

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

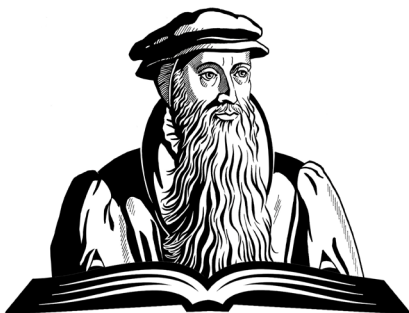
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 6

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 2



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 6

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 2

I want to begin by asking you a question. What are some of your earliest memories from childhood? Stop and think for a minute. Where were you? What do you remember seeing or hearing or experiencing? Well, if you're like me, your recollections are vague and foggy. Some of these early memories may only include a faint impression that remains in our mind. Sometimes we have heard other people tell us about an early event, and we can even confuse that with our own memories. Furthermore, if we were never present on a certain occasion in the first place, we obviously cannot have any memories of that event. And in all of this, we sense our limitations. Those limitations express themselves in other ways in childhood. Have you ever watched little tiny children cover their faces with their hands in order to hide themselves? They think that if they can't see you, then you can't see them either. We laugh at this, and we tell them, "I can still see you!"

But this illustrates a more serious spiritual problem exhibited by many adults. Many make the mistake of thinking that because they cannot see God, then perhaps He does not see them. Or, at the very least, men forget about what they cannot see, which is captured in the phrase, "out of sight, out of mind." Psalm 10:4 says that for the wicked, "God is not in all their thoughts." This results in peril for the unbeliever. And even for the believer, it can result in missing much blessing. What we need is the thought of God, gluing our gaze on the Lord. In doing so, we discover that the Lord is the One whose presence is everywhere, who sees and knows all things, and the One who has invincible power to do all of His holy will.

The series of lectures in this second module 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 last couple of lectures, we have been studying God's being and what He reveals about His attributes. Last time, we learned about God's independent self-existence, His eternal nature, and His immutability—that is, His inability to change. In the present lecture, we continue to explore God's attributes, turning our attention this time to His omnipresence, His omnipotence, and His omniscience. Now you'll notice that each of these words begin with the prefix *omni*, which means "all." So these words mean that God is all (or everywhere) present, all-powerful, and all-knowing.

First of all, we will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of God's revelation of Himself. In the opening of Psalm 139, in verses 1-6, we sing of the fact that God knows everything about us. He knows our sitting down and our rising up. He knows all of our deepest thoughts, and every word of our mouths, even before we speak them. As verse 3 says, He is "acquainted with all my ways." The Lord sees and knows all things. And this leads us to sing with the Psalmist, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it." We see in verse 6 that God's knowledge is comprehensive—it is an infinite knowledge. It staggers us; we are amazed by it; it is beyond our ability to comprehend the fact that God is all-knowing.

Then this Psalm turns to a related theme, the fact that God is everywhere. So in the same Psalm, Psalm 139, in verse 7, we sing, “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?” And the answer, of course, is, “Nowhere.” We cannot go anywhere, where God is not found. As the Psalmist says, in even the highest heavens, and in the depths of hell, or beyond the furthest sea—none of these places would take us outside of the presence of God. We are told that, “Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee,” in verse 12. So we see that God is everywhere-present.

Furthermore, Psalm 139 goes on to speak of God’s limitless power. And this is seen, for example, in His ability to create life by knitting together a baby in the womb of his mother, or on the other hand, His ability to bring death in the slaying of the wicked who wage war against Him. Nothing is too difficult for the Lord. As we see in Psalm 62:11, “God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this; that power belongeth unto God.” He is all-mighty; He is all-powerful. And so, Psalm 139 brings out each of these three attributes, bringing them into bold relief, where we not only think and sing about them, but are brought to feel something of the power of these truths.

In this lecture, we’ll explore these truths more deeply, learning about what it means for God to be omnipresent and to be omnipotent and to be omniscient: everywhere-present, all-powerful, and all-knowing.

Secondly, let’s consider some of the doctrinal details relating to these three attributes within God’s being. You will notice once again that these attributes are included in the summary that is provided for us in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1, which we’ve referenced in the last couple of lectures. I would encourage you to go back and look at that.

First of all, under this doctrinal exposition, let’s consider God’s omniscience. At creation, God brought both time and space into existence, when He created the heavens and the earth. God existed before that, but He also exists beyond both time and space. In the last lecture, we noted that when we consider God’s infinite nature, in reference to time, we see that He is timelessly eternal—that He is beyond time.

