

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

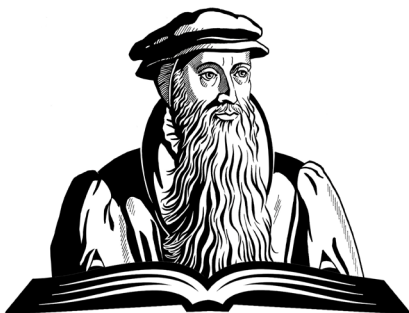
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 2:*

### THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

*Lecture 5*

### THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 1



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 5*

## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 1

Children are naturally curious. You know this by all the questions they ask. Their little minds seem to want to learn as much as they can about the things they see and hear. They may ask, “Mama, why is the sky blue?” or, “How do brown cows that eat green grass produce white milk?” Children growing up in Christian homes often ask very profound questions like, “Who made me?” Well, God did. “Who made the birds in the tree?” God did. “Who made the earth and stars?” God did. God made all things. And you can see the look on their faces, and you know that their little minds are actively pondering your answers. Finally, they ask the question, “Mama, who made God?” Now, you understand why they ask this. If everything comes from something, then who made the Maker? We then explain to them, “Well, no one made God. God is, God exists, by His own power. And that is only true of God alone. He is the uncreated Creator.” We go on to learn that there are many things about the Lord that are only true of Him and no one and nothing else. That leaves us with a sense of awe and wonder at His divine glory, but it also stretches our minds, which sometimes makes them ache. And that should not surprise us. He is God; He is unlike us. Our finite, limited minds cannot possibly comprehend all that there is to know about the infinite, unlimited God of glory. We should not resent having our minds stretched when thinking about the Lord. Instead, it should lead us to worship and adore Him, and to rejoice that He reveals His beauty for believers to behold.

The 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. In the previous lecture, we began to consider some aspects of God’s being. We learned that God is simple—that He is not composed of parts; that He is infinite—that He’s without limitations; and that He is a spirit—He’s without a material body like men. In the present lecture, and the following ones, we continue to reflect on God’s being by considering more of His attributes. And as we do so, we will build on what we already learned. So remember, for example, that God’s divine simplicity taught us that His attributes are not parts of God, and are not just descriptions of what He has - they reveal to us who God is in Himself. In this lecture we will be studying some of the more difficult and abstract attributes of God. So prepare yourself to concentrate and think hard about what the Bible teaches us.

First of all, we’ll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up the material that we’ll be considering. In Exodus 3:14 we read, “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” We referred to this passage in a previous lecture. God is revealing Himself to Moses at the burning bush. This is prior to his going to Pharaoh, prior to the Exodus and deliverance from Egypt. But this name

“I Am That I Am” reveals several things about God’s glory which were important for Moses and continue to be very important for us. It shows us that God has life in Himself. God does not derive His being from anything outside of Himself. He is the “I Am.” Moses, Pharaoh, Israel, and everything else receive life and existence from the One who is the source of all being. It is impossible for God not to exist. He does so necessarily. We also learn that God is eternal. He exists outside of time as the One who eternally is all that He is—the “I Am.” Thirdly, we see that God is unchangeable. You and I were one thing previously—we were babies and children, and we had less knowledge and grew to more knowledge, and so on. And we will be different than we are right now in time to come. Our bodies will continue to change; our souls will also develop. But the living and true God is immutable, unchangeable; He cannot change. He is the great “I Am.”

In this lecture, we’ll learn more about God’s divine being. In considering more of His attributes, we’ll explore God’s independent self-existence, His eternal nature, His immutability, and His divine impassibility, all of which show us more about who He is—His self-revelation to us.

Secondly, let’s consider some of the doctrinal details relating to these four attributes of God, His independent self-existence, His eternity, His unchangeableness, and His being without passions. You may recall that these are all mentioned in the summary that we find in Westminster Confession, chapter 2, paragraph 1, which says, “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 it goes on further. But you’ll notice some of the words that we’ve already mentioned in that description.

So first of all, we’ll begin with God’s independent self-existence. Now theologians call this attribute God’s aseity, which comes from two words in the Latin language, a and se, or “from himself.” God is from Himself—God is self-existent. He has life in Himself. Remember the words of John 5:26, “For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself.” Now the life of creatures is actually distinct from themselves. God gives them life. Things in creation come into existence at one point and die at another point. But God does not derive life from any other. He has existence as part of His very essence; that is, He exists necessarily by His very nature. He cannot not be, and cannot not be all that He is. Go back for a second to the child’s question that we mentioned at the beginning. “Who made God?” Well, a child might be tempted to answer, “God made Himself.” But that is not true. God is not self-created, which would be a logical contradiction. You would have to pull yourself into existence before you have anything to pull with. You understand the concept. God is, the Bible says, uncreated. God is different from everything outside of Himself, everything in creation. He created all things out of nothing, which is possible, because God had no beginning or cause Himself. He is self-existent.

