

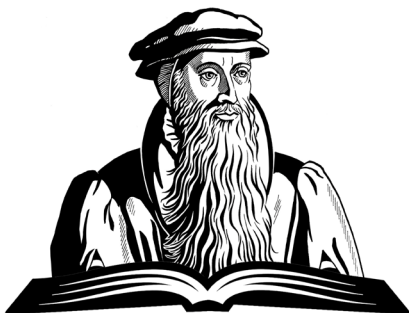
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 1

INTRODUCTION

It has been rightly said that what comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. This is true, and it should not surprise us. God is first, highest, greatest, and most glorious. Man was created by God and for God, and exists to know, glorify, and enjoy God. When men reverse this order, thinking that God exists for man, rather than the opposite, we end up in idolatry and a world of evil. One of the greatest reasons for the weakness of the church today is ignorance of the living and true God. Shallow or distorted views of God dishonor Him and disable believers, leading to corrupt worship, diminished personal holiness, and a lack of zeal for sacrificial service in pursuing the advance of Christ's kingdom and glory. Nothing is more important than seeing and knowing God. The Lord has given to us the Holy Scriptures so that we might come to a true and saving knowledge of God in Christ.

This series of seven modules, or courses, takes us through an introductory study of systematic theology. In the opening lectures of the first module, we provided an overview of the scope and purpose of these seven courses. The first two modules—the previous one on first principles, where we covered in ten lectures the doctrine of Scripture, and this second one, covering the doctrine of God—provide the basic principles, or axioms, for all that follows in our study of systematic theology. Everything else is built upon them and flows from them. The doctrine of God, of course, logically precedes the doctrine of Scripture, since something must be before it can be known. God is the principle of being, is the foundation of all knowledge. But we started first by treating the doctrine of Scripture, because we know the doctrine of God in systematic theology from His self-revelation in Scripture, through Christ, by the Spirit. This is why, also, the Westminster Confession of Faith begins with its first chapter on Scripture, followed by the second chapter on God and the Trinity.

Well, the purpose of this current module is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself, which is to say, what God reveals to us about God. So if you wish to gain a deeper understanding of who the Lord is, these lectures aim to benefit you. The lectures in this second module on the doctrine of God are, like the others, introductory, not exhaustive; and they're intended to furnish you with a foundation that you can build upon in your further studies. But that is not to say that they will be easy. When we think about the God of glory, we are dealing with deep and difficult matters. And this requires reverence, humility, diligence, and much prayer that the Lord would open our eyes to behold a glimpse of His glory by faith.

As you'll recall from the first module, theology refers to the knowledge of God. So, broadly defined, theology has to do with the study of the knowledge of God and all that He has revealed for us to believe and do. We noted that it is “the doctrine of living unto God through Christ,” thus

addressing both our thinking and our living. But we can also use the word “theology,” in a more narrow and restricted manner, referring specifically to just the doctrine of God, which, of course, is the limited scope of this particular course. This is why this particular topic within systematic theology, called “the doctrine of God,” is sometimes also called “theology proper.” It’s the study of God Himself, in contrast, for example, to the doctrines of man, or the doctrines of Christ, or doctrines of salvation, the doctrines of the church, and other branches of systematic theology.

We’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of God. This introductory lecture needs to be approached, first of all, scripturally. You will recall that in Exodus 33, we read of God removing His tabernacle, which was the symbol of His presence in the Old Testament. He was removing His tabernacle from the camp of Israel and refusing to go up with the people. So Moses went out, entered into the tabernacle, and stood in the door to converse with God. We then read of the interchange that took place. And at the heart of Moses’ pleading with God and interceding for His people, we read these words in Exodus 33:13—Moses says, “Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people.” Then a few verses later, in verse 18, he says, in that same prayer, “And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.”

Let me draw a few things to your attention from this. First of all, more than anything else, Moses craved the presence of God and desired to behold His glory. He understood that there were no prospects of going forward to the promised land without God. The benefits of liberty from bondage in Egypt or the inheritance of a land flowing with milk and honey were nothing in comparison to God dwelling with His people.

Secondly, notice that he considers the ability to know God and His ways to be grace—something precious that was undeserved and unearned. He wants to understand God’s ways, but seeing God’s ways was a means to something higher and better. Did you notice? He says, “Show me now thy way, that I may know thee.” What he wanted most was to know God Himself.

Thirdly, his heart cry was, “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.” Seeing the glory of God was the highest end and greatest privilege possible for Moses. And, amazingly, God granted this request. But God told him that he would have to be hid in the cleft of a rock, that God would cover Moses with His hand, passing by him and then enabling him to see a manifestation of God’s glory from His “hinder parts,” as the passage says. Now you think about this imagery that’s given to us here, because there are lots of other connections. When we have revealed to us the scene of heaven, we discover angels that are thronged around the throne, and they’re worshipping the Lord. But if you look carefully, you read carefully, you’ll notice that their faces are covered, and their hands are covered, and their feet are covered. Here are created beings who are completely sinless, who have never had any sin, and they have this joy of beholding God and praising Him and an intimate acquaintance with Him, and yet they’re covered, they’re shielded, as it were, from the direct gaze of God’s glory. And then you come back to Moses again in the Old Testament. Moses goes into the Tabernacle; he meets with Jehovah; the pillar of cloud descends; God shows his glory to Moses; and when he comes out, the people are terrified. Why? Because Moses’ face glowed. It was illuminated as a result of his communion with God. And so what did the people say? They said, “Moses, we cannot look upon your face; cover your face with a veil”—similar language to what you see with the angels in heaven. And so here in Exodus 33, God is putting Moses into the cleft of the rock, covering him. Why? The Lord says, “No man can look directly upon the glory of God and live.” And yet he is given, nonetheless, a glimpse; he’s given a manifestation of God’s glory.

All of this in answer to Moses' cry, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."

But you'll also notice in that next chapter, Exodus 34, we're told the rest of the story in verses 5 to 7. It says, "And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD." So that's the revelation of God. "And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."

Lastly, notice the response of Moses. Because just after this, in verse 8, we read, "And Moses made haste"—he was quick—"Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped." So what is the first and best response to seeing more of God's glory, and growing in a saving knowledge of Him? Well, we learn from this text that it is to bow down and worship God. This must always be true for us.

Secondly, we need to consider this theme doctrinally, and we'll do this under a few points. First of all, we see the priority of knowing God. In this first lecture, we're introducing the theme of all that we're going to be studying. This is a priority. The priority and chief longing that we saw with Moses—"I beseech thee, shew me now thy glory"—can be traced in the experience of godly saints throughout the whole Bible. Listen to Jeremiah 9:23 to 24, "Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD." What are we to glory in? We're to glory in knowing God. Well, Paul picks up on this, both in his first and second epistle to the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1:31 and then 2 Corinthians 10:17, we read that "According as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." We see the same thing in the Psalms. One good example is Psalm 27:4—this is David writing, the man after God's own heart—and he says, "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life." Why? "To behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple." David says, There's one thing above every other thing that I want—"to behold the beauty of the LORD." And this theme is woven throughout the whole book of Psalms. Look at Psalm 42 and Psalm 63 and Psalm 84, and countless others. We sing in the Psalms of our desire to know God. Think of Jesus' words in John 17:3: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." Jesus summarizes eternal life in knowing God. You think of Paul and his desire in Philippians 3:8, and again in verse 10: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ." Paul is saying, Here's what I want—everything else is like cargo that is thrown overboard on a ship, in comparison to the knowledge of Christ. He goes on in verse 10, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." What we find in Paul is the same exact thing that you see in what Jesus described and in what the Psalmist describes, as well as what we saw in Jeremiah and Moses and so on. Another example is from the Gospels. The disciples in John 20:20—this is after the resurrection of our Lord—we read, "And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord." Nothing is more important than coming to know God in Christ and to see His glory. This is a priority for us.

The second chapter of the Westminster Confession is devoted to this doctrine of who God is and how we are to understand the Trinity, and I would encourage you to look at that. We'll be referencing it in the lectures that follow. But you see it abbreviated in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which was designed for children to learn these doctrines. And we find, for example, in the fourth question, "What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." How many gods are there? "There is but One only, the living and true God." That's Question 5. Question 6: "How many persons are there in the Godhead? There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory." You see how that Catechism is putting into the hearts and minds of children and God's people this wonderful priority of knowing God.

But we can go further than that. We've established the priority, but you can think in terms of the history of the world, going all the way back to the garden, and all the way forward to glory. Go back to the garden. Man is created by God, made in the image of God, for communion with God. And we're told that he is placed in the garden where God had designed to manifest His presence to His people. And so man has his purpose, his very purpose, as well as his greatest privileges, all wrapped up in nearness to God and in the knowledge of Him. And then we see man's fall, in Genesis 3, and sin plunges man into these desperate circumstances. It results in a loss and a distortion of the true knowledge of God, led to alienation from God, so that, in Genesis 3:8, we read, "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden." Here is Adam—he fears the voice that he previously loved, the voice that revealed the knowledge of God's glory and will to him! Now, rather than being drawn near to the Lord, he's fleeing and he's seeking to hide, foolishly, from the Lord. Natural man is left in this wreckage. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Or in the next chapter, 3:18, "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise." So you see how God, in the garden, had designed man to have a true spiritual knowledge of Him and communion with God, and that was destroyed by the fall. And then we come, of course, to the gospel, and the gospel ultimately leads to glory. The gospel is the saving knowledge of God in Christ—God coming and telling sinners who He is and what He's accomplished, the way in which sinners are restored to fellowship with God, how there is reconciliation that is brought about by Christ to God, how there's a recovery and renewal of spiritual knowledge and righteousness and holiness for the true gospel believer found in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel provides a recovery of the saving knowledge of God. And that, of course, can be traced all the way to glory. What is heaven? And what is the soul—the core—of heaven? It is beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is soaking in the knowledge and a perpetually-growing, eternally-growing knowledge of God. You turn to the end of the Bible. We looked at Genesis 2 and 3. Go to Revelation 21 and 22, the last two chapters. In Revelation 21:3, it says, "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." Here is God dwelling again with His people. In verse 7, "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son." The great reward given to God's believing, overcoming people is God Himself—the knowledge of God. In verse 23, you see it, "And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for

the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” And then chapter 22:4, “And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.” So you can see how the study of the doctrine of God, with all of the individual doctrines underneath that, is absolutely fundamental to biblical Christianity and to a biblical Christian understanding and life. It’s important that we see these grounded doctrinally in our hearts and minds.

