

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

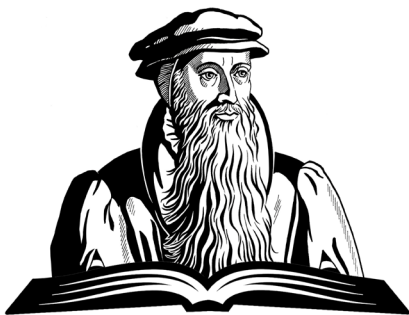
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 2:*

### THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

*Lecture 2*

### THE NATURE, LIMITS, AND MEANS OF KNOWING GOD



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

**John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

© 2021 by John Knox Institute of Higher Education

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, John Knox Institute, P.O. Box 19398, Kalamazoo, MI 49019-19398, USA.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

Visit our website: [www.johnknoxinstitute.org](http://www.johnknoxinstitute.org)

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.

[greenvillepresbyterian.com](http://greenvillepresbyterian.com)

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

### *Module 2 ~ The Doctrine of God*

1. Introduction
- 2. The Nature, Limits, and Means of Knowing God**
3. The Names of God
4. God's Being
5. The Attributes of God, Part 1
6. The Attributes of God, Part 2
7. The Attributes of God, Part 3
8. The Trinity
9. God's Decree
10. Predestination
11. Creation
12. Providence

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 2 ~ Lecture 2*

## THE NATURE, LIMITS, AND MEANS OF KNOWING GOD

God designed humans with two hands and two feet. We use our feet to walk, to run, to jump, and to move from one place to another. We use our hands to touch, to grab, hold, and carry things. We pick up food to purchase it in the market; we transfer that to a shelf at home; we perhaps place it in a pot to cook it; and we use our hands to put the food on our plate and into our mouths to eat it. All of this is very familiar. But God designed monkeys with something that people do not have. They have tails. More specifically, many monkeys have what is called a “prehensile” tail; that is, they have tails with which they can grasp things. Their tail can grab onto a branch when climbing a tree, or they can swing from that branch. They can use their tail to hold onto a banana, and so on. It is called a prehensile tail because it can grasp things. In the English language, the word “comprehend” is derived from the same root word as “prehensile”—“prehensile” tail. But “comprehend” means to grasp something with our mind, to lay hold of it mentally, or to know and understand it.

When it comes to our knowledge of God, the Bible teaches that the Lord is incomprehensible, which means that it is impossible for a creature to know God fully, perfectly, and completely. We begin our study of the doctrine of God by exploring the implications of God’s incomprehensibility in our knowledge of who God is. This series of lectures in this second module, or course, 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, which is to say, what God reveals to us about Himself. In the previous lecture, we considered an introduction to this module. In the present lecture, we will explore the nature, limits, and means of knowing God.

And, as has been the case in our other lectures, we’ll begin first of all by considering this scripturally, and specifically, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the nature of our knowledge of God. Consider what we read in Job 11:7 to 9. It says, “Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.” Notice that verse 7 begins with two searching, probing questions. They’re actually rhetorical questions that assume the answer, which is, “No! We cannot search out the full depths of all that God is; it is impossible to know the Almighty perfectly.” That is made clear in what follows in verses 8 and 9. It is too high, too deep, too broad, for us to wrap our minds around all that God is. The prophet Isaiah reinforces this point in Isaiah 40:28, which says, “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.” First, Isaiah appeals to the fact that God’s people do know things about God. They know what God

has revealed, that He is the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of all things, and is limitless in His power. But he also says, “There is no searching of His understanding.” Notice how that’s similar language to what we saw in Job. The believer knows enough about the Lord to know that no one can search out the full extent of God’s understanding. So Job 11:7–9 is one of the many passages in the Bible which sets forth the incomprehensibility of God. That word “incomprehensibility” is a big English word, but it simply refers to the fact that believers do know God truly, but they cannot know God fully, perfectly, and completely.

