

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

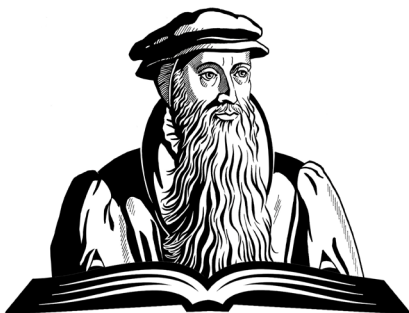
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 11

CREATION



The John Knox Institute
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John Knox Institute of Higher Education

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 11

CREATION

In this world, we are faced with many difficult but fundamental questions. Some of those ultimate questions include things like: What is my purpose in life? What is my true identity? Where does life lead? or, Where am I going? What is real? What is right and what is wrong? How do I know the things that I know? What is my origin? Why do certain things exist? But another such question underneath some of these others is this: Why does anything exist? That's a pressing question that needs a cogent answer. And it's tied to other related questions. For example, knowing *how* it is that things exist would help us know *why* it is that they exist. Natural, unbelieving men may dream up all sorts of silly answers to these questions. The fact is that, left to ourselves, it may be impossible to know the answers. But we are not left to stumble around in the dark, perplexed and uncertain about life's most important questions. God Himself tells us the answers. He reveals what we need to know in His inspired, infallible and inerrant Scriptures. This includes the answer to the question, Why does anything at all exist? We discover this in the biblical doctrine of creation, the topic to which we turn in this lecture.

The series of lectures in this second module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. And as we have come to see, the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. So in the early lectures, we explored what the Bible says about who God is in Himself. In these later lectures, lectures 9 through 12, we're turning our attention to all things outside of God, namely, within creation. You'll recall that in lecture 9, we took up for consideration the doctrine of the decrees of God. We saw that the divine decrees determine everything that happens outside of God, from initial creation through God's governing providence in history. And in the last lecture, we considered the doctrine of predestination, which teaches us about God's decree in relation to the eternal destiny of men. We now turn to creation. Creation also flows out of the divine decrees. The Shorter Catechism, in question 8, says, "God executeth His decrees in the works of creation and providence."

We will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our further consideration of the doctrine of creation. We read, in Psalm 33:6–9, these words, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." The Psalm opens with a call to "Rejoice in the Lord," and to praise Him, and this is a response to seeing who God is and what God does. In verses 6 to 9, which we just cited, our minds are drawn to God the Creator and to His work of creation.

So first of all, we read that the Lord spoke the universe into existence. Now think about that for just a second. Think about how vast the universe is. Scientists can only peer into a portion of

outer space, but they cannot come close to reaching the borders of it. The number of galaxies and all the stars and planets that fill them is staggering. It boggles our mind. Yet God merely spoke, and they came into existence. And we do not think of speaking as something powerful, do we? Human breath is weak—it's just air passing through one's mouth. And yet God uses this metaphor, this image, to reveal that He did the most powerful thing ever, creating the universe, with what we think of as the weakest means, what Psalm 33 says is “the breath of His mouth.” Well, this manifests the glory of His divine power.

Secondly, we also learn that there was a point at which the universe—all that we see and know—did not exist. Only God existed before the world. The heavens and the earth have a beginning, which means that all of time and all of space have a beginning, and that God is the sole cause that brought about all that exists.

Furthermore, we see that God designed the created cosmos after His own will. Psalm 33 says, “He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses.” So it is His handiwork. The design reflects the intentions of the designer, and God's purpose was to show His glory. So we are taught to expect that, as we behold and study the created world, we will discover wonderful truths about God Himself.

Fourthly, this truth carries a practical impact. Notice the words of Psalm 33, “Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.” The doctrine of creation leads us to the fear of God—to fearing God. So we have to have a consciousness of God's transcendence—that He is far above all else, and that God sees all things; that He is, in fact, present everywhere; that we live and move and have our being in Him; that we operate in this world within the presence of an all-seeing God, and we have to have some consciousness of what the Lord requires of us. This induces the fear of God. It also results in us standing in awe of God Himself. That's what Psalm 33 says. When we think about, and when we behold the works of God and creation, we're brought to awe, to adoration. This was the effect upon David. Think of Psalm 8:3–4. He says, “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” Here is an expression of awe and reverence before the Lord.

Well, in this lecture, we will explore an introduction to the doctrine of creation, providing once again some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of creation reveals the majesty and the power and the goodness of God, thus stirring our hearts to adore and praise Him.

Having considered this scripturally looking briefly at Psalm 33, secondly, let's consider the doctrinal exposition of creation. This doctrine is simply stated in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 4, paragraph 1, which says, “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good.” In seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must have firmly fixed in our minds.

