

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

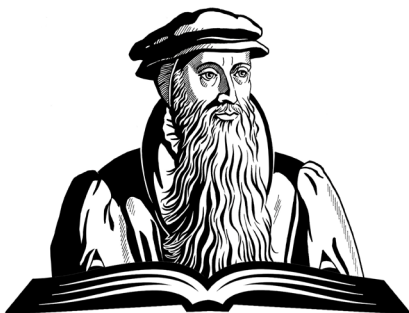
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 4

GOD'S BEING



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 4

GOD'S BEING

Snowflakes are beautiful. Each individual snowflake is configured of about 200 ice crystals. Many of us learned in school that there are no two snowflakes that are identical to each other—each one is unique. But you may not know that when you consider all of the snow over all of the world, one million billion snowflakes fall every second, when averaged over the course of a whole year. Think about that. That means you could make one snowman for every person on earth about every ten minutes. Now, we think about that, and we say, “Wow, that’s amazing.” And it is. But listen to what we read in Job 38. God is speaking to Job in that chapter, and in verse 4, He says, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.” God is asking Job the question, “Where were you when I was beginning everything and setting up the foundations of the earth?” But then later in that same chapter He says, in verse 22, “Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? or hast thou seen the treasures of the hail?” Although snow is massive, it is still measurable. Yes, it is a lot, but it is also limited. And just as God directs Job’s gaze from the things of this world up to the Creator, the Lord Himself, when our gaze is turned to the Lord, we’re led to think upon One who is unlimited in His being. We also learn that, unlike snowflakes, God is one. He is not comprised of various parts, as we noted a moment ago, like a snowflake, which consists of 200 ice crystals.

Mankind was created to know, love, worship, and glorify this God. Now man’s rebellion and sin, of course, diverted them from that path and privilege. But through the gospel, God re-creates believers into worshippers—worshippers who see and adore and serve the Triune God. He delivers sinners from serving idols, the figments of their depraved imaginations, and brings them to serve the living and true God, so that the heart cry of the true Christian is, “Lord, show me thy glory.”

The series of lectures in this second module, of 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 learned that God reveals Himself through His names. In the present lecture we begin to learn what the Bible teaches us about the being of God. This will prepare the way for our further consideration of the various attributes of God in the lectures that follow.

And so we will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of God’s revelation of Himself. In Deuteronomy 6:4, we read, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD.” “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD.” The Jews call this phrase the “Shema,” and the word *shema* is the first Hebrew word, the word that we translate “hear,” in this verse. So they named the phrase “Shema” after the first word of the verse. This verse, Deuteronomy 6:4, comprised their central confession of faith. It was used in prayer and in recitation. It establishes an important doctrinal truth that all Christians profess: the Lord our God is one Lord.