Secondly, let’s consider some of the doctrinal details relating to our knowledge of God. And we’ll note a handful of things here. First of all, we begin with the fact that God is infinite; that is to say, God is not finite. He is not limited. Infinite, therefore, means that God is without limits, without bounds, measures, and degrees. Everything that is created, all creatures, are by necessity finite. So you are finite, and a tree is finite; a star up in the heavens is finite; even an angel is finite. They’re all limited; limited in time, limited in terms of space in some circumstances, and in innumerable other ways. The fact that God is infinite, that He is without limitations, without bounds in His being, means that He is infinite in all that He is, all of His attributes. So He has infinite power, which is why we refer to Him as almighty. He is all mighty, all powerful. That’s true with regards to His wisdom. He has all wisdom—limitless wisdom, limitless knowledge; He knows all things. His holiness is infinite, His goodness is infinite, and so on. Well, since God is infinite, and since we are finite, we are very limited. It is impossible for the finite—we who are limited—to know fully what is infinite, the God who is unlimited and boundless. That would be as impossible as putting all of the oceans over all of the world with all of their depths into a single seashell. Your arm cannot reach all the way into the heavens and grasp a star. Likewise, your thoughts cannot fathom God’s bottomless being. Man cannot know all that there is to know about God. Now that is true here in this world. It is true, as well, in the world to come. Even into eternity it will be impossible for any creature—that’s the angels as well as redeemed believers—to ever fully see and fully comprehend all of the depths, the wonder, and the glory of who God is in His being, which means that for all of eternity in heaven, the believer will be continuously learning more and more and more about the glory of God.

Secondly, we can consider the distinction between the Creator and the creature. The creature cannot know God as God knows Himself, nor can any man see the divine essence. Remember what we read in 1 Timothy 6:15 and 16. It’s speaking about who God is, and it says, “Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.” God has in Himself a complete excellency in an imminent manner. He has it of Himself and from Himself and for Himself, unlike every other creature, who only has partial derived excellency at best.

Thirdly, God’s incomprehensibility is part of His glory. Think of how the Bible describes God’s attributes. His love “passeth knowledge,” Ephesians 3:19 tells us, so His love is bigger and greater than anything we can possibly get our minds around. Or we read, “Who knoweth the power of [His] anger,” in Psalm 90:11. Even His peace “passeth all understanding,” as Philippians 4:7 says. Surely, God is unsearchable. We know Him truly, but we cannot know Him fully. If you found out the most, you would still be far from finding out the utmost.

Fourthly, because God is incomprehensible, He is also incomparable. So He is unlike anything and everything else outside of Himself. In Exodus 15:11, we read, “Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?”

The Psalms which God gave us to sing in worship are full of this theme. For example, Psalm 89:6, “For who in the heaven can be compared unto the LORD? Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the LORD?” The knowledge of God results in a profound sense of wonder and admiration. He is incomparable. There’s truly none like unto the Lord. All of the false gods of this world cannot in any way compare to Him. Psalm 86:8 says, “Among the gods there is none like unto thee, O Lord; neither are there any works like unto to thy works.” This emphasizes the evil, of course, of all idolatry—of having anything else above the living and the true God. So His incomprehensibility relates to Him being incomparable. It shows forth His glory.

Fifthly, God does condescend to reveal Himself to mankind. The means by which He does this include creation, providence, but especially His Word, the Holy Scripture. So in creation, we read in Psalm 19, that “the heavens declare the glory of God.” Romans 1 picks up on this and says that through the created order, we can see His power, we can see His existence, we can see something of His goodness, and so on. So there are things seen there. We see the same thing in His providence—His power and unfolding and upholding all that comes to pass in time. But we especially learn about God most clearly, most fully, and most beautifully in the Holy Scriptures. He’s given to us the knowledge of Himself. Now man, of course, is made in the image of God, and as such, Romans 2 tells us, we have an innate and inescapable knowledge of God; that is to say, planted within the consciousness of man there is a sense of the divine existence of God. And that corresponds to what we see outside of us, so that the Lord says in Romans that every man is “without excuse.” They all know that there is a God who has created them, and to whom they are accountable. But this knowledge is non-saving without the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit. We see that in 1 Corinthians 2:13 to 16, “the natural man” cannot discern that which is spiritual. And it is especially important in relationship to the primacy of Scripture, because it’s in the Bible that God shows us the fact that He is a God who saves, a God who has secured redemption for His people. That can’t be seen in creation or in providence. And so in the unfolding of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, God is showing His people, in a variety of different ways, who He is. We noted how important this was in our first lecture; how important it was to Moses, and to David, and to Jeremiah, and to the Lord Himself, and to the apostle Paul, and so on.