But then thirdly, we need to consider this theme polemically. Consider this briefly. What are the objections that people have to the study of the doctrine of God? Well, the first one that you often hear is that this is too abstract; this is very technical; it’s too difficult; it’s too complicated. What people are saying is that they want something easy, something that is immediately understandable, something that doesn’t require effort, something that they don’t have to think hard about and study deeply to be able to understand and to obtain. What does that mean? What are the implications for a person who has this sort of objection? All they really want is a false god. They want a false god, rather than the knowledge of the true God. Because man is finite—limited in his capacities—and sinful, a finite, sinful man cannot ever grasp the glory of an infinite, unlimited, unbounded God. It’s impossible. It’s impossible for man to wrap his mind, if you will, around all that there is to know about the depths of God’s infinite being. I remember one of my sons coming to me, when he was just a very small child, and asking me about time and eternity. He’d heard in sermons about the eternity that is to come, heaven and hell, and he began to ask questions about it. He was coming to see and understand that in eternity, it never ends; that if you can think in terms of our normal measurements, if you get a hundred trillion years into eternity, you’re no sooner to the end than you were at the beginning, because it goes on and on and on, forever. And so he asked some questions, we talked about it, and he went away. He came back a short time later, and he said, “Daddy, when I think about God’s eternity, and I think about, even, eternal life, it makes my brain hurt.” I thought to myself, Well, that’s very good, son. It has to make our brains hurt to think about things that are so big, so grand, so glorious as those that pertain to God Himself. As we’ll learn in this course, God is incomprehensible. We know Him, and we know the believer knows Him truly, but we don’t know Him exhaustively, and we can never know God as He knows Himself. We know our place, our limitations, and we’re willing to have to exert diligent effort in thinking deeply about matters that are not easy for us.

A second objection, similar to the first one, is those who come and say, “Well, what is practical is what is important. That’s all that’s important. Tell me how to live, not what to believe.” Well, this is equally terrible—in some ways even, perhaps, more terrible than the first objection. Tell me how to live, not what to believe? Well, if you’ve worked your way through the previous lectures, you know that what you believe is what determines how you live; that we are not those who have this notion of a religion that serves my interests, that answers my practical questions, and improves my practical life. The believer is being brought to a saving knowledge of God in Christ, and the highest chief end in all of that is to see and know God Himself. That’s an end in itself; that’s a reward in itself; that’s a blessing in itself. And so that comes first, and that is of greatest weight. But it’s also true that without the knowledge of God, your practical life will be a disaster, because much of what is broken and sinful and disobedient and confused in your Christian life can be traced back in one degree or another to an inadequate knowledge of who God is. Coming to know Him informs how we are to live.

A third objection is that we only need knowledge of salvation itself. “Tell us, yes, about sin; tell us, though, about Christ and what God has done to accomplish salvation; tell us about how sinners are brought into that salvation, and that’s enough for me.” This, too, is a problem. Because if that’s

the way that a person thinks, then they don't understand what salvation is, nor do they understand what salvation entails. Salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins or eternal life. Salvation is coming into a saving relationship with God. What husband would say, "I don't want to know my wife. I don't want to learn about her. I don't want to understand her." You would say, "Well, then you don't love her." You would say, "This is terrible, ungodly behavior and thinking on the part of a husband." How much more for the believer who is wed to his or her heavenly Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, and brought to love Him? Love demands a desire to know the One that is loved, and to be able to behold Him, and to think about Him, to hear all that He has to tell us about Himself in His own Word. This is salvation, and ultimately, of course, glory. Glory is taken up, in heaven, with a growing depth of the knowledge of God and the sight of His glory. To say, we only need to know of salvation itself, is to say that you don't know what salvation is at all. And so that's not an appropriate objection either.

Fourthly and lastly, we need to consider this practically. We can draw some practical applications even from an overview or introduction like the one we're considering. First of all, the study of systematic theology entails a humble act of devotion to living unto God, which leads, of course, to worshiping Him and serving His glory. And so the top practical application that flows from the doctrine of God is worship. That's what we saw with Moses. That's what we see with the angels—the angels' chief privilege and preoccupation is with worshiping God. And redeemed sinners, who are brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, are given the privilege of angels, which is to praise, to adore, to worship God. This will be, of course, as I've noted, the preoccupation of the believer in heaven. We can say with the words of Exodus 15:11, "Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" The first practical application is worship.

Secondly, the knowledge of God leads to growth in godliness. Think of the words of 2 Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass"—or mirror, "the glory of the Lord"—beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord—"are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." You see Paul's point. We behold in the "glass"—or mirror—of God's Word, the glory of God, and we're transformed by the Holy Spirit into His likeness. In other words, we become like what we worship. Psalm 115 talks about this. Idolaters become like the idols that they worship. God's people become like the living and true God, who they worship. And so our reading of the Bible, our singing of Psalms, our listening to the preaching of God's Word, our taking the Lord's Supper, all of these means are ways in which we come to behold the glory of God and through which the Spirit sanctifies His people.

Thirdly, there is great comfort and strength that the Lord provides in the doctrine of God in times of trial. Isaiah lived in a difficult time. The church was a disaster, the nation was under great threats. And you come to Isaiah 40, and the Lord provides answers for His people there. In chapter 40, He's describing many of the ways in which God's people are to find hope. And in verse 9 it says, "O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!" What did Israel need in the face of looming trials and acute difficulties? The Lord tells Isaiah, Tell them to "Behold your God!" And you think of how this comes out in Isaiah. When you behold God, what happens? He's the King that is sitting high above the circle of the earth, and we're told that He looks upon the nations as "dust in the balance," as "less than nothing," that the inhabitants are as "grasshoppers." When we take in the sight of God and the sight of His majesty, all of a sudden these enormous mountains and trials—big nations with all of their

threats, big people with all of their power—they're reduced to their proper size; they're infinitesimally small; they're seen as insignificant. You get to the end of Isaiah 40—I'll leave it to you to read that—where there is great encouragement given that God's people will be strengthened in the midst of their trials.

Fourthly, the doctrine of God provides for us the source of greatest pleasure. This comes out in Psalm 16:8, "I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." And then listen to the words of verse 11, "Thou will shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore." The doctrine of God actually provides God's people with the sweetest, most delectable, most wonderful pleasures that are to be experienced in this world, all of which are a foretaste of what the believer will enjoy in God's immediate presence in heaven. Is the doctrine of God practical? Yes, it is extremely practical, as we'll see.

Well, in this introductory lecture, we have established from the Scriptures the importance of the doctrine of God within biblical Christianity, and for the individual believer's thinking and practice and experience. In the remainder of the lectures throughout this second module on systematic theology, we'll be delving into a more detailed consideration of who God is and what God has revealed of Himself to us. As we prepare to do so, we must humble ourselves like Moses and plead with Him, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 2

THE NATURE, LIMITS, AND MEANS OF KNOWING GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

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.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

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, or course, on systematic theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself, which is to say, what God reveals to us about Himself. In the previous lecture, we 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 con-

sidering 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.

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.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

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 on, 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.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 7

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, Part 3

Everyone is attracted to beauty—for example, a gorgeous sunset. People will stop and watch and look at all of the varied colors and beautiful hues that are found as the sun is falling below the horizon. Others will stop and study a flower with all of its beautiful petals and the color and texture that it represents. You see beauty in a newborn baby, or in the masterpiece of a famous artist, looking at the detail of a painting that’s hanging in a museum. But some insist that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; that is, that beauty is always and only subjective. Now, while some matters of taste can vary between people, the Bible teaches us that there is an objective beauty; that God Himself is the ultimate source, standard, and superlative display of true beauty. He *is* beauty and defines beauty. For example, in Psalm 29:2, we sing, “Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” You see the same thing in Psalm 96:9, and elsewhere. The angels in heaven are occupied with beholding the beauty of God, and worshipping and adoring Him. In this world, believers behold that beauty by faith; and in glory, of course, their chief joy will be delighting in the sight of God for eternity. God manifests His beauty and glory to creatures. He reveals to us who He is and what He does.

Our study of God’s attributes is a study of the beauty of God’s glory. Each attribute provides another window for the believing eye to behold God. What a privilege and what a pleasure God extends to such who are so unworthy as ourselves.

This series of lectures in this second module or course on systematic theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God, and the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the last couple of lectures, we’ve been exploring God’s divine attributes. In the previous lecture, for example, we learned what it means for God to be everywhere-present, to be all-powerful, and to be all-knowing. In the present lecture, we will briefly survey a select number of some of God’s other attributes—we’ll consider seven of them. These three lectures together on God’s attributes do not serve as an exhaustive list or study; rather, they provide examples that serve to help you in further investigation of God’s other attributes revealed in Scripture.

And so we’ll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our further consideration of God’s revelation of His divine attributes. Turn with me, if you will, to Exodus 34:5–8, where we read these words, “And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him”—that is, Moses—“there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped." Now you'll remember, perhaps, the context here. This text comes at a time when God was providing the Ten Commandments for the second time. After Moses had broken the first two tables, he brought two more tables back to the mountain. So there's a connection between God giving the law to His people and the revelation of His glory. This disclosure of God that we've just read of takes place in the context of Him giving His word to His people. If you go back to the previous chapter, in Exodus 33:13, there Moses is saying, "Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight." And then Moses goes on, in verse 18, "And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory." And the Lord responds by saying, "I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee." Now notice how this ties together what we have seen in our study thus far. First of all, He proclaimed "the name of the LORD" in connection with the manifestation of His attributes. And that's where we began, wasn't it? We began with the study of the names of God, and then moved on from that to a study of God's attributes. But we also have a description of some of those attributes. Some of them are listed by name, others are described. It speaks of God's mercy, and His graciousness, and His long-suffering, and His goodness and truth. Then it describes His faithfulness, and His love, and His holiness, and His justice. God was manifesting His glory and revealing Himself to His believing servant, Moses. God spoke about who He is, and He spoke about what He does. He's the one who is keeping mercy, He's the one forgiving sin, not clearing the guilty, punishing sin, and so on. And so we learn, among other things, the priority of knowing who God is in order to understand what God does.