First of all, the author of creation is God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. The starting point of every Christian doctrine is God Himself. You see in Westminster Confession of Faith the words, “It pleased God.” This is God willing creation, which refers to the divine decree, God working “all things after the counsel of His own will,” Ephesians 1:11. “It pleased God.” In Revelation 4:11 we read, “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for

thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” The created order did not have to exist necessarily. God requires nothing other than Himself. The universe exists only because the triune God chooses for it to exist. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created all things. And you’ll remember that all of the external works of the Trinity are undivided. There is one divine will: 1 Corinthians 8:6, “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” You see references to all three persons of the Trinity in the work of creation, from the opening of Genesis. Notice the first three verses of the first chapter of the Bible. It refers to the Father: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” It refers to the Holy Spirit, in verse 2: “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water.” We read, likewise, in Job 26:13: “By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent.” But we also see reference to the Son, in verse 3—Genesis 1:3—it says, “God said, Let there be light.” Christ, of course, is the eternal Word. Well, is it right to see Christ here, in Genesis 1:3? Well, it’s interesting because the opening words of the Gospel of John are nearly identical to Genesis 1:1, but it substitutes Christ, “the Word.” It says, “In the beginning was the Word.” This places Christ in the opening verses of Genesis. It goes on, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” Christ first appears in Genesis 1, not in Matthew 1. This is Christ’s world. He created the universe that He would later enter, through His incarnation, in order to redeem it and raise it above and beyond how it began. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the author of creation. And so it’s no surprise, therefore, to see the pronouns that are used in Genesis 1:26. “And God said, Let us make man in our image,” and, “after our likeness.” The author of creation is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, the goal of creation is the manifestation of God’s glory. Creation has a purpose: the display of God’s glory, to the end that He might be known, loved, served, and worshiped by men and angels. When we say “manifestation,” we’re speaking of God’s revelation of Himself, and of His divine perfections. In Romans 1:20, it says, “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen”—a manifestation revealed—“being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” This revelation of God in creation enriches us with the light of His knowledge. We sing of this in Psalm 19:1–3, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.” All that exists comes from God and leads to God. As we read in Romans 11:36, “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”

Thirdly, the inception of creation was “in the beginning.” The Bible opens with these words, in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The universe and everything in it had a beginning. That means that this was the beginning of time itself, which is a finite, limited, measurable part of creation, along with all other created things. Before creation, only the eternal God existed. God created all things of nothing. He created the universe without any pre-existing material. That means that matter is not eternal. Only God is eternal. We sing in Psalm 33:6, “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.” He created all things out of nothing. Creation proceeds from the decree of God.

Fourthly, the scope of creation was all things outside of God. Paul speaks about this in Colossians 1:16, “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were

created by him, and for him.” God created the unseen heavens and angels, and even the outermost reaches of the universe. Everything falls within the compass of His created work—everything, of course, but God Himself.

Fifthly, the duration of creation was in the space of six days. The Bible teaches that God created the universe in six normal days, contrary to the myth of evolution, which teaches billions of years—the world, the universe came into existence over the course of billions of years. Now the fact that God created in six days is clear from Scripture. You see it in Genesis 1. You’ll notice that there the word “day” is qualified by “evening and morning,” thereby limiting the time frame to what we think of as a normal day. We see that in a half dozen places throughout Genesis 1. “Day” is used on the fourth day to define the period governed by the sun (again, a regular day) in verse 14. Every time the word “day”—the Hebrew word that’s translated “day”—is used, in conjunction with a numerical adjective, like first, second, third, fourth day, fifth “day,” it is always a literal day in the Bible. And the plural use of “days” of creation always means literal days, throughout the entire Old Testament. And notably, if we don’t have enough already, in Exodus 20:11, in the context of the Ten Commandments, you’ll note the fourth commandment. In the fourth commandment, man’s workweek—“Six days shalt thou labour,” and on the seventh day, you’ll rest. Man’s workweek is patterned after God’s workweek. And so that, too, reinforces the fact that it is a true week and true days. If Moses meant six ages, he could have employed a different Hebrew word, not the word that we translate “day,” but the Hebrew word “olam,” which means “ages.” So the duration is clearly in the space of six days.

And then lastly and briefly, we should note the nature of creation. It was “all very good.” This is God’s declaration about His own work. God is good. All that He does is good. Therefore, the universe was created good. So we must reject any notion that that physical matter is inherently evil. No, God says it was created “all very good.”

Thirdly, we should consider this doctrine polemically. And there are a few things here. First of all, in order to get around the existence of God, some have tried to assert that the universe itself is eternal, without a beginning. Well, this falsehood leads to all sorts of absurdities. Even most scientists will say, in holding to their evolutionary theory, that there was a big bang, that something erupted at the beginning, and so on; that that was the beginning of the universe. They’re still asserting that there’s a beginning. But nonetheless, this idea of the created world being eternal, what would that mean? Well, every effect has a cause. So our parents were used in order to conceive us, and we were born, and their parents, and their parents before them. And you can say the same thing about the animal life and vegetation and so on and so forth. And if you keep going back, you can go back, and back, and back, and back in your mind. Eventually, what happens? You can’t have always had these things in existence, because there would be what philosophers call an infinite regress. So you would continue to go back, and back, and back. If there was no beginning to start from, you would ultimately not be here now. There would not be a present. You have to have a place to push off from, so that successive events can follow. If it continues to go infinitely into the past, then you would never reach, as it were, progression forward, because it’s infinitely to the past—there’s no beginning. So it leads to a rational contradiction and to all sorts of confusion. No, there had to be a beginning for a created world to exist at all, which is not the case with a God who is outside of time and space, who is eternal, and who, indeed, Himself, is the One who caused and created the beginning of all else. And we considered some of that when we were thinking about God’s eternity.

