

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

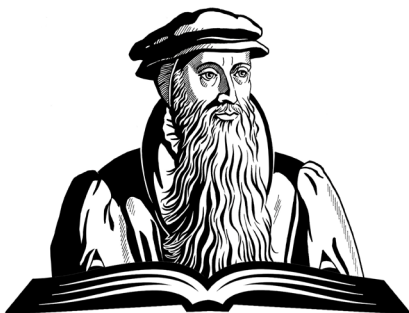
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 3

THE NAMES OF GOD



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 3

THE NAMES OF GOD

What is the purpose and importance of a name? Parents may choose a particular name for their baby for a wide variety of reasons. They may like the sound of the name, or they may have a family member or a friend with the same name, or they may like a nickname that is associated with that name, or lots of other reasons. But in Scripture, names have greater significance than they often do in contemporary societies. At the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam dominion over every creature. We read in Genesis 2:19, “And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” Naming expressed lordship. We also see that names describe the character of the thing being named and distinguish it from something else. So Adam may have said, “Well, this is a fish and that over there is a cow.” This becomes significant when we turn our attention to thinking about how God names people. In Genesis 32, we read of God changing the name of *Jacob*, which means “deceiver,” to *Israel*. We’re told because, as a prince, he had power with God and prevailed. So that change of name was loaded with significance. You can compare this to other examples. God changes the name *Abram* to *Abraham*, and *Sarai* to *Sarah*, and so forth. We could multiply other examples. But this will have even greater importance as we turn our attention to considering God’s own names. We learn that His names reveal the nature and character of God.

The series of lectures in the 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, what God reveals to us about Himself. In the previous lecture, we considered the nature, limits, and means by which we come to know God. In this present lecture, we’ll begin to learn what the Bible teaches about the names of God, thereby introducing to us how God reveals Himself. This will prepare the way for our further consideration of the being and attributes of God in the lectures that follow.

And we’ll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of God’s revelation of Himself. In Exodus 6:2–3, we read, “And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them.” The revelation of this name

Jehoveh, or Lord, marks a change. It was declared unto Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14, “I AM THAT I AM: . . . I AM hath sent me unto you,” it says. And you’ll remember the context of Exodus 3:1–22. We learn about God’s presence in verses 1–4; we learn about God’s covenant in verses 5 and 6; and His compassion in verses 7–9; and then the commission that He

gives to Moses in verses 10 to 12; God's faithfulness in verses 13 to 15; and His purposes in verses 16–22. The name *Jehovah* referred to God's self-existence and His immutability—His inability to change. And we see that from the verb “to be.” God says, I am sent me: “I AM THAT I AM.” So this name *Jehovah* reveals God's self-existence. But it also reveals that the Lord is the covenant-keeping God. He confirms that He is sovereign and that He always keeps the promises of His covenant. This is a significant further disclosure of His glory as the God of the covenant which He makes to Moses, and to the people of Israel more generally. And this becomes a dominant name in the remainder of the Old Testament, the name *Jehovah*, or the name Lord.

When you turn to the New Testament, we discover that Jesus is identified as Jehovah. One of the ways in which this comes out is by seeing how Old Testament Scripture is quoted and used in the New Testament Scripture. There are many examples of this. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah has set before him this vision of the Lord in heaven, His train filling the temple, and so on, the angels saying “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts.” And when you turn to the New Testament, that is referred to in the Gospel of John 12, and it's identified with Jesus. The One whom Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6 was actually Christ. Now we can do the same thing in many other ways. Joel 2, Psalm 16, many of these other passages which refer to the name *Jehovah* are then taken up, quoted, and applied in the New Testament to the Lord Jesus Christ. And then you think of the whole of John 8, which really revolves around this name *Jehovah* as it is applied to Jesus, and you'll remember at the end of that chapter in 8:58, we read, “Jesus said unto them,” that is, unto the Pharisees and scribes, “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am. Then they took up stones to cast at him.” They recognized that He was claiming and identifying Himself to be *I am*—to be *Jehovah*; and they considered that, wrongly, as a form of blasphemy. They failed to see the divine glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. And when you come to the end of the Bible, in Revelation 1:4, we also have an allusion to the meaning of this name *Jehovah*. Jesus is called “Him which is, and which was, and which is to come.” And in verse 8 of that chapter, we see an expansion of its meaning. It says, “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.” All of that is descriptive of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's another example of how Jehovah is being applied to Christ. You can consider, as well, the verse in Revelation 16:5. And we come to learn that unless we believe that Jesus is Jehovah, we will die in our sins. But on the contrary, if we confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts that Jesus is Lord—that He is Jehovah—then we'll be saved. Paul makes this point in Romans 10:9 and 13. So when God says, “This is my name,” He is revealing who He is to His people.