But we also see something else. The attributes that we have considered so far in this module belong to God's being alone; that is, they are not seen anywhere outside of God. Remember, over the last two lectures, we saw that God is independently self-existent. Well, that's not true of anyone else. We are dependent, angels are dependent, all of creation is. God is eternal, but everything in creation cannot be eternal. God is unchangeable, we are mutable, we are changeable. God is without passions. God is omnipresent—He is everywhere-present. That can't be said of any creature. He is omnipotent, or all-mighty. That, too, can't be said of anyone else. And He's omniscient—He knows absolutely everything comprehensively, and He knows it simultaneously. These cannot be found in any creature, whether the angels in heaven, or men, or anywhere else.

But in this passage here, in Exodus 34, we discover other divine attributes that are in God essentially, but which He sovereignly and analogically communicates to creatures. So, both holy angels and believers are described as good and holy and just, true, faithful, merciful, loving, and so on. Now angels and redeemed men cannot possess these as God does, but they do bear a derived likeness to God in them. In His condescending favor, God is pleased to put the stamp of His own likeness on them, glorifying Himself in them and through them. This ties who God is, and what God does, to who believers become, and what they do in glorifying God. So you see, in these attributes that are described in Exodus 34, attributes found originally in God, but then also finding expression within both angels and believing Christians. Well, the first and highest response to this revelation is seen in Moses, in the passage we read. It says, "And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped."

Well, in this lecture, we'll focus our attention on seven more divine attributes, along the lines of what we've just described. We will consider God's wisdom, holiness, justice, His veracity, goodness, love, and mercy.

Secondly, let's consider the doctrinal exposition of these seven divine attributes. Notice again that these are included in what is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 1, as well as, for example, in the Shorter Catechism, question and answer 4. We'll consider each of these seven attributes, one at a time.

First of all, God's divine wisdom. The Bible describes the Lord as the all-wise God, and elsewhere as the "only wise God." For example, you can look at Romans 16:27, or 1 Timothy 1:17, or Jude 25, Revelation 5:12, and others. As with all of God's attributes, we see with regards to His wisdom that He is perfectly, infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and incomprehensibly wise. Unlike kings, unlike business owners, and other people, God has no counselors to instruct Him. Isaiah 40:13 speaks about this, as does Paul, in Romans 11:34. God does not rely upon any other for His wisdom—He does not seek out input from any other. Wisdom is God's ability to manage and order all things. It's the skillful managing and application of knowledge. This distinction between wisdom and knowledge is important, because it's possible to have much knowledge and little wisdom in creatures. Some people may know a lot but they don't know how to apply that knowledge to circumstances. But in wisdom, God is able to direct all things, and He directs all things to His own glory, and to our good—so you see in Ephesians 1:11, and Romans 8:28. God does everything at the right time, and in the right way—Deuteronomy 32:4, Ecclesiastes 3, and so on. God displays His wisdom in the order and beauty of creation. We sing about this, in Psalm 104, and you see the prophet speaking about it in Jeremiah 10:12. When you look at creation, that's a work of God, and you see in that handiwork the traces of God's divine wisdom. The way in which He has created things and put them together, the way in which they function, the purposes that they serve, the ends that they accomplish—it displays wisdom everywhere you look. God shows His wisdom as well through His sovereign works of providence, in sustaining everything, in controlling everything, in the unfolding of His plan in history. The example of the life of Joseph is an amazing one, isn't it? All of the twists and turns, the surprises, the instances that look like setbacks—but the Lord is ordering, He's orchestrating all of that, in order to bring about an end for God's glory, and the good of His people. God displays His wisdom preeminently in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 1, and in Ephesians 3, because, in Christ's cross, the Father honored every divine attribute simultaneously, in a way that glorified God and brought salvation to sinners. God continues to show His wisdom, through the preservation and government of His church throughout all of the ages. So first of all, we see God's divine wisdom.

The second attribute is God's divine holiness. Now, holiness includes two parts, two ideas: the first is the idea of separation, and the second is purity. So God is separate from the rest of creation. This is the Creator/creature distinction that we've talked about before. He is separated from what is common. Now we use the word "holy" in that manner. We're familiar with it. We speak about the Holy Bible because it's a book that is separated from all other books, or we refer to the holy supper—Communion, because it's separated from all other suppers. God's people are a holy people—they're separated from the rest of the world. The Sabbath is a holy day because it's separated from the other six. And so there's this idea of separation. You think, for example, of Isaiah 6, where the angels are saying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." Isaiah 6, by the way, is the backdrop for the Trinitarian worship that's described again in Rev-

elation 4 and 5. The second component to holiness is purity—God’s ethical or moral purity. God is perfectly pure. He is without any sin or any sinful blemish. He is set apart by His glory, for His glory. John Owen, the seventeenth-century English Puritan, said, “This fiery holiness streams from His throne, Daniel 7:10, and would quickly consume the whole creation as now under the curse and sin, were it not for the interposing of Jesus Christ.” So, secondly, we have holiness.

Thirdly, we have God’s justice. The Lord is a just God, and a just Judge, and a just Savior. Justice refers to God’s constant will of giving each his due—in other words, people receiving what they deserve. Divine justice demands the punishment of sin, for example. God cannot clear the guilty without denying His divine perfections, as Nahum 1 tells us. God cannot be indifferent to sin—He can’t just look the other way. When we think about the wrath of God, the wrath of God actually falls under the heading of this vindictive justice of God. It’s an expression, if you will, of God’s justice. Paul speaks about this in Romans 1:18, and 32, and in 2 Thessalonians 1:6. Wrath against sinners results unavoidably from God’s holiness, and from His knowledge and His wisdom and His immutability and His justice. The nature of the atonement, through the Lord Jesus Christ’s death, is a display of justice. We’ll come back to this under the practical consideration of this doctrine. But you’ll remember, just for right now, Christ and His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He’s saying, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” But it wasn’t possible for the cup to pass from Him, because God’s justice had to be upheld in punishing sin, in order to redeem sinners. If there could have been another way, then there would have been another way, but there wasn’t. Romans 3:25 makes that clear. That’s God’s justice.

Fourthly, we have God’s veracity—this speaks of truth. God *is* truth. The true God is the God of truth. This is spoken of everywhere in the Bible. We sing about it in the Psalms (Psalm 31:5); you see it in the prophets (Jeremiah 10); you see it throughout the Gospels, and the Epistles, and so on. God is the foundation and the standard of all truth. The concept of truth is meaningless apart from God. And we know, furthermore, that Jesus Christ is God’s truth incarnate. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus says. God reveals His truth to us through His Word—through the Holy Scriptures: John 17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” And we know, of course, that it is impossible for God to lie. Hebrew 6 and Titus 1 tell us that. Therefore, God is absolutely trustworthy and the only proper object of our trust, because He is truth in every sense of the term. This relates, by the way, to God’s faithfulness. God’s faithfulness is tied to His veracity, or His truth, and it’s tied to the concept of covenant, in Scripture. Deuteronomy 7:9, Psalm 89:8, and many, many other passages make that clear.

Fifthly, we have God’s divine goodness. Once again, God not only does things that are good, but God *is* good. He *is* goodness. In Psalm 119:68, we sing, “Thou art good, and doest good.” He both is good, and therefore, He does what is good. It’s interesting, because the Book of Psalms seems to focus on divine goodness more than any other attribute. All of the other attributes are there in the Book of Psalms, but this one seems to receive the preeminence. And that’s not really surprising to us because of what we saw at the beginning of this lecture, in Exodus 33:18–19. When Moses was beseeching God to show him His glory, the Lord says that He would cause all of His goodness to pass before him. His goodness is His glory. Understanding goodness is important, because the goodness of God issues in the communication of His love, and of His grace, and of His mercy. These are displays of God’s goodness. And we see it in a lot of places. You see God’s goodness displayed in creation. Remember, in Genesis 1, you

get to the end of each day, and we're told, "And God saw that it was good." At the very end, in the end of the sixth day, He looked upon all that He made and He said it was "very good." God's goodness is seen in creation. It's seen in providence (Psalm 145:15–16). And it's seen especially in God's work of redemption.

Sixthly, God is love. The sixth attribute is divine love. "God is love." That's a direct quote—1 John 4:8 and 16 both say, "God is love." Not just what He has, not just what He does, but who He *is*. We cannot talk about love without reference to God Himself. Even the believer's love to God is second to God's love to them. "We love him because He first loved us." So we begin with God, who is the inexhaustible fountain of love, and we note that God loves Himself supremely and eternally. Places like John 17:26 speak of the Father's love for the Son, from eternity, and there are many passages where there are these references. Within the Godhead, there's a perfect love in the indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God loves Himself supremely. If He didn't, He wouldn't be God, because if He loved something else more, the thing that He loved more would be God. But He also chose to manifest that love outside of Himself, and what's more, to manifest it and set it upon depraved, ungodly, enemies—the elect, who He came to redeem. The believer's unworthiness of God's love makes God's love all the more lovely to them.

Seventhly, and lastly, we have mercy—God's mercy. Mercy attends the grace of God. Grace regards the sinfulness of men, whereas mercy respects their misery. Sinfulness and misery are often held together, and so grace and mercy should be held together—grace in reference to sin, mercy in reference to misery. God exercised grace toward Adam before the fall, but He did not exercise mercy toward him, because there was no misery at that point. God's mercy, we're told, is free. God exercises both a general and temporal mercy to all men in common. Places like Psalm 104:27 make that clear. But God exercises a special and eternal mercy to His elect by giving them eternal life in Christ. God's mercy is a shelter for the believer, into which they run. But it is not a refuge for the unbelieving and unrepentant.