And as you’re reading the Bible, you’ll notice a number of things. One thing that we’ll highlight here, and come back to in a future lecture, is that the Lord will use language that stoops to our own creatureliness. So the Bible will speak, for example, about the eyes of God, or about the ears of God—God hearing something; the arm of God—His strength; God coming, and God going, and so on. Well, we know that God doesn’t have a body like men. This language is what we call accommodation. He’s accommodating our creatureliness. He’s speaking, in other words, in ways that we can understand. And that language that employs the symbols and pictures of a human body is what is called anthropomorphic language. So it’s the language of man’s body. It’s not telling us that God literally has eyes like we do in our face, or ears on the side of our head, but rather the Lord is using it to explain something of who He is, in ways that we can understand. John Calvin refers to this as God “lispering to us.” What that means is, you can picture a parent holding a little child. And he will speak to the little baby in short words and in sounds and in ways that the baby can comprehend, since, of course, the baby has limited vocabulary. So God is coming to us and He’s lispering. When He says that He will “lay bare” the strength of His right arm, it’s not telling us literally that God has an arm, but it’s a picture showing us that God is powerful, that indeed He has all power, as we’ll come to see in future lectures. When it says that His eyes go to and fro throughout the whole earth, it’s saying that God is everywhere present, that God sees comprehensively, that He knows every-

thing intimately, the inside and the outside of our own hearts. And so that language is employed in order to bring us a knowledge of who God is in His glory and in His attributes.

So in summary, we learn in this doctrine the nature and limits of our knowledge of God. We know God truly, as He reveals Himself, but we can never know God exhaustively. Not even the angels in heaven will be able to do that, because they too are creatures like ourselves, and God is an infinite and incomprehensible, incomparable Creator.

Thirdly, we can consider this polemically. And there are a couple of extremes we'll touch on briefly that people have mistakenly, wrongly—at times sinfully—gone to. On one hand there are those who are inclined to say that we cannot know God. Here you would have the error of people actually cutting off the creature from any acquaintance with the Creator. This defies everything that the Bible is. Think about it. The Bible is a revelation from God. It is an unveiling of who God is. The whole purpose, both in terms of the created order where we see His glory, as well as in His word where we see His glory more accurately—the whole purpose of this is to communicate something to the creature. And so this objection of not being able to know God at all turns everything on its head. God created man in order that man might know and have fellowship with God. That was true in the garden. There is Adam walking with the Lord in the cool of the day, holding communion with Him. After the fall and the entrance of sin, the Lord provides a way of salvation in order to remove the enmity that came as a result of sin and to restore the communion and fellowship that God provides through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. So this objection would undermine the whole purpose of creation and the Scriptures, and it would also undermine the very core of what salvation is.

On the other hand, there are those who think that we can know God perfectly, that we can know God as God knows Himself. And this too is an error. It's a failure to come to grips with what we described earlier as the Creator/creature distinction. To know God as He knows Himself, you would have to be God; you would have to be infinite; you would have to have a limitless knowledge. This is impossible, by definition. And so to say that we can know God perfectly would be to take man and deify him, to try to raise man to the level of God Himself, which is idolatry. The Bible condemns this. Every attempt for man to lift himself up to the level of God makes man like Satan. This is what Satan did, right? He was grasping for something higher than what belonged to him, which is evil. And so this is an evil notion that should be rejected, repudiated by Bible-believing people, Christians.