Well, when we apply the same idea in reference to space, we learn that God is omnipresent. When we ask the question, “Where is God,” we learn that God is universally present everywhere. There is no place that you can go, there is no place that exists where God is not. Neither is He confined to any place or even to all places put together. God is everywhere, but not limited to anywhere. Now, think with me about the nature of space. Space involves limitation, and we’ve learned already that God is infinite; God does not have any limitations. In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon says, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?” All creatures can only be in one location at a time, but God is never limited to a “somewhere”—to “anywhere.” Now, think of how this relates to what we learned previously. God cannot be divided into parts; that’s what we call God’s simplicity. God is wholly present everywhere; that is, He is present with His whole being everywhere simultaneously. This is what we call God’s immensity, which relates to His omnipresence. If you look at the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1, you’ll notice the word “immense” is used in that list. These two things, immensity and omnipresence, go together. When you turn on a lamp in a room, what happens? It diffuses light through the room. But this is not the case with God. He has no diffusion; He cannot be stretched out everywhere through the heavens and the earth. It’s not as if part of Him is in one place and part of Him is in another. He has no division. He cannot be divided up into a variety of places. It’s not as if part of God is in the United States and part of the Lord is in China. Nor can we say that He is even moving from one place to another. He

is fully present everywhere in His whole being. He is fully present with us, and He is fully present with others at the same time, though they may be in a very distant location from ourselves. God is everywhere present and His whole being is everywhere present. Now, as we saw in a previous lecture, this kind of stretches our minds, doesn't it? It hurts us to think about these things. And that is, of course, good, because we are finite creatures, who are thinking about an infinite Creator.

Secondly, God is incomparable in His divine power. He is omnipotent—invincible in power. He is not just mighty, but all-mighty. When you think of power, you may imagine all sorts of things. You may imagine an object, like a bomb, or you may imagine a person, like a powerful ruler, or you could even think of a force, like the force of gravity; it has the power to pull things back down to the earth. In all of these you see the ability to affect something else. Well, God's power gives life and action to all of His other attributes. He not only has infinite and eternal and wise counsels, but He also has the power to execute them. What would it be if God had mercy without power? Well, that would be only mere pity. But He has a powerful mercy. Or you think of the promises He gives, whether they are promises of blessing or promises of cursing; they would just be empty talk if it weren't for the fact that God is all-powerful. He has the power to deliver on all that He has promised.

Our power is very different. Our power is derived outside of ourselves, and so we have to eat vegetables and drink water and exercise our body in order to have energy and ability to move and function and do things. We have to utilize other things, like a car that we operate in order to move from one place to another. Now, that's true of everything. It's true of little insects, it's true of things like trees, and other things as well. All of creation, all individual creatures must derive their power from outside of themselves. But God's power is independent. It's intrinsic and it is absolute. God has limitless power. Job 26:14 says, "Lo, these are part of his ways: but how little a portion has heard of him? but the thunder of his power who can understand?" God can do anything as easily as anything else, because He always acts without effort. He never expends energy that must then be replenished. He is undiminished in the fullness of His infinite being. He always does all of His holy will.

Now, he displays that power in a number of ways. He displays His power to us in creation. Think of Psalm 33:6, 9, and 10. We are told that the Lord, by the word of his power, brought everything into existence—He spoke it into existence. And you can think of specific examples of this. He created light which can travel at a speed that can go 7 ½ times around the whole earth in a single second. The Lord created light by the word of His power. He also displays His power in preserving and governing all things—all of the heavens and all of the earth. And Hebrews 1:3 speaks of Him "upholding all things by the word of his power." We see His power in His judgment as well. Think of the flood, in the days of Noah, how the Lord destroyed the whole earth except for eight souls—Noah and his immediate family. Or think of Him raining fire from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah. One instant everything was fine and normal, and just within just a few seconds later, the whole place was annihilated. And, of course, we can cast our eye to the last day, when the Lord will resurrect and assemble all of the hosts of all of mankind before His throne to render judgment, to condemn the guilty and to bring those who are redeemed into heaven. A beautiful display of His power can be found in the conversion of a soul. This is why Paul says in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." When the Lord comes to convert a soul, He takes those who are spiritually dead and brings them to life. He takes those who are spiritually blind and enables them to see, gives them hearts that are able to receive Him with faith, and so on. And of course, as I've already alluded to,

we will yet see His power at the last resurrection, the resurrection of the dead, when the Lord will take the dust of all of humanity, from Adam to the end of history, and will raise these bodies back to life—those who are guilty, to dishonor, and those who are just, unto honor. All of this shows us that God is omnipotent. He is all-powerful.