Thirdly, we need to consider these doctrines polemically, and we'll do this briefly. First of all, in reference to God's justice, there are those who will ask the question, "How can God remain just and declare the guilty, not guilty?" So those who are saved, how can they be declared guilty and not guilty? That seems as if God is setting aside His justice in order to reconcile a sinful people to Himself. So the objection is that there's a disconnect, or there's opposition between God's justice and His redemption. But the answer to the question takes us into the heart of the gospel. God cannot cease being Himself. God cannot not be just—that's impossible, so nothing can be pursued along those lines. And yet Paul says that God is both just and the justifier of the ungodly. How is that so? Well, all sin must be punished, and for those who are unbelieving sons of Adam, they receive that punishment—they receive God's justice in hell for all of eternity. For the elect, God takes His justice, and He provides, in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, a substitute. So Jesus stands in the place of His elect people. The sins of God's people, their transgressions, are credited to His account. And then God actually executes His justice, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, on behalf of—as a substitute, in the place of—His people, so that His justice is fully vindicated. His wrath is appeased—it is satisfied. It is pacified in the person of His Son, in order that His people might receive pardon, might receive forgiveness. And so there is no contradiction between justice and redemption. Indeed, redemption provides us with one of the most staggering, beautiful displays of God's justice. Here, righteousness and mercy have met and kissed, as we sing in the Psalms.

A second area, in terms of our polemical exposition relates to God's veracity, God's truth. God is truth, so then there is absolute truth. And yet we have in the world around us, those who want to say, "No, truth is relative. Truth is relative, and what is true for you may not be true for me; what is right for you may not be right for me," and so on. In other words, truth is person-relative. It's determined by an individual's own outlook, maybe even their own preferences and inclinations and so on. Well, this flies in the face of what the Bible teaches, and it flies in the face of rationality. Because, if we say, "What is true for you is not true for me," that there's no standard of truth outside of ourselves to which people appeal, then whenever there is a dispute, no one can be wrong. So if a person says, "I paid my bill", and another person says, "No, you didn't pay your bill," normally we would appeal to something outside of ourselves, a third party: Here's the evidence for the fact that I paid my bill, or the evidence for not having paid a person's bill. But if truth is relative, then you don't have that ability. A person can just say, "No, that may be true for you that I didn't pay my bill, but it's not true for me," right? It leads to utter chaos, it leads to irrationality. And the same is true with regards to morals and ethics. If you went to a person and held up a gun and said, "Give me your wallet," and then took their wallet, they might say, "That's not right! You can't do that, that's unjust, that's not ethical," and so on. And a person can say, "Well, that may be true for you but not for me." The whole world would descend into chaos. No, we have to repudiate, we have to reject this notion of relativism and realize that God is truth, His Word is truth, and it is the basis for all truth. For those who say, "Well, it's arrogant for the Christian to say they have truth when others don't," it's actually the opposite. It's humility to recognize our own ignorance and our own fault, and to rather submit ourselves to the truth as it is in Jesus, to submit ourselves to the Word of God, and to receive that truth from Him. Arrogance is rejecting that for our own finite folly.

A third point of considering this polemically has to do with love. Similar to what we just saw with regards to truth, people will define love in all sorts of squishy ways. "This is what I find loving," and "This is how I want to express love." They'll take things that are immoral and call them love, and that's because love is being defined in terms of pleasing themselves—what they like; whereas love, truly and biblically, is ultimately pleasing God. It is conformity to who God is and what God requires of us. That's why the Lord can tell us in the Gospel of John that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments. The content of love is seen in obedience and subjection to what God has revealed to us and required of us. That's biblical love. And when people attribute love to what is immoral, they're actually doing what is hateful and unloving to another person, to themselves, and in dishonor to God.

Hastening on, fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. And we'll do this rather quickly, but in picking up each of the attributes that we've considered. First of all, God's wisdom. We are to exercise much humility and patience in submitting to God's wisdom. You may be tempted at times to say, Why would God allow this? or, Why would God allow that? But the fact is, we could not understand adequately even if He chose to tell us. But rather, we're called upon to trust His character that He is wise. Job 28 brings this out. If God is the source of all wisdom, then let us seek all wisdom from Him. This should give you great encouragement, as a student who's going through this course, and other courses with John Knox Institute. We want to grow in wisdom, we want to avoid the "wisdom of the world," as 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 tell us—wisdom which is "earthly, sensual, and devilish," as James 3:15 says. We want true wisdom, and this drives us to Christ, who is the Wisdom of God, "in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." This also sends us to the Word of God.

“Sanctify them by thy truth: thy word is truth.” We need to study the Holy Scriptures; we need to study the Word of God and what He has shown to us in order that we might find true wisdom. The Lord gives us help in seeking guidance on the decisions that we have to make. How do we find wisdom? In being guided by the study of God’s Word.

Secondly, we have holiness. God’s twofold holiness—separation and purity, corresponds to our twofold sanctification or growth in Christian maturity. We cannot walk with God unless we walk in holiness. “Without holiness no man shall see the Lord,” Hebrews 12 says. God reveals His holiness to us in His law. God’s holiness is the ground for our holiness. He says, “Be ye holy, even as I am holy.” And Christ’s holiness is the pattern for our holiness. God has given to us the Holy Spirit in order to make us conform to God’s holiness.

Thirdly, God’s justice. Divine justice is necessary to uphold God’s moral government of the world. To receive what we really deserve is to receive justice. Grace is to receive what is undeserved. And so for someone to appeal to God’s love as a way of dismissing God’s justice is to create a false god. This should be a comfort to the Christian, because all wrongs will be righted. The wicked never win. God will bring all things to account on the last day. We saw that the cross of Christ harmonizes the justice and mercy of God, and the salvation of sinners. God satisfied His justice by punishing our sins, as imputed to the Lord Jesus Christ. And He shows mercy to sinners without clearing the guilty. He is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Christ.

Fourthly, there is God’s veracity. This strengthens our faith in God and in His infallible Word. It’s a consolation, for example, in affliction. God gives us, in His word, promises that are sure—they are “yea and amen” in the Lord Jesus Christ. We know God is truth. These promises we can be confident in. We must also see and hate error. We need to hate false doctrine, false worship, because it’s not only opposed to God’s word, it’s opposed to God’s being. We need to have zeal for the truth. We need to love it, proclaim it, defend it. We must also desire to see others walking in that truth, as 2 John 4 tells us.

Fifthly, God’s goodness. Romans 2:4 tells us that God’s goodness leads us to repentance. We’re also told in Psalm 34:8 that we are to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” that this is something that has to be experienced by the believer, enjoying God’s goodness. We’re to be assured that God’s goodness and mercy shall follow the believer all the days of their life, as Psalm 23 says. Well, this strengthens the believer to live out of God’s goodness. So they are not to “grow weary in well doing,” as Galatians 6:9–10 tell us, just as the Lord Jesus Christ didn’t grow weary in well doing. The believer is to pursue and to bring forth good works—the fruit that comes by God’s grace, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Sixthly, we have divine love. It’s nice to be loved by another creature. But this pales in comparison to the One who is love. God brings the believer into the realm of the eternal love of the Trinity. This is why God’s love for His people is “incomprehensible,” Paul says in Ephesians 3:17 and following. And His love for His people is indestructible, as the end of Romans 8 teaches us. Heaven will be an ocean of divine love, unaltered, unending. The Holy Spirit sheds abroad this love of God in the hearts of His people, and enables them to see it and believe it and taste it and enjoy it. Well, this should banish all cold formality in worship, and it should banish halfhearted devotion to God. There’s no place in the Christian’s life for divided loyalties. Our loyalty is to Him alone. The sum of the law is to love God with our whole being, to love Him for who He is, and what He does. And that, of course, will spill over into loving all that God loves—loving our brethren, loving His law, loving His holiness, loving the Sabbath, loving

worship, and so on.

Seventhly, we have God's mercy. The experience of mercy takes place in the context of sin. It's interesting—the Old Testament speaks of mercy four times more often than the New Testament. You should study that. In the Psalms, we sing much of God's mercy, which trains us, then to cry out like the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner." You see how this strengthens our faith. God's mercies are tender, God's mercies are plenteous. He is rich in mercy, He has abundant mercies, He has everlasting mercies. All of this describes an enduring multitude of mercies. We're warned then about forsaking our mercies or abusing them. God's mercy makes the believer happy and humble at the same time. It fills them with praise and love, and it also motivates the believer to show mercy to others, having received mercy themselves.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of some of the other attributes of God. There are many more that we have not covered, but this provides us with a pattern for how to study what God has revealed to us about Himself, leading us to long for a greater knowledge of Him.

In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, and we'll seek to answer the question, "What does the Bible reveal to us about the one God, who subsists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?"

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 8 **THE TRINITY**

Some things are easy to learn, and other things are far more challenging and difficult. Learning to count, for example, is fairly simple. On the other hand, we would find the science and math needed to send a rocket into outer space, to be complicated. It takes years of painstaking study to learn that kind of math, and its application to rocket science. But we expect that to be the case. We're not surprised, because we have a sense of the technical difficulties involved. In fact, if you reduced it to simple math, you would find it dangerous.

Well, when it comes to the study of God, we need to have a similar mindset. Some things will be relatively easy to grasp, without much effort. But the more we study, and the deeper we dig, the more we find our minds stretched to comprehend all that God is in His glory. That is especially true when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity. We can affirm simple statements like, "God is three in one," which is good and appropriate. But when we begin to dig further, we find more complex truths. And this is further reinforced when seeking to distinguish sound doctrine from false heresies. This requires careful reflection. The content of these lectures is different and, indeed, more difficult from what would be found in preaching a sermon. But this doctrinal study provides a solid foundation to place underneath our thinking, reading, praying, and preaching. We are being pressed to go deeper, and to beware of oversimplifying the doctrine of the Trinity. Omitting vital Trinitarian concepts will hinder us from applying the doctrine rightly. That means we need to be prepared to be stretched in the material before us today.

The series of lectures in this second module on systematic theology is devoted to the doctrine of God. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the previous lectures, we've been answering the question of what God is, all that is in God. We learned that there is one God, that is, one and only one divine essence. And we have explored what God reveals about His essence by way of His attributes. In the present lecture, we turn to the question about who God is, and therefore, to the doctrine of the Trinity. There is one God who subsists in three persons. We will consider an introduction to this all-important, fundamental doctrine.