Now notice the significance of God's name, for example, in the third commandment. We read that in Exodus 20:7, “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.” God's name summarizes here in the third commandment all of the ways that God reveals Himself. So His name refers to His titles and what we might think of more particularly as His names, but it also refers to His attributes, and to His Word, and to His worship, and to His works, and so forth. All that is attached to God's revelation of Himself is compressed, if you will, or summarized in His name. And all of that is to be approached with reverence and never to be handled vainly or lightly. This is further confirmed in the New Testament in the very first petition of the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 6:9, we read, “Hallowed be thy name.” The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 101, provides this answer—it says, “In the first petition we pray that God would enable us and others to glorify him in all that whereby He makes Himself known.”

And so we see that God's name opens up for us the revelation of who God is. In this lecture,

we'll learn that God alone names Himself and declares it to us, and in doing so, He reveals to creatures who He is—His self-revelation to us. God's name signifies God's nature. That is to say, the names of God reveal the nature, character, and attributes of God. John Owen, the seventeenth-century English Puritan wrote, "Whatever, therefore, any name of God expresseth him to be, that He is, that we may expect to find him, for He will not deceive us by giving Himself a wrong or a false name." And so you can see the richness within the Scripture itself of the significance of God's name, the self-disclosure or revelation of who He is.

Secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details relating to God's names and their disclosure of the living and true God. We began by considering the name *Jehovah*, *I Am That I Am*, also translated as *LORD*. In our English Bibles, that's translated capital L O R D.

But let us now consider some of the other names of God. All of these names reveal the glory, nature, and attributes of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—applicable to the whole Godhead. We will seek to connect the meaning of His names to what they teach us about His glory. So in addition to the name *Jehovah*, we also have the name in Hebrew, *El*, which is in the singular, or *Elohim*, which is in the plural, and this is usually just translated as "God." But it is the idea of the overwhelming majesty of God. You see this in Ezekiel 28:2; you see it in Hosea 11:9, or places like Numbers 23:19. The plural of this Hebrew word *Elohim* is one of the most common names of God in the Old Testament. Now, what does this teach us or reveal to us about who God is? Well, you'll notice, because it's given to us in the plural *Elohim* sometimes, that this hints at the plurality within the Godhead. We see this at the very beginning, in Genesis 1:26, and you can connect that back to the opening two verses of the Bible, Genesis 1:1–2. This is proper in relationship to the gradual self-revelation of God in the Old Testament, which of course culminates and becomes clearer in the New Testament, speaking of God in the plural. Now we'll come in our series of lectures to thinking about God and His one essence—His one being—subsisting in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We'll see something of the significance of that. But the name of God *El* or *Elohim* also points to authority and power. And it allows for the later revelation of this power of God within the Godhead in the rest of the Scripture.

A second name of God is *Adonai*, the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which means "lord" or "master" or "ruler." It's used of God in a variety of places all through the Old Testament—Joshua 3:11 We see it in the Psalms—one example would be Psalm 97:5. You see it in the prophets—Zechariah 4:14 and 6:5, for example. So these three names, *Jehovah* and *Elohim* and *Adonai*, are sort of the most common, the most basic, of the names of God.

But then there are combinations of those names with other things that reveal to us who God is. So think with me, for example, of some of the names that are compounded or connected with the Hebrew word *El* or *Elohim*. One of them would be *El Shaddai*, which is translated "God Almighty." Especially during the era of the patriarchs, the patriarchal period, we see this name a lot—God Almighty. Genesis 17:1 would be an example. It shows us that He is the God of creation, but He's also the God of providence.

Another name connected with *Elohim* is *El Elyon*, which means "God Most High." This is speaking of His transcendent exaltation, His sovereign rule, the fact that He is controlling everything. We see "God Most High" in Genesis 14:8, Psalm 78:35, Psalm 91:1, and many other places.