The unbelieving world, both ancient and modern, follows a multitude of false gods. We know that in Egypt that was the case, in Babylon, among the Greeks later on, as well as among the Romans during the New Testament era—they had a pantheon of different types of gods, a whole host of gods that they worshipped on different occasions at different times. In the modern day, we see the unbelieving world representing the same thing. For example, in Hinduism, they have 330 million gods that they worship. And then there are other religions, like Islam, that only have one god who is false, not the true God. But God reveals in the Bible that He and He alone is the living and true God. All others are not living, they're dead; and they are not true, they are false. It's interesting that in the New Testament, Jesus quotes this passage from Deuteronomy 6:4. In Mark 12:28–29, we read these words, “And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he”—that is, Jesus—“had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord.” So here is Jesus affirming that there is one God, one and only one divine being. Paul affirms the same truth in many passages. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:6 we read, “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.” Now this raises a question, doesn't it, about the relationship of the Father and the Son, coupled with the fact that there is only one God—only one divine being. Well, in thinking about that relationship, consider briefly the words of Jesus Himself in John 10:30. He says, “I and my Father are one.” Now stop for just a second and think about this. He says, “I *and* my Father”—so there are two. And you'll notice, He says, “I and my Father *are*”—that verb is in the plural. And so he's saying, “Two are”—the first and second persons of the Godhead. Then note the last word—“are” what? “Are *one*.” “I and my Father are one.” So Jesus is saying, “Two are one.” Well, the question then is, one what? What is this one? And the verb there, *are*—“I and my Father *are* one”—is the verb “to be,” and that helps inform us. He's speaking about the fact that they are one being, one nature, one essence. Jesus is teaching that He and the Father are of one divine being. In fact, notice the two previous verses. In verses 28 and 29, Christ says that no one can snatch His people out of His hand. Now, He's not speaking about His physical hand in His human nature—it's a metaphor for His divine power. No one can snatch His people out of His hand. But then He also says that no one can snatch His people out of His Father's hand. And we know, of course, that the Father doesn't have a body, so He doesn't have a physical hand. Again, it's a picture—the hand is a picture of divine power. And so they, that is, the Father and Christ, have one and the same power. Now, you notice in verse 30, the verse following the one that I mentioned, He is noting that they—the Father and the Son—are of one and the same divine essence. “I and my Father are one.” So in verse 31, the Jews sought to stone Him. Why? Well, they understood His meaning. They understood Deuteronomy 6:4, that Jesus was claiming to be God, of one essence with the Father. Now, we'll be considering some of the details of what all of this means, how we're to understand it, in a later lecture. But we're noting, first of all, from the Scripture, that there is one God; there is one Lord; there is one divine being. And this will be important for what we'll be considering together. Because, in this lecture, we learn that there is one and only one divine being. In exploring this doctrinal truth, we see by way of introduction that God reveals to us that He is simple and infinite and a spirit, showing us who He is, His self-revelation to us. So we've looked at a passage of Scripture.

Secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details relating to God's being. And here, we'll get more into the substance of what the Scriptures teach about this doctrine. We began by considering Deuteronomy 6:4, that “The LORD our God is one LORD.” We learned that there is one

single divine being. Now notice how this is summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1. And I'm only going to be highlighting in this lecture just a couple of things that are stated here. We'll refer to some of the other things in the later lecture. But Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1, says this: "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute," and so on. And we're going to look especially at a couple of these details—the fact that God is infinite, the fact that He is without parts, and the fact that He is a pure spirit. But let's consider a number of points under this second section.

First of all, "There is but one only living and true God." That means that Christianity is monotheistic. "Mono" means one, "theistic" means God; so Christianity holds that there is one God. And this divine truth is fundamental to the very core of biblical Christianity. We'll be considering the doctrine of the Trinity in a future lecture later in this module. But we know that the Bible teaches that there are three Persons in this one Godhead. There are not three gods. There is only one God, subsisting in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. These three are of one and the same singular substance, each having the whole divine essence, and yet the essence being undivided. Therefore all three are equal in glory and power and will. We'll explain this in detail later, but for now, we must see that there is one God, one divine being. We worship one God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, God's unity not only means that God alone is God, and no others, but it also means that God is one with Himself, that He is the self-same. that He is indivisible in His being and operations. If you refer back to that quotation from the Westminster Confession of Faith, you'll notice two words. It says that He is "without parts." He is "without parts." Now this is what theologians call God's "simplicity" or "divine simplicity." We need to define that, because "simplicity" does not mean unwise or uncomplicated or not complex or not advanced, as we sometimes use the word. The theological term "simplicity" or "divine simplicity" means that God is not a compound or a mixture of anything. He is without parts, without members or separate qualities. He is incapable of the least composition or division. God is pure God. What is in Him is His very being. So God is identical with His perfections, and is wholly perfection, without mixture. Everything outside of God, that is everything in creation, is a composite of parts. So you think of a tree. It consists of branches and twigs and leaves and roots, and it has a bark on the outside—it's composed of parts. And you can think about that all the way down into the cellular structure of the tree. It's true of stars, of our sun, of other planets. It's true of people. We have both a body and a soul. We're composed of a body and a soul. The body has various parts of the body—eyes and ears and so on. The soul has various faculties—our mind and our volition and our conscience and so on. Therefore, everything in creation is composed of parts, and therefore has the potential for change. It can gain or lose perfection. The tree can shed its leaves, we can lose hair, we can grow in our knowledge, and we can perhaps forget things and decrease in our knowledge. But it's not so with God. You can distinguish *what* a creature is from *that* a creature is. So we know what a butterfly is, but that butterfly may or may not exist—same thing with a flower or a stone or something. We can even think about things that don't exist. We know, perhaps, what a leprechaun is, but there are no leprechauns. There's never been one that's existed. But God is not composed of parts, and therefore God is not subject to change or fluctuation. God's essence and His existence are not distinct. A person's essence is one thing—being a human being; but they can come into existence and go out of existence. That's not true for the Lord. His essence and His existence are distinct. He exists