Thirdly, God is incomparable in His knowledge. He is all-knowing or omniscient. God knows all things in Himself, by one pure, simple, undivided, and eternal act of His understanding. That means He knows all things perfectly and immediately and distinctly at every moment. God never increases or decreases in knowledge. He never learns anything. He knows everything. He knows what was and what is and what will be. Indeed, He knows what can be and cannot be. His knowledge is exhaustive. This is so different from ourselves. We know in part, and we come to know things one thing at a time; we can think only one thought at a time. We come to know things through various means, by hearing them or by seeing them or by experiencing them. But God knows all, and He knows all at once. God does not just know things because they are—rather, it's the reverse. They are because God thinks them. Things exist because they're being thought by God right now. In other words, His power and His knowledge are one. All of His attributes, of course, are one in God's undivided being. So His power is to be joined with His knowledge, which is to be joined with the fact that He is everywhere present, all of which are to be joined with His other attributes as well.

Well, thirdly, we should consider these attributes polemically. First of all, with regards to God's omnipresence. What about the fact that the Scriptures refer to God coming and going, and they refer to Him being near and far? What is the answer to that? Is this a contradiction from God's omnipresence? And the answer is, "No, it is not a contradiction." The answer is that these Scriptures are not describing God's essence or His being. Rather, they are speaking of the manifestation of His presence to His creatures. God is, once again, accommodating us. The language which speaks of Him coming and going expresses His bringing blessing, for example, or bringing judgment. It is not referring to His location, but rather His revelation of Himself. You see that from the earliest chapters of Genesis in the Garden of Eden. You see it in the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later on in the temple, where the Lord manifests His presence with His people; He is showing them that He is near to them, that His promises are true, that He is powerful, that He is wise and guiding them, and all sorts of other things. But this comes to the most beautiful display, of course, in Christ's incarnation, when the second Person of the Godhead assumes to Himself a human nature. He is Emmanuel—He is "God with us." It's a beautiful picture to us of God's presence with us. And, of course, the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, is true God and true man. And while His human nature has the limitations of a true human nature, He nevertheless, in His divine nature, continues to be fully God.

We also see the manifestation of His presence in the public worship of his people. Where two or three are gathered together, Christ is in His presence with them. And the Lord comes and shows His power through the ordinances of worship, making it a delight and a blessing, making it a fruitful vineyard for His own glory. And so these passages of Scripture that speak of God as near or far are not at all a contradiction of what the Bible teaches us about His omnipresence

Secondly, is there anything that God cannot do? This is a reference to God's omnipotence, His power. There will be people at times that will say things like, "Can God make a rock that is bigger than He can pick up?" or "Can God do this? or can God do that?" And sometimes they're doing this in very irreverent and unbecoming ways. At other times, it may be a person truly and sincerely wrestling with understanding God's omnipotence. Well, the answer to the question begins with

realizing that it's actually turning things upside down, it's actually inverting things to ask, "Is there anything God cannot do?" We approach that by saying, God cannot not be God. He cannot cease to be who He is. He exists necessarily, He exists inescapably, and He exists as He is. So God cannot not be Himself. Now, that has implications. The Bible will say, for example, that God cannot lie and God cannot deny Himself, God cannot sin, and so on. But rather than being limitations of God's power, they are displays of His power. Because if God could lie, then He would be limited in His ability to know and love the truth. If God can deny Himself, then that would be a limitation, wouldn't it? The fact that He is not able to do those things is because God is not able to not be true to Himself. So these questions that are sometimes posed in unbelief, as undermining God's omnipotence, actually do the very opposite. He is so powerful that He can never sin, never deny Himself, and so on.