First of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity. At the end of Christ's earthly ministry, we read, in Matthew 28:18–20, these words, "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." While God reveals His existence and some of His attributes through creation

and providence, the revelation of salvation, that is, the saving knowledge of the blessed Trinity, can only be found through His Word. The revelation of the Trinity comes in connection with the revelation of the gospel, as you see here in Matthew 28. God revealed both the Trinity and the gospel at the same time, and in the same ways, more obscurely by way of anticipation in the Old Testament, and more clearly and fully by way of fulfillment in the New Testament.

Consequently, we should not be surprised to see this reference to the Trinity tied to baptism, one of the most fundamental ordinances in the New Testament. You learn the same, for example, in the apostolic benediction, in 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” We see, in Matthew 28, that the believer is baptized into the “name,” (singular), “of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” (plural). So, in the unity of the divine being, there are three persons; and these three are one God, of one substance, equal in all of the indivisible, divine attributes. That means that the revelation of the Trinity is God’s self-revelation about who God is, internal to the divine being, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit stand toward each other. We see shadowy references to plurality in the opening three verses of the Bible, for example: “God created the heavens and the earth.” You see reference to the Spirit hovering over the waters. And you can connect this to other places, where Christ is the One who created the world. So you see it in the opening verses of the Bible, and in the Old Testament narratives, and Psalms, and Prophets. But in the New Testament, we discover greater clarity about that same plurality, a plurality of equality. 1 Corinthians 8:6, “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.” There is one God, and there are three who are equal, who perform divine works, and who are worthy of worship and obedience. As we will see, the three are not three gods, but one God in three persons or subsistences—the blessed holy Trinity. We know this because God revealed it to us in the Scriptures. But the doctrine of the Trinity surpasses our comprehension.

In previous lectures, we felt the weakness and limitation of our minds, in considering many of God’s attributes. But we are stretched even further in truths about the Trinity. That is because there is nothing comparable to the Trinity in this world, and there are no analogies to illustrate it. In this lecture, we’ll explore an introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the highest and most precious doctrine in the Christian faith, and so it warrants careful attention. But it is also the most practical doctrine. It is the foundation of the believer’s salvation and all communion with God, delivering some of the greatest joys to us. But before we turn to the practical, we must begin with the doctrinal. As I’ve noted, this will require some heavy lifting and some diligent thinking on our part. We’re talking about God, so it should not surprise us that it will be difficult. But it is also all-important.

And so secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 3, which says, “In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor preceding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.” Well, given the fundamental importance of this doctrine, as well as the difficulty and complexity it entails, we need to aim at clarity, by defining our terms and categories precisely, thereby seeking to avoid the pitfalls and dangers of theological inaccuracy

and error. There is one God, and there are three persons that the Bible refers to as God. So, how do we understand this? Well, let me give you a number of points in this pursuit of clarity.

First of all, let's think about the word, "persons"—one God, three persons. When using the word "person" to describe the three, we need to be careful about a point of confusion. When we hear "person," we may find it difficult not to think of the idea of a human person. We unavoidably connect this to the idea of finite, created, separate relations. So for example, human persons, like fathers, beget other persons, like sons. We must not think in terms of the imperfections of created persons, who have a limited essence, distinct and separate from one another. In the doctrine of God, we are referring to an uncreated person, devoid of the limitations and finitude of human personality. An uncreated person is the divine essence subsisting in a relative property. You say, "Well, wow! That sounds very complicated. An uncreated person is the divine essence subsisting in a relative property." Well, let's further define those words, so we can take what sounds complicated—the vocabulary—and focus our attention on, "What do those words mean?" Because if we understand what they mean, then all of the sudden the word doesn't seem so puzzling to us. Let's define the words "subsistence" and "relative property."

That brings us, secondly, to this idea of subsistence. "Subsistence" is really another word for "person" in the Trinity. So think of it as a synonym. It's not a perfect synonym, but a close synonym to the word "person" in the Trinity. Now, I realize this is abstract, but subsistence means a manner of existing, a manner or way of existing. So it means the way in which the one God, the divine essence, exists in the Father eternally begetting the Son, the Son being begotten eternally, and the Holy Spirit proceeding eternally from the Father and the Son—three subsistences in one divine being. It's the way in which the triune God exists. The word "subsistence"—you can even hear it in the English. The word "subsistence" connects to the unity of one divine essence, unlike human essences, which are, as I said, finite and separate from each other. So two humans share a common essence in general—we refer to it as "humanity" or "human nature"—but they are not the same essence in particular. They're distinct human beings from each other. This also helps clarify that the three persons are triune, not triple. The divine essence does not exist apart from the three persons, nor is the divine essence the sum total of the three persons. The divine essence *is* three persons, or subsistences. The subsistences do not divide up God into three parts. Remember our treatment of the doctrine of divine simplicity. God is not composed of parts. The three are not divided in being, but distinguished by their relative properties and personal relations. So let's define those words. Let's see if we can understand those concepts, "relative properties" and "personal relations."

So, thirdly, "relative properties" are the names of the personal internal acts of the divine essence. They describe an act of God relative to God, not the creature—not anything outside of Himself. Each cannot be attributed to the other two persons of the Godhead. They're internal, in that they do not describe anything in creation or outside of God and the Bible. There is One who is not of another, but is also not alone—He eternally begets. So the relative property is generation, or begetting, which distinguishes Him in the divine essence. Likewise, the Bible speaks of One who is eternally "begotten" and is "of the first." The relative property here is affiliation, of being begotten, which distinguishes Him in the divine essence. And lastly, there is One who is not begotten, but who proceeds eternally from the first and the second, and the relative property here is procession, which distinguishes Him in the divine essence. So there's one divine essence that subsists in three relative properties, each one having the whole divine essence, without the essence being divided.

Now, we can add further to this to strengthen our sense of clarity. That brings us, fourthly, to “personal relations.” Personal relations, therefore, derive from these relative properties. Personal relations are the names that the Bible supplies. You’ve probably already anticipated this. First, we speak of the Father. The Father has His name from His paternity in relationship to the Son; He eternally begets the Son. The Gospel of John, 1:14 and 18, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” Verse 18 says, “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Secondly, God the Son has His name in relation to the Father, who begets Him eternally. So eternal generation means that the one and whole essence of the Father is communicated to the Son without multiplication or division. Think of John 10:30, “I and my Father are one,” or that same book, 14:11, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.” Thirdly, God the Holy Spirit has His name in relation to His proceeding eternally from the Father and the Son. He receives the complete undivided divine essence from the Father and Son. In John 15:26, Jesus says, “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.” He is also called the “Spirit of Christ” in Romans 8:9 and the “Spirit of the Son” in Galatians 4:6. The Bible attributes divine actions and perfections to the Holy Spirit.

So the doctrine of the Trinity is based on careful study of the Scriptures, in which we find one God in three persons—three in one. It is difficult to understand, but it provides the foundation for the whole Christian faith, so we neglect it to our own peril.

Fifthly, in considering the tri-unity of God, we must also affirm the unity of the Trinity. This is a very important point. Each of the three persons has the whole undivided divine essence. So we must reject the idea, for example, that only the Father is somehow truly God, and that the Son and the Holy Spirit are something lower, as if having only a derived deity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. Each has the whole divine essence. So the essence of the Son is the divine essence, and the essence of the Holy Spirit is the divine essence. Similarly, we can say the Father is God in Himself, the Son is God in Himself, the Holy Spirit is God in Himself. But then, when we turn to speak about subsistence and ask the question, “In what manner, or way, does each person have the whole divine essence?” we answer, “The Father is of none, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Each has the whole divine essence, and yet the essence remains undivided. In previous lectures, we learned about God’s attributes which belong to the single divine essence, and therefore apply equally to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There are not three eternal, or three omnipotents, but one eternal omnipotent God subsisting in three persons. So we reject the error of tri-theism—there being three gods—as well as polytheism. We affirm, as we saw earlier, monotheism. There is one God.

Sixthly, since the divine essence is numerically one, and there are three persons subsisting within the Godhead, they are indivisibly united. They mutually inhabit one another. The Father is in the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son. In John 14:11, Jesus says, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.” Theologians call this the doctrine of perichoresis—mutual indwelling of the three persons. 1 Corinthians 2:11, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.” God the Trinity enjoys perfect fullness of communion and mutual delight in Himself from all

eternity. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably, and you can say the same about the Son's love for the Spirit and the Father, and the Spirit's love for the Father and the Son. God does not need creation or anything outside Himself to be complete. Creation serves to display God's glory, but it is not the source of God's glory and blessedness.

Seventhly, we have referred to the internal works or actions within the Godhead: the Father begetting, the Son being begotten, the Spirit proceeding, and so on. We can also speak of the external works or actions of the Trinity, outside of the Godhead, with reference to their actions regarding creation. Indeed, the Trinity was revealed when God the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit. These two missions, the coming of the Son and of the Spirit, are a revelation of the life of God. The Father sending the Son and sending the Holy Spirit, that is, Christ's incarnation, and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, take place in time, and in time, they provide revelation or manifestation of what we've already learned about the eternal relations within the Trinity. In other words, it is God who is sending God. There are, in the eternal essence of God, three distinct persons.

Eighthly and lastly under this section, since the three persons of the Trinity are God indivisibly, so also the works or external operations of God outside Himself are indivisible. The three persons carry out jointly the works of God concerning the creature. This is seen, for example, in creation, which I noted earlier. There's a reference to God creating the heavens and the earth, there's a reference to the Spirit who is present hovering over the waters, and then we learn in the New Testament that the Father created the world, the universe, through the Son, that the Son was the one who made all things, and so on. All three persons are working jointly in the work of creation. The same can be said with regards to redemption. The Father sends the Son, and the Son is sent by the Father, and the Son is being upheld by the Spirit in all that He is accomplishing. And even in the application of salvation, the Father choosing the elect, the Son purchasing the redemption, the Spirit applying that redemption to them, and so on. We could speak at length about this, and indeed, you'll hear more about it in the module on the doctrines of salvation. Scripture brings to the forefront certain persons of the Trinity in connection with certain works, which reflects the order of the persons within the Trinity. But it is always in connection with the three, without hierarchy or subordination, within the Godhead.