necessarily. Now I realize that some of this is kind of staggering and mind-boggling. It's hard for us to grasp these things. We are, after all, creatures, and everything that we are, everything that we see and know around us is composed of parts, and so on. And so this causes us to think. It's going to stretch us. And some of these things that we're covering in the lecture today and, really, over the next couple of lectures are going to stretch our minds. But that's important, because we need to submit our minds to the Word of God, and we need to realize that God is far greater than our minds could ever comprehend. So it shouldn't surprise us that it hurts a little when we think about who God is.

Thirdly, understanding God's simplicity is very important in our consideration of His attributes. That's the reason we're covering God's simplicity in this lecture. We're going to go on to speak about the fact that God is all-knowing; we're going to speak about His power, His holiness, His goodness, His mercy, and so on. All of those are attributes of God. But we must not think of God's attributes as parts of Him or as pieces of a pie. Think about a pie or a cake. It comes out of the oven, and then we take a knife and we cut it up, we divide it up, and then we give one piece to this person and one piece to that person. We shouldn't think of God's attributes that way, as if God is a whole pie and that one attribute is one piece of Him, and another attribute is another. His holiness is one thing, His power is another thing. Some people make this mistake and they're failing to realize that when we say that the Lord our God is one Lord, it includes the fact that He has divine simplicity.

Now some even elevate one attribute over other attributes. And so they'll say, "Well, God is just, but He's more loving than He is just," and they make other mistakes like that. We need to understand that it is not that God has goodness, or merely does what is good, but that God is goodness. God is goodness in His very being. Who God is and what God is are identical. God is one—one undifferentiated, indivisible, uncompounded being. We possess attributes, of course, but they're distinct from ourselves. And so we may have wisdom, we may not have wisdom, we may grow in wisdom. We may have some parts where we're wise in some things and foolish in the others. The same thing with our body; we have hair color and it may be blond, and it turns darker to brown, and then later on turns gray, and so on. But all of those attributes which we have are distinct from ourselves. Our wisdom can change, our hair color can change, but we still remain ourselves. We're still the same person. We don't have those attributes essentially. And so when you're thinking about God, God is not one thing and His attributes another thing, like with us, somehow attached to His being. No, God is His attributes. This is good for you to have firmly planted in your mind. God is His attributes—is identical with His attributes, because of the unity of His essence. He is one singular perfection.

Furthermore, we come to realize that we cannot know an infinite, undivided essence—can we? And so God stoops to reveal Himself to us in His Word, and works in a way that is suited to our creaturely capacity. You think of pure light. You can shine light through a prism and when you do so, there's a refraction of the wavelengths of that light, and it comes out the other side in what we see as a rainbow of colors. Well, God reveals His infinite being to our finite minds by showing Himself to us from different creaturely angles, if you will, which we rightly call his attributes. We learn truth about who God is. He's wise, powerful, holy, just, good, and so on. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that these attributes are parts of God that can be contrasted from each other. God is simple. For example, His being is His power, and His power is wisdom and goodness and holiness and so on.

Next, in this module we'll be considering the divine attributes before we go on to consider the

Trinity. But God's simplicity already shows us that we do not believe in tri-theism. Remember earlier we learned that Christianity is monotheistic—one God. We don't believe in tri-theism, that the divinity of God is divided between three persons—that would be three parts. It is not that three persons are instances of a larger category that we call God. No, that's thinking in terms of the creation rather than the Creator. So I am a human person, and that means I'm a human being. But so are you. You're a human being as well. That's two beings with two minds and two wills. But there's only one being in God. The one God is indivisible. Each person of the Trinity shares one undivided essence. Each person of the Trinity is fully and wholly God. So we see God is simplicity in His essence. We'll come to see later that He is trinity in His persons.