This also means that God has full sufficiency of Himself. So he’s independent. He’s not dependent on anything at all. Creatures need something to sustain them. You see it with babies; babies need milk, and they need to be clothed and put down for a nap. Plants need nourishment from the soil, they need sunlight, they need water, and so on. But God does not need anything. Even more, He cannot need anything, otherwise He would be incomplete, imperfect, and not God. God is absolutely perfect and supreme, and so God is completely blessed in Himself. He is the independent, self-existent God.

A second attribute relates to God’s eternity. God alone is eternal. Think with me by way of contrast. Animals have a beginning and an end to their existence. But then you have men and angels; men and angels begin to exist but have no end—they live on forever into eternity. God alone has

no beginning and no end. God is eternal. This truth is woven through the whole Bible. You think of Isaiah 57:15, “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy.” We sing of this in various Psalms. For example, in Psalm 90:2 we sing, “Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.” God’s eternity refers to His infinity, or infinitude, as applied to time. So He has no limits, no limits of past and present and future. He has no succession of moments that are measured, whether in minutes or millennia. No, God is eternal. You ask yourself the question then, “Well, is God in time?” and the answer is, No. God created time and He transcends time. God’s eternal nature is a timeless eternity. Think with me. Time is measurable. God is not measurable. Now we can comprehend more easily the idea of time with numberless, never-ending days, numbers that go on and on and on and on and on. We can kind of conceptualize that. But being outside of the bounds of time altogether, that’s difficult to grasp for temporal creatures. We live in time and think in terms of time. So this stretches our minds a bit. But God has no past or future. Time does not pass within God. He sees the past and the future simultaneously—all of it, all at once. This is revealed to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the God-man. So you open your Bibles to the Gospel of John, and in the first verse we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And then you keep reading and you come to 8:58, and we read, “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am.” And so, as to Christ’s divine nature, He is eternal, and we behold something of the glory of God in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, secondly, we see that God is alone eternal. As the Creator of time, He is outside of time. He has a timeless eternity.

Thirdly, God alone is unchangeable or immutable. Malachi 3:6 says, “For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” A New Testament passage that you could consider would be James 1:17, which says that He is without “variableness” or “shadow of turning”—no change. The created universe is filled with change and variation and alteration and fluctuation, and this shows imperfection and weakness. But above all of this is the Lord. Again, the Psalms are full of this theme and raise our hearts to behold the Lord, who is eternally the same, never different from Himself. So God has no development, no potential, no growth, no improvement. All of that entails change. You can see how this flows from His infinite self-existence and self-sufficiency and His eternity—they’re all one in God. That means that all His attributes are unchanging. His power is unchanging, His wisdom, His goodness, His holiness, His love, and so on. This helps us make sense of the language of Scripture, because we read of His “everlasting” mercies, and His “enduring” mercies, and the “infinite riches” of His mercies, and so on. For God, change is impossible, whereas for man, no change would be impossible. So we see, thirdly, that God is unchangeable or immutable.

Fourthly, God is without passions. Now that language “without passions” is taken from the passage I quoted in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1. God is without passions. Theologians call this God’s divine impassibility. This flows from God’s eternity and His immutability, His unchangeableness. He cannot change from within or from without. It means that He has an inability, for example, to suffer pain or distress. But more fundamentally, God’s being cannot be affected by anything outside Himself or acted upon by anything in creation—any external power or influence. This is what we mean by without passions or impassable. God cannot be susceptible to emotional fluctuation like men. Emotional states entail change and vulnerability and the possibility of even being at odds with oneself. That’s never true of God. He does not have emotion and emotional fluctuation—that would be a weakness; that would be a limitation upon Him. Think of the terrible results. We could not have confidence in Him. Without impassibility,

God could be crippled by pain, and clouded in His judgment, and so on. But God is complete in Himself. He's incapable of loss, change, or manipulation.

Now, that does not mean that God is lifeless or apathetic or inert. No, He is the fullness of being and supremely perfect in all His ways. There is no lack, no fluctuation in Him, for example, in His love. Why? Because He is steadfast love. Everything is stable and certain in God's being. He is without passions.

Thirdly, we need to consider this polemically, and we'll note a few things. We noted earlier that the New Testament speaks of Christ being eternal. "Before Abraham was, I am." What about the fact that Jesus was born? Well, in the incarnation, the eternal Son—the second person of the Godhead—assumed into union with His person a human nature. His divine nature remains unchanged in this union, including His eternity. He did not cease to be God when He became flesh, nor did He set aside some aspect of His deity. Remember, God is His attributes, so that's impossible. But we must distinguish Christ's divine and human natures without confusing them. Both birth and development and death apply to the human nature of Christ—that is temporal. But His divine nature cannot be born or die—He is eternal God. We'll explore this in detail in the fourth module on the doctrine of Christ.