Thirdly, we should consider this briefly from a polemical angle as well. So let's consider it polemically. First of all, and this is important, when you're first thinking about the Trinity in any depth, you should resist and reject all human analogies or illustrations from the created world to explain the Trinity, because they result in error. They will always result in one type of heresy or another. Some of them you'll have heard. People say, "Well, the Trinity is like water. It can be ice when it's frozen, or it could be liquid when it's water, or it can be a gas, it can be vapor." Or they'll say, "The Trinity is like a tree; it has roots in the ground, and it has a trunk, and it has branches." Or they'll say, "The Trinity is like a man who is a son and also a husband and also a father." Well, all of these analogies are heretical when it comes to the Trinity. You can't refer to God as one person who has three different modes of existence, or one person that has three different relationships to that which is outside of Himself, and so on. It leads to all sorts of trouble. The doctrine of the Trinity is ineffable, it is sublime, it's beautiful, it's mysterious, and it is clear in terms of what the Bible teaches us. We need to stick to the text of Scripture, recognizing that the Trinity is completely distinct from everything else that we know in the created world—that there's nothing here that does justice to explaining it.

Secondly, let me point out two opposite errors. We're not going to consider this at length.

But on the one hand, there are various forms of modalism. The idea is that God appears in different modes—God is one person manifested in three different modes. That’s somewhat simplistic in terms of describing modalism, and it takes lots of different forms, but we need to beware of this idea of there being one person manifested in three different modes. The opposite error is tri-theism, when speaking about the Trinity, to refer to three divine essences, which would thus be three gods rather than one. And that can take place in different forms shapes and sizes and so on. So beware of those two opposite errors.

Thirdly, some teach that God the Son is subordinate to God the Father. Now we’ve learned that the three are one God, the same in substance. So we must vehemently reject the error that God the Son in His divinity is in any way subordinate to the Father. He is not. The subordination of the Son that is described in various places in the Gospels is entirely limited to Christ’s incarnation as the God-man, the Word made flesh. It speaks of the obedience of the human will of Christ’s human nature to the divine will, not to a relation within the divine being. So God the Son is not subordinate to God the Father, within the divine being.

Fourthly, you’ll sometimes hear objections to the technical vocabulary that is used in discussing the doctrine of the Trinity. But it is necessary to make clear distinctions, and the reason is because heresies all claim to hold to the Bible. They may say, for example, that Jesus is God. But when you question them or you listen to them, you discover that they mean that He is a created god, or that He is similar to God but not of the same essence. And there are many, many, many other perversions. So as you begin to flesh out what a person is saying or what they mean, indeed, what you are saying and what you think, we have to employ clear distinctions. We have to strive to be precise in our language. These truths are too precious to be distorted.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. First of all, the Trinity is the foundation of the believer’s salvation. John 17:3, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” It is impossible to know the Father without the Son. Jesus says in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” And it is impossible to have the Son without receiving the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9, “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”

Secondly, the Trinity is the foundation of all of our worship. Revelation 5:11–14 brings out the character of our Trinitarian worship. You can actually connect that back to Isaiah 6 as well. We see that we are baptized into the name of the Trinity. Even the most simple, basic component of the Christian life, prayer, is Trinitarian. We learn to pray to the Father, we learn to pray in the name of the Son and through the mediation of the Son, and we learn to pray by the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches us that we ascribe praise and adoration to each of the three persons, and seek from each of the three divine blessing.

Thirdly, the believer’s obedience is tied to the Trinity. The Father commands us to “hear” the Son, Matthew 17:5. We behold the glory of God in the Son (John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1). The Son commands us to take the gospel to the nations, as we saw in Matthew 28. And saints are called to obey “what the Spirit saith unto the churches,” as you see in Revelation 2.

Fourthly, the believer is brought into union with the triune God. John 14:23 says, “Jesus answered and said unto him, if a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.” The believer is brought into union with Christ in their salvation. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell the believer in their salvation. And this union leads to communion with each of the persons of the Trinity. Commu-

nion or fellowship is giving and receiving, and the believer is brought into a precious privilege of being able to enjoy this in time and eternity, receiving from the Father and the Son and the Spirit, enjoying all of the riches and bounty that are conferred upon us in salvation, us giving in our love, our service, our worship, our praise, our obedience to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well. There is communion that results from this union in the triune God.

Well, in this lecture we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of the Trinity. There is obviously much more to learn, but this provides some help for a Trinitarian reading of the Bible. And it should lead us to long for a greater knowledge of the one God who subsists in three persons. In the next lecture, we'll be turning our consideration to the doctrine of God's divine decrees, His eternal purpose in foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 9

GOD'S DECREE

Reading history can be fascinating. There are so many twists and turns, and so many unexpected and surprising events that unfold. We see this even in the history recorded in the Bible. Think of the complicated story of Joseph. He has a dream, in which he's told that his brothers will bow down before him, and yet everything that unfolds after that seems to contradict it. He's thrown into a pit, he's sold into slavery, he's taken to a far country, he's betrayed by his master's house, he's put in prison and forgotten about there, and there's one thing after another. And when you first hear the story, you find yourself sitting on the edge of your seat wondering, "What will happen next?" At several points, it appears as if God's plan has failed, and that everything is over for Joseph, only to discover another twist and an open door, ultimately leading to the salvation of God's people in the end. The same is true, for example, at the end of the Old Testament, in the story of Esther. You think of how close, it seems, that the people of Israel came to extinction. And yet the Lord turns things in a split second and brings about abundant good. The same is true in many other accounts. You can trace this beyond the Bible, through the history of the world, and especially the history of the church down through the ages. Even in our present contemporary context, the believer may often wonder, "What is God doing in these events? Where will this lead? What will be the outcome? What are His intentions?" Though we may not always see clearly the immediate answers to questions about specific events, the believer does have more fundamental truths revealed to us, which provide a foundation upon which we can rest our faith. We know that God is at the helm of history. We know that nothing is outside of His control. We know that His perfect plan will certainly come to pass, and we know that His plan will serve His glory and the advance of Christ's kingdom. Our sight may be blurry in viewing present circumstances, but our faith sees clearly the God behind those circumstances.

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 lectures, we've been exploring what the Bible teaches about God Himself both in unity and in Trinity. In this and the following lectures, we will turn our attention to all things outside of God, namely, creation. We learn that all that exists, exists because God decreed its existence. So we begin with the question, "Why, and for what purpose, did God create all things?" The answer is found in the decree of God. We will consider an introduction to this all-important, fundamental doctrine. But as has been our pattern, first of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of divine decrees.

We read in Isaiah 46:9 and 10, these words, “Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.” Notice in this passage the connection between who God is and what God does. He begins by saying, “I am God,” and so on. As you study systematic theology, you’ll discover that all of the other doctrines of the Bible flow from the doctrine of God Himself. Who God is informs our understanding of what God does outside of Himself in the created cosmos. God is eternal and unchangeable and all-wise and sovereign. And since He is God, His most holy determinations must always come to pass. As the independent, self-sufficient God, He does not look outside Himself for reasons to do anything. All is accomplished according to the counsel of His will, and must always serve His interests and glory. This text in Isaiah says that He declares the end from the beginning. So before anything happens in history, God declares all that will come to pass, clear through to the end of all things. Now, He declares it because He determines it Himself, and what He determines cannot be altered in the least degree. As that Isaiah passage says, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.” God does not decide things based on a response to things in this world. Nothing among men can change what He decrees.

Now we know this truth, because God revealed it to us in the Scriptures. We know that God decrees all that comes to pass, but we do not know what He decreed before it comes to pass. Remember the words of Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” So we must distinguish between God’s sovereign will of decree, which is secret in God Himself, and on the other hand, God’s revealed will in His Word, that is, in the Scriptures. In reference to the former, His will of decree, the eternal purpose of God brings to pass whatever He ordained according to the counsel of His will alone.

In this lecture, we will explore an introduction to the doctrine of the divine decree, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of the decree once again stretches our minds, humbling us, and leading us to worship God. So it warrants careful attention, as an all-important Biblical doctrine.

Secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of the divine decrees. This doctrine is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, paragraph 1, which says, “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” So that’s Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 1. In seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must have firmly fixed in our minds.

First of all, let’s define our terms. The divine “decree” refers to the act of God, by which He determines the existence and future of all that is outside of Himself. God is the first cause, and the director, and governor of all events. We trace all things back to what God’s will causes. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question and answer 7, provides what I think is a succinct definition. It says, “The decrees of God are, His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” So notice that it says “decrees,” plural, are defined by His “purpose,” which is in the singular. So

God has one single eternal purpose. Don't think in terms of an order of succession in time or deliberation. You also notice that the goal of the decree is the glory of God alone.

Secondly, the decree is eternal. It has no beginning, no end, no succession in time. Now from our side, we see the individual unfolding of events in time and space, but this is the effect of God's decree. All that happens is the outworking of a plan already established by God. So God's decree is simple and eternal like Himself. We saw this in Isaiah 46:9-10 at the beginning of this lecture, "He declares the end from before the beginning." It's eternal.

Thirdly, the decree is a free act. What do we mean by that? The origin of the decree is in God Himself. It's not determined by something outside Him in this world. Think of Paul's words in Ephesians 1:11, which speaks of God acting, "according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." Or think of the words of Job 23:13, "But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desireth, even that he doeth." So God did not determine things based on anything He foresaw in creatures—it was a free act. The Lord wasn't compelled by anything outside Himself.

Fourthly, that means God's decree is not conditional—it is not conditioned on something else. If you go back to Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, it continues in paragraph 2 with these words, "Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions." So if we were to say that God decreed certain things because He foresaw and responded to something in creation, then we would be supposing their existence independent of God, which would unravel everything we already learned about God Himself. No other being exists apart from God first decreeing their existence, as well as all that follows from it. And so, when we're thinking about God, we don't think, "Well, if people were going to do thus and such, then the Lord determined to do something else." It's not conditional.

Fifthly, the decree is immutable. It is unchangeable. If nothing else caused God's decree, but rather His eternal decree causes everything, then the decree is an immutable decree of an immutable God, an unchanging decree of an unchangeable God. What God decreed will happen, without alteration, without adjustment or modification. In Numbers 23:19, we read, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?"