Another name is *El Olam* or "Everlasting God." You'll see this in Psalm 90:2, for example. And if you take that, this name "Everlasting God," it's speaking of Him being eternal. He's outside of time, as we'll come to learn in more detail in a later lecture. He's a God who has created time, brought it into being. You can compare the Old Testament name "Everlasting God" to references

in the New Testament like Romans 16:25–26.

Another name is *El Roi*, “The God Who Sees.” Genesis 16:13 can be compared with Psalm 33:18 or even the beginning of Psalm 139. So “The God Who Sees”—a God who knows everything, a God who has all knowledge, whose presence is everywhere to behold what is secret and what is open, what is inside us and what is outside of us. Both the darkness and the light are alike to Him.

Another name would be *El Gibbor* or “Mighty God,” “The Mighty God”—Isaiah 9:6, Psalm 45:4. But then you’ll notice, for example, in Psalm 89:20 that it’s in reference to the Messiah. So it’s referring to the Messiah as “Mighty God.” Think of Isaiah 10:21 as well. The Messiah is the One who will come as God and accomplish, as “the Mighty God,” all of God’s purposes.

So those are some examples of the name *God*, or in Hebrew, *El, Elohim*, being combined with other words to provide us with a diversity of names for God. But we can do the same thing with *Jehovah*—names that are compounded or connected with *Jehovah*. There is the name *LORD of hosts* or *Jehovah of hosts*. This name is used to encourage God’s people when they’re threatened with enemies and the possibility of defeat. This name appears most frequently in the restoration prophets, the prophets that God sent to speak to His people at the time in which they were going to be restored to the land. And so here’s a beautiful picture of the Lord Himself. It’s used first of all in 1 Samuel 1:3. It appears prominently, though, as I noted, in prophets like Jeremiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Now, *Jehovah of Hosts*—that word “hosts” can refer to both angelic hosts—the armies of heaven, if you will, and it can also refer at times to the armies of Israel, like in 1 Samuel 17:45. And so when we think of *Jehovah of Hosts*, we should combine those two. It refers to both of them—the God who is the God who rides upon the heavens with the armies of heaven, the angels that are there, as well as the God who dwells among His people. *Jehovah of Hosts* reminds God’s people that He is sufficient to save them from all of their enemies, that He is the One who is invincible as the defender of His people.

Another name would be *Jehovah-Jireh*, which means “The LORD Will Provide.” You see this in Genesis 22:14. Abraham is on Mount Moriah and he is called upon to offer up Isaac upon an altar there, and God sends the angel to stop and provides a ram. And we have given to us this name *Jehovah-Jireh*, “The LORD Will Provide.” It shows that the God of providence provides salvation as well. Christ’s redemption, of course, is the ultimate act of providence, as you see in Acts 2:23.

Another example is *Jehovah-Nissi*, “The LORD is My Banner”—Exodus 17:8–15. Again, this is sometimes applied to the Messiah, as in Isaiah 11:10, Christ is “The LORD My Banner.”

Another name is *Jehovah-Rapha*, “The LORD Your Healer.” You see this in Exodus 15:26. And Christ, of course, comes again to fulfill this name particularly. You see it in the Gospels—think of Matthew 12:15 and 14:14.

We also have *Jehovah-Shalom*, “The LORD is Peace,” “The LORD Our Peace.” In the Old Testament, this is seen in Judges 6:24, and you can compare this to how, in the New Testament, as the peace of His people is reinforced in our hearts, places like Ephesians 2:14.

Another is *Jehovah-Rohi*, “The LORD is My Shepherd.” We all know and love to sing Psalm 23—“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want,” and so on.

We have further examples: “The LORD Our Righteousness,” *Jehovah-Tsidkenu*, “The LORD Our Righteousness”—the righteousness of God’s people. You’ll find this in Jeremiah, for example, Jeremiah 23:5-6. But we come to the New Testament, and again we find “The LORD our Righteousness” as a reference to Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:30.

Then we have *Jehovah, the LORD Who Sanctifies You*. Now the whole book of Leviticus is

about holiness and God's gospel holiness. You'll see the name *The LORD Who Sanctifies You* in Leviticus 20:7–8. And this, as in all of these names, they're all a reference to the whole Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I've been highlighting some of the New Testament examples where it's applied specifically to the Lord Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son. You see that here as well. The New Testament ascribes sanctification to all three persons in the Trinity.

