be thought religious dares simply deny predestination, by which God adopts some to hope of life and sentences others to eternal death.” Well there is a brief encapsulated summary of the doctrine of predestination.

Let’s, thirdly, consider this doctrine polemically; and there are a few things here. First of all, some will object that this doctrine is not fair. How can people be held responsible if they were not chosen by God? Well, Paul anticipates this common objection when dealing with predestination throughout Romans 9. He says, in verses 19–20, “Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour?” You see, the objection stems from a high view of man and a low view of God, thereby causing us to forget our place. God is free to do as He pleases with His creation. He is the potter; we are the clay. Furthermore, this reinforces the fact that we should never want what is fair. If all men got what they truly deserved, then all men would be lost forever. Thank God that He does not give what is fair. In His mercy, He is pleased to choose and save an undeserving people for the praise of the glory of His grace. Think, by way of parallel, of the nation of Israel—God’s Old Testament chosen people. When God chose Israel, He did not choose Egypt, or the Canaanites or others. Well, why did he choose them? Was it because they were deserving? No, it was God’s free choice of sovereign love. In Deuteronomy 7:7–8 we read, “The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

Secondly, another objection is that God is the cause for why some go to hell. Well, this objection confuses the mode of divine activity. God’s positively providing the Spirit and regeneration and faith to the elect is done by His monergistic work of grace. But God does not monergistically work sin or unbelief in the lives of the reprobate. Monergism means “to work one way.” So God does monergistically give the Spirit, and a new heart, and faith, and so on, but He does not work sin and unbelief in the lives of the reprobate. Rather, He withholds His monergistic work of grace from them, and ordains to leave them to perish in their sins. Reprobate sinners bear the culpability and responsibility for their own damnation.

There are those who will object that this doctrine means that there are people, who sincerely want to be converted, and who are rejected and excluded from salvation; and that is not true. Remember what we saw in the introduction about spiritually dead souls. No one will ever want

to come to Christ without God's divine intervention, and all who do come, do so because they're drawn by His marvelous grace. Those whom the Father has chosen will certainly be saved. John 6:37, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out."

Fourthly, there have been those who have rejected this biblical truth, and taught false doctrine down through the ages. So in the early church, we have Augustine, who was a godly, faithful, biblical theologian. There was a controversy that he had with a man named Pelagius. Pelagianism had a naturalistic view of salvation in which the power exerted to save man is found within himself. So infants are born without a corrupt nature, and so on. Well, you can immediately recognize the error there. Then later on, there was what was called semi-Pelagianism, which arose out of this battle, and dominated the period of the Middle Ages, and provided the historic roots for Arminianism. This view asserted that man saves himself with God's help. Likewise, Arminianism, which arose during the time of the Reformation, taught that by God's universal, prevenient grace, man has a free will and the ability to savingly respond to the gospel. And so predestination is reduced to God foreseeing who would choose Christ. Likewise, Luther had battles with Erasmus, and in the next century, the Synod of Dort arose in response to a group called the Remonstrants. The Remonstrants were teaching this Arminian doctrine. The Synod of Dort, with its verdict, its canons, upheld the biblical doctrine we've been considering here, and refuted the errors of the Remonstrants. And you'll see in the following century, how George Whitefield, the famous evangelist who held to the doctrine of predestination, had to battle John Wesley, who was an Arminian who rejected these doctrines. And many more examples could be given. My point is, that battle will continue, and so in each generation, we have to remember the words of Jude 3, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." We must continue to hold fast to what the Scriptures teach us.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves. In fact, the Westminster Confession does this. In its final paragraph, paragraph 8, of chapter 3, it says this: "The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel." So the doctrine of divine decrees must be handled with wisdom and discernment. The decrees of God, as you'll remember, are secret. We are called upon to set our sights on what is revealed, specifically, what is revealed in His Word. Remember Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever." The Scriptures present the gospel to sinners. This gospel is set forth in preaching before men, and those men are called upon to respond by receiving and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. It's focusing on what is revealed, not secret.

Secondly, this doctrine casts us in dependence upon the Lord. We can teach ourselves and others to pray for the Lord to give us His Holy Spirit, to give us a new heart, and to give us the gift of faith. The believer who receives Christ in the gospel by faith must then give all of the glory and honor to God. This doctrine destroys pride, and it fosters humility. We are led to marvel at His sovereign love and condescending grace, in seeking and in securing salvation for those who are so undeserving of His mercy. This yields delight in God and a desire to worship and adore Him.

Fourthly, this doctrine should strengthen and not diminish assurance of salvation. Salvation



rests in God's omnipotent hands, not in our own feeble hands. What assurance, what confidence would there be, if it was in our hands? The fruit of the gospel and the fruit of gospel grace and effectual calling can secure a confidence and persuasion in the believer's eternal election.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of predestination. But you could summarize what we've learned in three brief, simple words—God saves sinners. God is the one who does the choosing and saving, not man. God does not merely attempt to save, He saves—irresistibly saves the elect. And He saves undeserving sinners, who, if left to themselves, would be otherwise lost. In the next lecture, we'll turn our consideration to the doctrine of creation, which addresses the divine decree with regards to God bringing the cosmos into existence.