Secondly, the Bible seems to speak of God changing. It'll speak in language of Him relenting, and so on. Now when we come to study God's decrees, we'll learn that they are eternal and unchangeable like God Himself. So when we read in Scripture about God relenting, or appearing to change His mind—for example, the language that's used before He sends the flood, or the language that He uses in reference to King Saul, or even with Moses, or you think of Nineveh with Jonah—these are all examples that, on the surface, appear as if there's change. But we understand that God is accommodating our creatureliness in describing the unfolding of His plan. From our viewpoint or perspective, it appears to be a change. But it is, in fact, God ordering the twists and turns of His unchanging will. You think of Jonah, for example. He says, Go tell Nineveh that in forty days He's going to destroy them, and so it sounds as if that's what's going to happen. But then they repent, from the king all the way down through the nation. And what does God do? He shows mercy to them. Is that God changing? No, it's not God changing. The message that He sent through Jonah was to accomplish His purpose and end of bringing them to repentance, and to thereby fulfill what was all along, His end of demonstrating mercy to them. Think—if you place clay in the sun, it hardens the clay; but if you put ice in the sun, it melts it. But the sun itself remains the same. God is unchanging in His very being, though in His revelation to us, He accommodates our creatureliness in ways that engage our responses to Him and produce what He has planned in His own mind and in His own decree. And so though there appears to be transition and fluctuation from our side, God is remaining stable and unchanging on His side.

Thirdly, some object that the Bible speaks of God having emotions. This relates to His divine impassibility. Well, this is, again, an expression of God's accommodation to creatures, just as the Bible speaks of God's ears and eyes and arm and so on, and yet tells us that God is a spirit and does not have a body like men. We understand that that imagery of His eyes teaches us that He sees everything—that He knows everything; His ears that He hears everything; His strong right arm that He has invincible power, and so on. Those are pictures that are meaningful to us. So, likewise, the Bible stoops to us and describes God in terms we comprehend, by using what we associate with emotional language. And this facilitates our response to the revelation of His glory. But we must not make a mistake here. We must not remake God after ourselves, as if He were needy and suffering, for example. That is more like the idolatry of the gods in Greek mythology, which have all the

instability of being helpless and dependent on humanity for their happiness and contentment. Not so with the Lord. He is without passions.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications from these doctrines for ourselves. And I'll leave us with a few of them. First of all, since God is independent and self-existent, we are dependent upon Him for everything that we are, everything that we have, everything that we do for good. Well, this creates gospel humility in the true believer. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" He's saying, Listen, we're dependent upon the Lord and we receive everything good from His hand. We have no cause for boasting in who we are, what we've done, or what we have, and so on. No, we must live looking to Him, and relying upon Him in faith for everything in our life, both our temporal needs with our body, as well as our needs with our soul, both in terms of time and eternity. The doctrine of God's self-existence teaches us to think in terms of our utter dependence upon Him for everything.

Secondly, because God is eternal, the Christian has joy that never ends, which is why we sing in Psalm 16:11, "Thou will show me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore." The Lord will never cease to satisfy His people. That's not true of the things in this world or in creation. People think that money or fame or possessions or certain relationships will satisfy them, and they never do, because they never can. But the believer looks outside of this world, outside of time to the Ancient of Days, who is the eternal joy of His people. This redirects our gaze from the fleeting, perishing things of this world and fixes our eyes and our appetites and our desires and our pleasures and our pursuits and our priorities—it fixes them all on God Himself, the Eternal One.

Thirdly, man is as "unstable as water." That's the language God uses to describe Reuben in Genesis 49:4. Even the believer changes. We change in our character, in grace—we grow in grace, in strength, and so on. There's spiritual variation. Like the violin, we constantly are going out of tune and have to be re-tuned. We see the vanity of the creature and the world. And therefore, we must not look for more in the creature than God put in it. We do not put our trust, for example, "in princes," as the Psalm says. All changes, everything changes but God Himself. He is the rock and foundation of our lives. Our comfort is in reliance on the Lord, who is fixed and stable and sure. And in all of the trials and losses of life, we pray and we look to the One that can never be lost to us, the One who is the unchanging God. His love endures forever. And this provides spiritual stability to God's people in a world of instability. Amidst all of the surprises, and amidst all of the uncertainties about our life, the Christian is grounded upon the unchanging God. Our faith must be in Him alone.

Fourthly, because of God's divine impassibility, He is utterly reliable. Hebrews 6:18 says, "That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us." If the Lord were subjected to an external force or to internal emotions, we could not be unconditionally comforted or consoled. But instead, we are able to find our rest in Him and to offer ourselves in unreserved devotion to Him.

In this lecture, we've been considering further the being of God by way of a few more of His attributes. We've learned about God's independent self-existence, His eternal nature, His immutability or unchangeableness, and His divine impassibility—that He is without passions. This further informs what we expect to learn about who God is in His attributes. In the next lectures, we will continue to study what the Bible reveals to us about the other attributes of the living and true God.