Then we have *Jehovah-Shammah*, “The LORD is There”—Ezekiel 48:35. If you want to see this in the New Testament, look at the end of the Bible in Revelation 21:2–3. This fulfills the covenant promise that God will dwell in the midst of His people. He is “The LORD Who is There.”

So that gives you some examples of how the name *Jehovah* is combined with other words to provide a variety of names that reveal who God is. There are also names compounded with *Israel*. So this stresses God's personal relationship to His people. We read of *Jehovah, the God of Israel* in places like Judges 5:3; or we read of *The Holy One of Israel*, and this appears 29 times just in the prophet Isaiah. The name *The Holy One of Israel* is also applied to the Messiah in Isaiah 43:14 and Isaiah 48:17. We have the name *The Mighty One of Israel*. So here's divine strength on behalf of those who are oppressed among God's people. You see this as early as Genesis 49:24, and later on in Deuteronomy 32:11, and so on.

Turning our attention to the New Testament itself—of course, the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, the New Testament is written in Greek, and there are New Testament names for God as well, some of which carry over from the Old Testament, some of which build on what we have in the Old Testament. But there are various descriptive names in addition to these that I mentioned. So we have the word *theos*, which in Greek means “god.” So, this is the name that is applied to all three persons of the Godhead in the New Testament—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—though it's used primarily of the Father representing the majesty of the entire Godhead.

Then you have the word *Lord*. In Greek, it is *kyrios*. And there's an important connection here between this New Testament word *Lord*, and the Old Testament name *Jehovah*. I've mentioned some examples of this already, where Old Testament passages that use the word *Jehovah* are quoted in the New Testament in reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. But you'll see the connection to *Jehovah*, for example, in Philippians 2:8–11.

There's another word for *Lord* as well, the Greek word *despotes*, which carries the idea more of ownership and authority. You see this in the Gospels and Acts and the Epistles, and even in the Book of Revelation 6:10.

So here in this section, we've been considering some of the names that God gives to Himself that He then reveals to us, and how these names open a window for us and enable us to peer through the names to see the character of who the Triune God is, the glory that belongs to Him, His nature, His character, and so on. And this is going to be very important for us, because as we transition into thinking in more detail about the being of God and specifically about the various attributes of God, those characteristics of His divine being, we're learning already the way in which God shows Himself to us, beginning with this very dominant theme of the names of God within the Bible.

Thirdly, we need to consider this matter polemically. And, just very briefly under this section, some will allege that God's name is merely a label rather than being revelatory, rather than disclosing something to us about His character. And so, for example, you might name one of your pets something. It's just a label, it's what you refer to that particular creature as. But it doesn't necessarily tell you about what or who the creature is. But we've seen here that this notion of merely thinking of God's name as a label by which we refer to Him or identify Him is tragically

misguided. There is so much richness and fullness in the names of God, because God is giving us His names in order to, in fact, show us who He is in His being, who He is in His nature and in His character. And so that affects us in terms of our meditating upon God. The thought of God begins with His names—what He has named Himself. And by meditating upon the names of God, we’re actually pulling back the layers, as it were, and going deeper and deeper into our understanding of who is God? Who is the living and the true God? What can we know of Him and how does it impact us? What does it do to strengthen our faith? How does it lead us to worship Him and to put our confidence in Him and so on?