Fifthly, we mentioned in the second lecture that God is infinite in His being; that is, God is not finite, not limited. He is without limits or bounds, measures, degrees, and so on. Well, this further reinforces the fact that God's being is one being, because by definition you cannot have two infinite beings. They would not both be unlimited because they would be limited to not being the other being. I realize that that's a mouthful, but you can see the point.

We also see that God's being infinite means that He is infinite in all of His attributes. So He has infinite power; that's why He's called the Almighty—what we call omnipotent. But He's infinite in His wisdom, He's infinite in His knowledge, He's infinite in His holiness and goodness and so on. It's true of all of these attributes, because He is both simple and infinite. All of God's perfections are boundless and limitless in their measure. Now that's contrasted with everything that is created, even things like air. You think, "Well, air seems to be everywhere," but air is only one type of thing, isn't it? It's not infinite. And you can say a mountain is huge, but it's limited to being one mountain, in one place, of one size, and so on. Not so with the Lord, He's boundless and limitless in measure. In Psalm 145:3, we sing, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable." Notice, it's "unsearchable." It is impossible for the finite—we who are limited, to know what is infinite—a God Who is unlimited and boundless. We can never comprehend Him exhaustively, though we do know Him truly in what He's revealed to us.

The sixth point under this second section is that God is a spirit. Jesus says in John 4:24, "God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." The divine being is spirit. This isn't just referring to the third person, the one we call Holy Spirit, but to the divine being as a whole. God does not have a body like we do, like men. You recognize this already from God's simplicity—He doesn't have parts. But it is true that God condescends to us in His revelation, and He uses imagery that's familiar to us. So for example, He accommodates our creatureliness by describing Himself in creaturely ways or creaturely language, what theologians call "anthropomorphic" language. So it'll speak about the "eyes of the Lord" being everywhere. God doesn't have eyes, God is a spirit; but it's a picture that's familiar to us that teaches us that God knows everything, that He sees everything, that He is everywhere-present; indeed that He protects His people and loves them. When it speaks about God "coming" and "going", it's not as if God can be limited to one place and transferred to another—not at all; but it's speaking about the manifestation of His presence to us. He reveals Himself perhaps in blessing; He reveals or manifests His presence in judgment even; and it's described in a creaturely way of coming and going. It makes it easy for us to understand the concept. But we're not so foolish as to then conclude that God has a body. No, God is a spirit.

And so in terms of thinking about God's being, we've especially highlighted three things: the divine simplicity of God, the fact that God is infinite, and the fact that God is a spirit in His being. Well, that gives us a survey of some of the doctrinal exposition of God's being.

But then thirdly and briefly, we need to consider this whole matter polemically. And the first thing you immediately bump up against, of course, is the threat of idolatry. And you know your Ten Commandments, you know that the first and second commandments prohibit idolatry. The first commandment tells us who we are to worship—the one living and true God. The second commandment tells us how we are to worship Him—only in the way that He has prescribed for us. So the first commandment is dealing with the object of worship, the second with the manner of worship. We are not to give worship to any other, and our worship of the true God must be in spirit and in truth. So there's this threat of idolatry. The rest of the world—the pagan world—says, “No, there are many gods.” Paul bumped up against this in Acts 17, when he was in Athens. In verse 16 we're told, “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.” And then in verses 22 and 23, he goes on to address that. We read, “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.” What's happening? The Apostle Paul is coming, and he's exposing the foolishness of idolatry and of multiplying gods—having false gods. He says, “This is superstitious,” and he comes rather to proclaim the true God, to show them the liberating wonder of the fact that the God who is, is the God who has created the heavens and the earth, and so on.

Secondly, we need to confront the temptation to worship God by images. If you stay in Acts 17, you see Paul addressing this as well. In verse 25 and 29, it says, “Neither is [God] worshipped with men's hands as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.” In verse 29, he says, “We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold or silver or stone, graven by art and man's device.” So there are those who think that we can worship even the true God, the God of the Bible, with the use of images. Now, the second commandment forbids this. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,” we're told. And you see that this is to be brought back to our understanding of who God is, God in His divine simplicity, and the fact that He is infinite, and the fact that He is a spirit. It is unlawful—it is sinful—to employ images of God, images of any of the three persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. The Bible forbids these things. We are not to make or to use any statues or paintings or pictures of the three persons of the Godhead.