Secondly, throughout history, various forms of false theology and pagan philosophy have

taught that what is physical is evil, and what is immaterial is good. The true doctrine of creation teaches us to reject this unbiblical dichotomy. The error leads to perverse consequences. Why? Well, not only for the reasons that we've already noted, about God's works being good because they come from a good God and other things, but also because the second person of the Godhead entered into this world and assumed to Himself a true physical body and a reasonable soul. Created manhood was joined to uncreated Godhood. We must affirm the goodness of God's work of creation in the world around us, otherwise we would be attaching evil to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, which contradicts everything that the Bible teaches.

Thirdly, unbelief leads to irrational myths about the beginning of the world. The pagans had this, and the modern, unbelieving world has it. A prime example is the error of evolution under the false guise of science. But you need to think carefully here, because the question of origins is actually a theological question, not a scientific one. You say, "Well, why is that?" Well, science pertains to empirical observation. And so we have laboratories, and telescopes, and microscopes, and so on, and the material that science studies is the physical world. And it comes through empirical data, the observation of nature and so on. But the fact is that there was no scientist present at the beginning, and it is beyond the reach and scope of the scientific method to be able to pontificate about the beginning of time. There is only one that was there, and that was God Himself. And thankfully, God has given us a record of what took place, He being the prime witness. So it's a theological issue and not, first and foremost, a scientific one.

But this error of evolution also leads to absurd conclusions. We could list many of them, but think about the ethical implications of evolution. Evolution says that, basically, the human race has risen out of primordial slime, and that we have, over time, climbed our way up the food chain to becoming homo sapiens, that we are ourselves animals like other animals, that have evolved with rational intelligence, and so on and so forth. But if that were true, which it is not, then we are equivalent to the rest of the animal world. Now, when a lion eats a gazelle on the plains of Africa, no one considers that morally reprehensible. No one protests and says, "Well, this is terrible. A gazelle is being eaten by a lion." No, we say that a lion is doing what is in accord with its instincts, it's feeding upon its prey, and so on. Well, if the fable of evolution were true, the ethical implications are that I'm an animal, you're an animal; what one animal does to another is ethically amoral—it doesn't have any ethical implications. So if a person kills another person, you can't really object to it—it's just one animal doing to another animal what they wish. And of course, we revolt against that, and rightly so. We say, no, that is wrong. Man actually has dignity, there's inherent value in human life, the Bible teaches that man is made in the image of God, man is distinct from the rest of the created order. And so the biblical doctrine of creation provides us with the ethical framework and foundation for preserving life, whereas evolution undermines it, if they were consistent. So we have to continue to affirm that God alone created the universe, and He did so in the space of six days, as the Bible says.

Fourthly, we can now draw a couple of practical applications for ourselves. First of all, the Bible calls us to study all of God's works. That includes His work of creation. Psalm 19 teaches us that "the heavens declare," or they preach, in a way, God's glory. So the Christian cannot be disinterested in the world around them. David, for example, was captivated by the glory of God and the expanse of the heavens. But the Psalms are also full of references to all parts of the created order. The proper use of the tools of science can help the believer explore the wonders of God in the stars and galaxies, the mountains, the depths of the sea, vegetation, animal life, even the human body. But that study is a means to the end of seeing the glory of God. So the Christian scientist

approaches things differently from the unbeliever. They want to pull out what God has put into the design of His own world. You think of the parables and accounts that we have of Jesus in the gospels. He'll refer to the lilies of the field, He'll refer to the sparrow, and so on. It's not as if the Lord was seeing something, and then trying to think of a spiritual analogy. No, He was actually bringing out what God had designed. Those spiritual lessons were actually built in to the created order themselves, so that when we go to look upon the work of creation, we're actually thinking about and extracting, if you will, what God shows us about Himself, what He requires of us, and chiefly, of course, His glory.

Secondly, God's creation should lead us to worship God. His work of creation should lead us to worship God. The appropriate response to seeing Him must be adoring Him for who He is. We sing Psalm 104; and Psalm 104 is devoted to praising God for His work of creation. There are lots of things that are said, but in verse 24, and again in verses 33 and 34, we read these words, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches." It goes on: "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord." And so worship is the goal. God created the world, and He created it in order that He might manifest His glory, so that it would lead to Him being known, and loved, and served, and worshiped. So this doctrine of creation, once again, in opening, as it were, a vista, in showing forth the majesty of God, should lead us to worship Him, and to adore Him.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of creation. God executed His decree in the work of creation. He did so freely and graciously, in order to set forth His glory. God also executes His decrees in the work of providence. So in the next lecture, we'll turn our consideration to the doctrine of providence, which teaches us that God governs all of His creation, all of His creatures, and all of their actions.