Thirdly, there are those who say, "Well, yes, we can know God, but it is not that important to us. There are all sorts of things that are important—how we live, what we do, how we think, the practicalities of daily life, and so on and so forth. But thinking about who God is, and the whole pursuit of the knowledge of God, well, that's not something that is so significant." Well, this contradicts the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Think of what Jesus says in John 17:3. He says, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." What is Jesus doing? He's actually putting the knowledge of God at the very core, at the very heart, at the very center of everything. He defines eternal life in terms of knowing God. Indeed, the gospel is the means that God has provided to bring us to the end of knowing and enjoying who God is. Now that's true in this world. The believer has eternal life now, and thus is brought into a saving knowledge of God, is able to see Him, and to behold Him, to worship Him, to delight in Him. And, of course, this is the very core and heart of what heaven is. The joy of heaven is the sight of God, and being able to behold His glory in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Is this important? Yes, it is of greatest importance to us, which is why we have this whole course to study it.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves from this doctrine related to the nature and limits of our knowledge of God. And we'll highlight a handful of things. First of all, the study of the knowledge of God must lead to humility. An arrogant student of the doctrine of God is a living contradiction. Pride, in fact, reflects an absence of true knowledge, not a high attainment of that knowledge. Why do I say that? Because the more we understand, the more we realize how little we have come to grasp of all that God is. You see this again in Job 26:14, which says, "Lo, these are parts of his ways: but how little a portion is heard of him? but the thunder of his power who can understand?" What's happening? Job, the book which contains so much about the glory and grandeur of God—you see it in the early passages, but especially those latter passages of the book where God comes and speaks to Job and shows forth through a series of questions and assertions all that He is. You see in the midst of all of that Job saying, "Listen, we only see part of His ways. How little a portion is heard of him." In other words, we're humbled, we're brought low before the glory of God. And so, practically speaking, our study of the knowledge of God should humble us. And of course that's a wonderful thing, because God says that He gives more grace to the humble. He resists the proud, but He gives more grace to the humble.

Secondly, we recognize that the evil of sin is defined by who we sin against. So what are the implications of that? Well, we are sinning against an infinite God, and so the evil of our sin is defined by who it is that we're sinning against. If He's an infinite God, well, then that makes sense that sin requires a limitless, eternal punishment. You think of hell and the lake of fire—that is a punishment that is exacted upon the unbelieving, which never ceases. It goes on and on and on and on and on and on throughout all of eternity. And you think, "Well, why do limited numbers of sins result in a limitless punishment?" The answer is because of who it is that we're sinning against. We're sinning against an infinite God.

Thirdly, we must come to treasure the Lord and all that we know about Him above everything else. Now David expresses this again in the Psalms. In Psalm 27:4 we sing, "One thing"—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 enquire in his temple." In other words, you should make knowing the Lord the number one thing that you pursue. One thing we desire, one thing we seek after—to behold the beauty of the Lord. This is treasuring the knowledge of God that He gives to us.

Fourthly, we should study the doctrine of God with frequent and fervent prayer. Given God's incomprehensibility, we desperately need the help of the Holy Spirit. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds as well as to stir our affections, and to deepen our devotion, and to guide our actions, in seeking to glorify the triune God. Prayer is an expression of dependence upon the Lord, and so we study who God is prayerfully—dependently seeking the help, the aid of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, never allow the study of God to become merely an intellectual exercise. Now it is true that these doctrines that we're going to be studying over this course stretch our minds. They require arduous mental effort. After all, we're thinking about God. But they can also become intellectually intoxicating. In other words, these doctrines can be sinfully used for our mental amusement, thinking about amazing, astonishing things. But that would be treating God like a toy, which would be a violation of the third commandment, which requires us not to take His name in vain. Our study must always lead to awe, to wonder, to delight, and reverent worship. We are to think about the Lord in the very presence of the Lord, not abstractly apart from the Lord. We're not studying who He is over here, and God is way over there. But rather, we are studying who God is in His very



presence, and as we're studying His word, He's opening to the believer a knowledge of Himself, and we should be conscious of that presence, which leads to reverent worship.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we have explored the nature, limits, and means of our knowledge of God. Now this answers questions like, How do we know what we know? And, What are the limitations of that knowledge? And, How does that affect our study of who God is? In the next lecture, we will turn to our consideration of God Himself, and over the next several lectures, we'll be studying what the Bible reveals about the being and attributes of the living and true God.