Secondly, God’s name is attributed to the Lord Jesus Christ. So there have been, historically, many heretical groups who have denied that Jesus is God, and many of those continue to exist in our own day under different labels. We have, for example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Jehovah’s Witnesses is a cult—it’s a false religion. They believe a number of things that are tragically false and are damning errors. One of the worst of them is the fact that they deny that Jesus is God. And so already, before we come to the doctrine of the Trinity which we’ll be exploring, and before we think about the divine glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, we’re seeing already early on in our study that Jesus is God. Why? Because God’s name is given to Him. In the first chapter of the New Testament, in Matthew 1, we are told that Joseph and Mary are to give the name *Jesus* to the child in Mary’s womb. And we’re told why—we’re told that His name is *Jesus* because God would come “to save His people from their sins.” The name *Jesus* is equivalent to the Old Testament name *Joshua*, which means “Jehovah saves.” And so the very name of Christ, *Jesus*, is “Jehovah saves,” *I am that I am*, the transcendent covenant-keeping God is One who comes to save His people. And so from the first chapter of the New Testament, Christ is identified as God Himself. And then, as you move on from Matthew 1, you have, throughout the Gospels, Jesus claiming for Himself to be identified with God, that He and His Father are one. As we saw from John chapter 8, He claims to be I Am, which the Jews recognized immediately, was Jesus claiming deity for Himself. And then you come to the Epistles, and Paul and others, the Apostle John, are unpacking all that this entails. In John 1, in the Gospels: “In the beginning was the Word,”—that’s Christ—“and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He is both God and yet He, in His person, is distinguished from the first person in the Trinity, the Father. And so from the very beginning here, we’re having our roots put down into the soil of Scripture and recognizing that divine glory does belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves from this doctrine. And first of all, wonder of wonders, God places His name on His people. And so we start with this magnificent truth, this doctrine that God’s names reveal who He is, and we’re left with a sense of awe over that. But then we come to see that God actually takes these high, lofty, glorious names that He gives to Himself, and He places them on His people. In Isaiah 43:7, we read, “Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.” Or you’ll remember Jeremiah 15:16, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts.” Turning to the New Testament, we read at the end of Matthew in chapter 28:19, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Here you have the name—singular—of God, which is described in the plural—Father, Son and Holy Ghost—being placed on God’s people. They’re baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Further on in Acts 11:26, we’re told that the disciples were called *Christians* first in Antioch. They have the name *Christians*. They’re bearing the name

of Christ. In Revelation 2:17, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.” Have you ever wondered, What is that name? What is this new name that God is going to give to each of His people? Well, we’re told a little later, in a parallel passage, in Revelation 3:12, “And I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.” The believer is given the name of God. The name of God is placed upon him. This is a wonderful, wonderful thing.

Secondly, God’s name signifies God’s presence. So in Deuteronomy 12:5 it says, “But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come.” You see something similar in Deuteronomy 16:2. Fast forwarding to the days of Solomon, in 1 Kings 8:17, “And it was in the heart of David my father to build an house for the name of the LORD God of Israel.” And so God’s name also signifies His presence. This is helpful for us, because in Proverbs 18:10, it says, “The name of the LORD”—the name of *Jehovah*—“is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.” And so when we come to public worship, what’s happening? We’re coming to the place where God has put His name. And even in the proclamation of the Gospel, we’re preaching Christ and Him crucified; people are being called upon, sinners are to run into the name of God as a strong tower to find safety.

Thirdly, we must never take God’s name in vain, as we see in the third commandment. We should speak of God in ways that are reverent. This is important for us, because it applies, remember, not only to God’s titles, but also His attributes. We speak of holiness. We should never attribute holiness to something vain. Or when we think of the works of God—even the word *hell* is to be used with reverence, or *damnation* is to be used with reverence. Sometimes we listen to others and they use the attributes of God, the names of God, in ways that are blasphemous. We have an obligation, at times, to actually say something to them, to warn them. The Lord says “He will not hold him guiltless who taketh His name in vain.” Instead, we need to pray and labor for God’s name to be hallowed, for His name to be kept holy. “Hallowed be thy name.”

Fourthly, the believer bears God’s name. So our whole life must show forth God’s glory. The pursuit of gospel holiness shapes our service of our holy God. Christ is the light of the world, and His people are called upon to shine as lights in a dark world. Our light is a derived light that reflects Christ’s light, just as the sun shines upon the moon. The moon doesn’t emit light; we look upon it and it’s glowing—it’s the light of the sun that is shining on it. So the light of Christ shines on His people and reflects to those that are around us. We’re bearing His name and we are therefore to serve His interests and His glory.

Well, in this lecture, we’ve explored the names of God. We’ve learned that God only can reveal Himself to us, that His names pertain to His titles, His attributes, His works, His worship, His Word. All of this sets our expectations for what we expect to learn about the Lord. In the next lecture, we’ll turn our consideration to studying what God reveals to us about the being of the living and true God, and begin to open up some of the attributes that He teaches us.