A third question is this: Is God's knowledge open and incomplete? So you'll have foolish people who will say things like, "Well, God doesn't know the future. He has to wait to find out what the future is." And this stems from an unbiblical doctrine where people believe that men have a completely free will to do whatever they want, and therefore, God doesn't know for sure what they're going to do until they do it. Well, this touches on a wide array of different doctrines, and we can't address them all here. Some of them will be taken up in other lectures. But more specifically to this lecture, with regards to God's knowledge, His omniscience, it is false. It is an error. It is not true. It is a false doctrine to say that God's knowledge is open or incomplete, that it's limited to not knowing certain things. That is false. For that to be the case, God would not be God—God would not be the One who has ordained all things, who has an eternal decree in which He orders all that is to come to pass. He would not only lack knowledge, He would lack power, He would lack wisdom, He would lack goodness, and there's a whole cascade of implications that would flow from that. So we need to be on guard against it. People think sometimes that they're innovative and insightful and creative, when they say these sorts of things, that God's knowledge is open and incomplete, but it is an error that leads to catastrophic problems. So the fact is that God's knowledge is comprehensive, infinite, eternal, perfect, unchangeable. God's knowledge is such that He is all-knowing.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. The first point of application shouldn't surprise us, and that is the impact of humility. These truths influence us by producing humility. If you go back to where we began in this lecture, in Psalm 139:17–18, it says, "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand." The Psalmist is being overwhelmed with a sense of humility at the glory and grandeur of God. It's interesting that Psalm 139 has bookends, if you will; that is to say, it begins and ends with the same point, namely, noting that God searches us. He searches us, He knows us. At the end of the Psalm, we say, "Search me, O God." He searches our inside as well as our outside. That further reinforces humility. God knows everything within the deepest crevices of our soul—our motives, our thoughts, and our attitudes and ambitions, and so on, both the good ones as well as the sinful ones. So we are humbled under the hand of God. We are humbled under His glory.

A second point of practical application deals with what some of the older writers would call practical atheism. We all know what atheism is—atheism is denying the existence of God. Practical atheism is similar, but not the same. Practical atheism is expressed even when a person does believe in the existence of God. Indeed, it could be a believer who knows the living and true God, the triune God of the Bible, but practically they're thinking or acting like atheists. They are speaking and living and doing things as if the Lord was not present. This is a problem. We need to confront

practical atheism as it finds expression in our life. And we do that by cultivating a sense of God's presence. We need to be bringing to our remembrance that God is present in all of our thoughts, in all of our speech, in all of our actions. And we need to maintain that sense of His presence. We need to beware of forgetfulness, we need to say, in the words of the Book of Genesis, "Thou, God, seest me." Ask yourself the question, "Will you think, speak, or do in the presence of God what you would never do in the presence of men? Proverbs 15:3 says, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good". Well, this is terrible news for the impenitent unbeliever. Why? Because the Lord knows all the sin, and no fugitive can escape the Lord. He sees all, He knows all, and He possesses all power.

But thirdly, this is also a comfort for the believer. The fact that the Lord is everywhere, the fact that the Lord is all-powerful, and that He is all-knowing, is a comfort. It's a comfort in temptation, and it's a comfort in affliction. In 2 Chronicles 16:9, we read "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong In the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." The Lord gives us consolation in this. We should trust him. For example, sin seems so powerful; temptations seem at times irresistible. But God is more powerful, and He knows all of these circumstances in which we find ourselves. 1 Peter 1:5 speaks of us being "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." The Lord knows all of our sorrows, all of our afflictions, all of our limitations and our weaknesses—the difficulties that we face. He sees it all. He is actually with His people in the midst of all those things. You sing about this in Psalm 23—even in "the valley of the shadow of death," the Lord is with His people; His rod and His staff, they comfort them. So He is present with His people in their trials, and He is powerful to hold them and to help them, to uphold them in sorrows, and in affliction, and to deliver them according to His will.

Fourthly, these doctrines also promote holiness. They cultivate the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is a consciousness of His presence, and an awareness that He is transcendent—far above us, and yet with us—and a knowledge of all that He requires of us. These doctrines aid Christian experience, for example, amid the distractions that we face in prayer, and in singing His praise in the Psalms, and in sitting under the reading and preaching of His Word. We need to be mindful of the fact that God is present, that God is seeing all, that God is exercising His power. This aids us as we go into our prayer closets, into the secret place, or into the public assembly of His people. It also aids us and enables us to walk before Him in godly fear. "The fear of man bringeth a snare," but "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;" it is the "beginning of knowledge;" it enables God's people to have a bold testimony, even in the face of those who perhaps frown or, even worse, persecute them.

Fifthly, the knowledge of these attributes leads us to worship. 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 thought of God, the study of God, reflecting and learning about God's attributes must lead us to worship Him. It must fill our hearts and then our mouths with praise and adoration of Him. We should have awe and wonder and delight in knowing this God, to know Him savingly, and to know Him truly.

In conclusion, in this lecture we have opened up further our consideration of the being of God. We have learned about God's omnipresence, His omnipotence, and His omniscience. In the next lecture we will continue our consideration of the various attributes of God, thereby coming to a fuller knowledge of who the living and the true God is.