Thirdly, very briefly; we noted earlier that we need to be prepared already in our study to reject tritheism. So there are those who come to the Bible, and they discover the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and they conclude that, therefore, there are three Gods. But we're learning already in our study (we'll deal with this more fully later) that that is false, because there is only one God. “The Lord our God is one Lord,” and therefore, we cannot tolerate the notion that there are three Gods. This would be false doctrine, and it leads to all sorts of practical problems which we'll consider in a future lecture.

Fourthly, we can now turn to draw a few practical applications for ourselves. The first application is the most obvious, and that is, we are to respond to these doctrines with worship. All glory, honor, and praise is to be given to the one living and true God. We are to apply this doctrine by getting on our faces before the Lord and worshipping Him with all of our hearts, by assembling with His people in the congregation, and worshipping Him with all of our hearts. Augustine, the early church father, wrote, “The truest beginning of piety is to think as highly of God as possible.” And seeing the supremacy of God, we are led to trust and fear and love and delight in God Himself. Notice what follows Deuteronomy 6:4—the verse that we started with. If you put verses 4 and 5

together, it says, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD; and thou shalt love the LORD thy God, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” What does that mean? It means that this doctrine is to lead us to loving the Lord with our whole being, with everything that we are. We are to adore Him and love Him, to follow Him and to keep His commandments, to serve Him, and so on.

Another practical implication has to do with the seriousness of sin, because sin is against an infinite God. The seriousness of sin, the magnitude of the offense, is seen in the fact of who is sinned against. It is God, who is simple in His being, infinite, and of pure spirit. This is the reason that the price of sin is eternal death, eternal hell. Hell is everlasting. You think, “Well, why do the limited number of sins in a person’s life require an everlasting punishment in hell?” The reason isn’t just because of the sins themselves, but because of who the sins are against. We’re sinning against an infinite God, and that requires an infinite punishment.

Likewise, on the flipside, how does this influence our understanding of the atonement for sin? Well, Christ must be true God and true man—He has to be both. He has to be true man, of course, and finite, in order that He might die. But He also has to be true God—infinite. When He assumes to Himself a human nature, He is not emptied of His divine attributes. Quite the contrary. Those divine attributes—His being infinite—actually provides infinite worth to the sacrifice of Himself upon the cross.

Thirdly, we’re brought to see that in this simple, infinite God, who is spirit, there are immeasurable riches of grace. Sin, as terrible as it is, and Satan, as powerful as he is, are no match for the God of all grace. God is not limited by what seem to us as impossibilities. Sometimes the Christian has what feels like impossible trials. The Lord says that the Christian is “kept by the power of God.” This is a God who is power, and who is infinite in His power, and so He’s able to deliver His people from the snares of sin, and to defeat Satan, and to sustain His people in trials. And our hearts are given confidence and faith by casting our gaze to behold His glory, to behold the glory of this one God.

Fourthly, God is the supreme good of the believer. He is the food for which our souls hunger. We not only have temporal and spiritual gifts that He gives to us—He does give us our daily bread, and He does give us many spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit and through His word, and so on. But above all of that, God Himself is the soul’s greatest reward—seeing Him, knowing Him, having Him, worshiping Him. He is the One that we want to behold. He is the great source of our delight and pleasure. We are those who are lovers of God. In Revelation 21:7, we’re given a picture of heaven, and we’re told, “He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.” We will have the Lord Himself. And so this is another implication. It’s drawing our hearts into the heavenly things and away from the earthly things, to find our delight in Him.

Well, in this lecture, we have opened up our consideration of the being of God. We’ve learned that God’s simplicity and His infinitude—the fact that He’s infinite, and the fact that He is a spirit, inform our understanding of all of His attributes. So this further informs what we expect to learn about who God is in His attributes. You see why this is important in terms of our building blocks. As we go on in the next couple of lectures to consider God’s attributes, it’s against the backdrop of what we’ve considered about God’s being in this particular lecture. So in the next few lectures, we’ll turn our consideration to studying what the Bible reveals to us about various attributes of the living and true God.