Sixthly, we see the divine decree is comprehensive. It includes everything that comes to pass. Again, you'll note the words "all things" in Ephesians 1:11, "according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." Nothing that exists or happens is excluded from the all-encompassing, universal will of God. And so it is comprehensive. We'll speak further about this in the lecture on the doctrine of providence.

Seventhly, if God is the first cause, decreeing all things, then what about second causes? And what about man's free agency to make decisions without being something like a robot? We saw in Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 1, that it said, "Nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." So God is the first cause, not a first cause; God is the first cause. And then everything else, in terms of cause and effect, are secondary, or second causes. In understanding the relationship between God as the only first cause and all other second causes, that relationship is called the doctrine of concurrence. Concurrence involves the idea of two things running together or side-by-side. You can think of confluent rivers—two rivers that are coming

together, or two rivers running side-by-side one another—they concur. These two things that we’re speaking of are the first cause and all second causes, so do not think in terms of only two options. This is the kind of basic mistake that people make. They think only in terms of two options—either God does something, or man does it. And they think of those as the two options. But that would assume that all causes are first causes, which, of course, is impossible. So men act freely in accordance with the scope of their volition. And we’ll speak more about what that scope is, because fallen man, sinful man, is restricted in his will and abilities by his own fallen nature. But men act freely in accordance with the scope of their volition, and God accomplishes His purposes, through all that they do, perfectly, immutably, eternally—all that we saw earlier. So the first cause concurs with second causes. You see this in the Bible, Proverbs 19:21, “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand.” Or you think of that story we were speaking about with Joseph. You get to the end, in Genesis 50:20, and he is speaking to his brothers, and he says, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” So what his brothers did, they did in their own choice and volition, and what they did, they’re responsible for—they sinned. But God was doing something, and He was bringing to pass His decree, which was going to result in something wonderful. Now, there’s no better place to see this than at the cross. You remember how it’s described in Acts 2:23; “Him,” that is, Christ, “being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God”—so God has decreed this, He’s decreed that He’s been delivered. Peter then says to them, “ye have taken” the Savior—“ye have taken” the Lord Jesus Christ, or, to use the words of the text, “ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.” So you see the point here. The point is that God had determined something, and men were bringing it to pass by their own choice. Similarly, in Acts 4:27–28, “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” So these wicked men are doing what they want to do, in their wicked devices, but they’re actually bringing to pass what God had determined, in His own counsel. So we see that men are not compelled to do something by a force outside of themselves. They’re acting in their free agency within the scope of their limitations. But we also see that what they do fulfills God’s immutable purpose and plan. Now we’ll discuss this further in subsequent lectures. So that provides us with an overview of the doctrinal exposition.

Thirdly, we come to consider this doctrine polemically. What are the objections? Well, first of all, people will hear this Biblical doctrine, and they’ll think to themselves, “Well, God is the author of sin.” And you’ll remember Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 1, addresses this: “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin.” So there’s an emphatic denial that God is the author of sin. And that must be the case, because the Bible teaches it. God is not the author of sin. He does not tempt or force man into sin. God actively decrees to permit sin. He’s not passive in it— He’s actively decreeing it, but it is a decree to permit sin. He does not actually work sin in men—they bear that guilt. So you have God’s immutable decree coming to pass through their sin, in order to serve the greater purposes of God’s glory.

Secondly, some will say, “Well, this eliminates the freedom of man.” We’ve noted already the Westminster Confession addresses this as well. It does not eliminate man’s freedom and

choice of doing things that he wishes to do. No, man's responsibility and man's culpability are maintained. So men are thinking for themselves, speaking for themselves, acting according to their own will and desire; and what they choose to do, they're responsible before God for, and, in instances of sin and rebellion, are guilty for it. So that free agency is maintained, but not to the exclusion of the fact that what does come to pass is perfectly in keeping with what God has decreed.

Thirdly, some will say that it breeds human apathy, passivity, a lack of motivated exertion, and so on. But it's actually to the contrary. For the believer, it fuels our dependence upon God for all things. It's casting us back on the Lord, and it's recognizing that all is dependent upon Him, that we must receive from His hand the ability to do what would please Him and glorify Him, and so on. And so, when you have a sense of God's overruling, sovereign execution of His own will, coupled with our own responsibility, we're forced into a position of diligence, and of activity before the Lord, and in seeking His service. Because we know that, for the believer, in trusting the Lord, and in following the Lord, and in serving the Lord, and in sacrificing for the Lord, and so on and so forth, that God is actually orchestrating these things, and He's using them to display His glory, and to bring forward His own cause.

Fourthly, we should consider this practically. We can draw some practical application for ourselves. Just a few brief things here. First of all, we recognize the doctrine of divine decrees must be handled with wisdom and discernment. We're dealing with holy things here: who God is, and what God does. We're not to speak in a way that would be vain or empty or disrespectful or lightly of these things. We should walk in the fear of God when handling such doctrines, and with a sensitivity to those who are perhaps early on in their comprehension and ability to understand these things. We don't want to confuse them unnecessarily. We want to lead them with clarity to the truth.

Secondly, rather than being counterproductive to man's responsibility, and specifically to things like evangelism and the advance of the kingdom, it strengthens this. It strengthens our trust in the Lord. We recognize that what we're doing for the kingdom is something that God Himself is doing and is bringing it forward. So we don't have to worry about the outcomes. God is going to secure success for His own cause in these things. Even in our personal life, it strengthens our trust amid many difficulties, trials, afflictions, and many things that are confusing. We're able to fall back on this doctrine, knowing that we are safe and secure and that we can trust the Lord in all that He's unfolding.

Thirdly, it should destroy our pride and it should stimulate humility. Man is put in the dust by this doctrine. God is made altogether glorious. God is the one who is seen as all in all, and man becomes very small by way of consequence. So it humbles us.

But it should also produce lifelong gratitude to God. He rules and overrules in all the affairs of men. And therefore, we desire that all glory and honor must go to Him, not to man and to his achievements. We cannot lay claim to these things. We give the Lord the praise.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of the divine decree. There is much more to learn, of course, but this provides some help for understanding God's work in the world, leading us to long for a greater knowledge of Him. In the next lecture, we'll turn our consideration to the doctrine of predestination, which addresses the divine decree within the arena of God redeeming men for His own glory.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 10

PREDESTINATION

When God says in the Bible that natural, unconverted men are dead in trespasses and sins, many people find themselves puzzled. They may respond by saying, “I don’t feel dead, I don’t seem dead. Look at me blink and eat and run and so on.” The problem lies in their failure to recognize that men have both a body and a soul. Their body can be alive and active, while simultaneously their soul can be dead. Then what are the indications that a person’s soul is dead in sin? Well, the easiest thing is to think in terms of the parallel with the body. Those who are spiritually dead cannot see the light of God’s truth. They cannot hear by faith the Word and believe it. They do not taste and savor the wonder of God’s love in Christ. They cannot respond to the truth or run in the way of God’s commandments. Like a dead corpse, they are spiritually lifeless.

Well, this paints a grim picture of reality. People left to themselves are far worse off than they imagine—they’re hopelessly lost. The unconverted are not just sick or weak, they’re spiritually blind, ignorant, and dead in sins. That means that if left alone, they cannot possibly respond to the gospel and be saved from their sins, any more than a person in a grave can respond to someone shouting at them. What the sinner needs can only be provided by God. He must show the initiative in supernaturally giving them spiritual life. Otherwise, the dead sinner will die in his sins and suffer the eternal death of divine punishment in hell. But thanks be to God that He is pleased, graciously and mercifully, to choose a people for Himself, to seek and save them, to give them life, and to secure their complete and eternal redemption in Christ Jesus.

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 earlier lectures, we explored what the Bible teaches about God, both in His unity and in His trinity. But in the latter part, in lectures 9 through 12, we are turning our attention to all things outside of God—namely, creation. You’ll recall that in the previous lecture, we took up for consideration the doctrine of the decrees of God. We saw that the divine decree determines everything that happens outside of God, from initial creation, through God’s governing providence in history. But before we turn to the doctrines of creation and providence, we’re going to consider the doctrine of predestination. And in doing so, we move from the broader concept of God’s decree, to a narrower consideration of the divine decree in relation to God’s purpose in redemption. In expounding predestination, we will follow the pattern that we have used in all of our lectures.

We’ll begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our further consideration of the doctrine of predestination. We read in Ephesians 1:4–6, these words: “Ac-

ording as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.” Paul continues, in verses 11 and 12, by saying, “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ.” So Paul opens his epistle by highlighting the spiritual blessings and privileges that believers receive in Christ. In doing so, he stretches his mind backward into eternity before the beginning of the world, and then he stretches his mind forward to the believer’s heavenly inheritance in the world to come, and he encompasses everything else that is in between these. But I want us to focus especially on his reference to the saving blessings recorded in the past. We read that God “chose” His people in Christ (verse 4), that God “predestinated” believers to salvation (verses 5 and 11). Notice that God is the one doing the choosing and predestining. He takes the initiative. He decides whom He will save.

Secondly, we also see that God made this determination “before the foundation of the world”—before the beginning of time, before the creation of the earth, before any people actually existed. He did not decide to convey these saving privileges after He saw what individual people would do.

Thirdly, this is further reinforced by the words of the text in verse 5. We read that God predestined a people “according to the good pleasure of his will,” and in verse 11, “according to the purpose of him, who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” So the reason behind God’s predestinating to save a people is rooted in His own good pleasure, His own will, and His own divine purpose. It’s not based on man’s will, or man’s disposition or action.

Lastly, we see the end of all of this. God’s predestination results in the “praise of the glory of His grace” (verses 6 and 12). Predestination accentuates the grace of God. Salvation is a gift from God bestowed out of His own good pleasure. Because the choice of salvation originates with God, all the praise and glory go to God. If man could lay claim to some of the credit of his salvation—his wise choosing of God, then man would have a share in the glory. But it is not so. God reserves all of the glory for Himself, from first to last, and magnifies that glory through His sovereign grace in choosing to save an undeserving people.

In this lecture, we’ll explore an introduction to the doctrine of predestination, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of predestination reveals the majesty and power and love of God, thus humbling us and stirring our hearts to adore and praise Him for His wonderful mercy.

Secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of this matter of predestination. All that we learned about the divine decree applies to the matter of predestination. Like the decree, predestination is eternal, it’s immutable, it’s not conditional, and so on. This doctrine is simply stated in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 3, paragraphs 3 and 4, which says, “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.” Thus far the language of the Confession. So in seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must have firmly fixed in our minds.

First, let's define our terms. Predestination is God's decree determining the eternal destiny of all men. God, by His divine will, foreordains—He predetermines; He decides beforehand who will be saved and who will not be saved. We can think of predestination as consisting of two sides: election (God choosing whom He will save) and reprobation (God's choosing whom He will not save). We'll consider both of these. The doctrine of election refers to God's sovereign decree to redeem a people for Himself. So when you hear the word "election," think "choosing"—God's choosing. By way of illustration, in the political realm of many countries, the citizens "elect," or "choose," their government officials. Maybe that will help you remember, election is God choosing to save sinners. Now, this is fleshed out in that same chapter in the Westminster Confession, chapter 3, in paragraphs 5 and 6, if you want to reference those. But as we saw in Ephesians 1, the source of God's choosing is His own good pleasure. We read elsewhere in Romans 9:11, "For the children being not yet born"—this is referring to Jacob and Esau—"for the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth." So God's decree to elect His people is eternal and unchangeable. In Romans 8:29–30 we read, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." In terms of God's eternal and unchangeable decree to elect, you can also see 2 Timothy 2:19 or what we noted from Ephesians 1. As we see in the Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 6, it says, "Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only."

Election is also unconditional. Romans 9 talks about this. But if you look at Acts 13:48, it says, "And when the Gentiles heard this,"—that is, the gospel—"they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Again, Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 5 says, "Out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto; and all to the praise of His glorious grace." So it's reinforcing what we're seeing in the Scripture, that God did not make His choice based on anything He saw in man, or conditioned on anything that He saw would happen in the future. Indeed, Jesus says in John 15:16, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain." The Lord is showing that He's the one who unconditionally chooses His own people; it's not the reverse.

But this also means that divine election is exceedingly gracious. Romans 9, which is devoted to this doctrine, says in verses 15–16, "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of Him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." So God is the one who is showing His gracious, merciful, condescending love, in pursuing to choose and save a people. We see this in action with Lydia, in Acts 16:14, where we're told that, "A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshiped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul." God's graciousness is magnified against the backdrop of men's spiritual deadness and inability. Again, Jesus says in John 6:37 and 44, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. . . . No man can come to me, except

the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise Him up at the last day.” So election speaks of those chosen by God unto salvation.

On the other side, conversely, the doctrine of reprobation refers to God’s decree to leave the rest of mankind to perish in their sins. Westminster Confession, chapter 3, paragraph 7 says, “The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.” Or as you see in Romans 9:18, “therefore hath He mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.”

For the sake of clarity, reprobation includes two facets. First, there is what theologians call preterition, which means “to pass by” or “to pass over.” Preterition is the sovereign, unconditional decree to pass over the non-elect, or reprobate, and to leave them in their sins. You saw this language in what I just cited from Westminster Confession of Faith. So on one side, you have preterition. Second, there is condemnation. The sinfulness of men is the active ground which damns them. What actually condemns men to hell is their own sin. They only receive what they have merited and deserve. In reprobation, God ordains them to be left under His just wrath. So we think of predestination as consisting of election and reprobation. And when we think about God’s decree of reprobation, we can think of preterition (His passing by, leaving the reprobate to themselves) and condemnation (it’s their own sin which damns them). John Calvin wrote, “No one who wishes to be thought religious dares simply deny predestination, by which God adopts some to hope of life and sentences others to eternal death.” Well there is a brief encapsulated summary of the doctrine of predestination.

Let’s, thirdly, consider this doctrine polemically; and there are a few things here. First of all, some will object that this doctrine is not fair. How can people be held responsible if they were not chosen by God? Well, Paul anticipates this common objection when dealing with predestination throughout Romans 9. He says, in verses 19–20, “Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour?” You see, the objection stems from a high view of man and a low view of God, thereby causing us to forget our place. God is free to do as He pleases with His creation. He is the potter; we are the clay. Furthermore, this reinforces the fact that we should never want what is fair. If all men got what they truly deserved, then all men would be lost forever. Thank God that He does not give what is fair. In His mercy, He is pleased to choose and save an undeserving people for the praise of the glory of His grace. Think, by way of parallel, of the nation of Israel—God’s Old Testament chosen people. When God chose Israel, He did not choose Egypt, or the Canaanites or others. Well, why did he choose them? Was it because they were deserving? No, it was God’s free choice of sovereign love. In Deuteronomy 7:7–8 we read, “The Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

Secondly, another objection is that God is the cause for why some go to hell. Well, this objection confuses the mode of divine activity. God’s positively providing the Spirit and re-

generation and faith to the elect is done by His monergistic work of grace. But God does not monergistically work sin or unbelief in the lives of the reprobate. Monergism means “to work one way.” So God does monergistically give the Spirit, and a new heart, and faith, and so on, but He does not work sin and unbelief in the lives of the reprobate. Rather, He withholds His monergistic work of grace from them, and ordains to leave them to perish in their sins. Reprobate sinners bear the culpability and responsibility for their own damnation.

There are those who will object that this doctrine means that there are people, who sincerely want to be converted, and who are rejected and excluded from salvation; and that is not true. Remember what we saw in the introduction about spiritually dead souls. No one will ever want to come to Christ without God’s divine intervention, and all who do come, do so because they’re drawn by His marvelous grace. Those whom the Father has chosen will certainly be saved. John 6:37, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out.”

Fourthly, there have been those who have rejected this biblical truth, and taught false doctrine down through the ages. So in the early church, we have Augustine, who was a godly, faithful, biblical theologian. There was a controversy that he had with a man named Pelagius. Pelagianism had a naturalistic view of salvation in which the power exerted to save man is found within himself. So infants are born without a corrupt nature, and so on. Well, you can immediately recognize the error there. Then later on, there was what was called semi-Pelagianism, which arose out of this battle, and dominated the period of the Middle Ages, and provided the historic roots for Arminianism. This view asserted that man saves himself with God’s help. Likewise, Arminianism, which arose during the time of the Reformation, taught that by God’s universal, prevenient grace, man has a free will and the ability to savingly respond to the gospel. And so predestination is reduced to God foreseeing who would choose Christ. Likewise, Luther had battles with Erasmus, and in the next century, the Synod of Dort arose in response to a group called the Remonstrants. The Remonstrants were teaching this Arminian doctrine. The Synod of Dort, with its verdict, its canons, upheld the biblical doctrine we’ve been considering here, and refuted the errors of the Remonstrants. And you’ll see in the following century, how George Whitefield, the famous evangelist who held to the doctrine of predestination, had to battle John Wesley, who was an Arminian who rejected these doctrines. And many more examples could be given. My point is, that battle will continue, and so in each generation, we have to remember the words of Jude 3, “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” We must continue to hold fast to what the Scriptures teach us.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves. In fact, the Westminster Confession does this. In its final paragraph, paragraph 8, of chapter 3, it says this: “The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.” So the doctrine of divine decrees must be handled with wisdom and discernment. The decrees of God, as you’ll remember, are secret. We are called upon to set our sights on what is revealed, specifically, what is revealed in His Word. Remember Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong unto

the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.” The Scriptures present the gospel to sinners. This gospel is set forth in preaching before men, and those men are called upon to respond by receiving and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s focusing on what is revealed, not secret.

Secondly, this doctrine casts us in dependence upon the Lord. We can teach ourselves and others to pray for the Lord to give us His Holy Spirit, to give us a new heart, and to give us the gift of faith. The believer who receives Christ in the gospel by faith must then give all of the glory and honor to God. This doctrine destroys pride, and it fosters humility. We are led to marvel at His sovereign love and condescending grace, in seeking and in securing salvation for those who are so undeserving of His mercy. This yields delight in God and a desire to worship and adore Him.

Fourthly, this doctrine should strengthen and not diminish assurance of salvation. Salvation rests in God’s omnipotent hands, not in our own feeble hands. What assurance, what confidence would there be, if it was in our hands? The fruit of the gospel and the fruit of gospel grace and effectual calling can secure a confidence and persuasion in the believer’s eternal election.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of predestination. But you could summarize what we’ve learned in three brief, simple words—God saves sinners. God is the one who does the choosing and saving, not man. God does not merely attempt to save, He saves—irresistibly saves the elect. And He saves undeserving sinners, who, if left to themselves, would be otherwise lost. In the next lecture, we’ll turn our consideration to the doctrine of creation, which addresses the divine decree with regards to God bringing the cosmos into existence.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 11 CREATION

In this world, we are faced with many difficult but fundamental questions. Some of those ultimate questions include things like: What is my purpose in life? What is my true identity? Where does life lead? or, Where am I going? What is real? What is right and what is wrong? How do I know the things that I know? What is my origin? Why do certain things exist? But another such question underneath some of these others is this: Why does anything exist? That's a pressing question that needs a cogent answer. And it's tied to other related questions. For example, knowing *how* it is that things exist would help us know *why* it is that they exist. Natural, unbelieving men may dream up all sorts of silly answers to these questions. The fact is that, left to ourselves, it may be impossible to know the answers. But we are not left to stumble around in the dark, perplexed and uncertain about life's most important questions. God Himself tells us the answers. He reveals what we need to know in His inspired, infallible and inerrant Scriptures. This includes the answer to the question, Why does anything at all exist? We discover this in the biblical doctrine of creation, the topic to which we turn in this lecture.

The series of lectures in this second module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. And as we have come to see, the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. So in the early lectures, we explored what the Bible says about who God is in Himself. In these later lectures, lectures 9 through 12, we're turning our attention to all things outside of God, namely, within creation. You'll recall that in lecture 9, we took up for consideration the doctrine of the decrees of God. We saw that the divine decrees determine everything that happens outside of God, from initial creation through God's governing providence in history. And in the last lecture, we considered the doctrine of predestination, which teaches us about God's decree in relation to the eternal destiny of men. We now turn to creation. Creation also flows out of the divine decrees. The Shorter Catechism, in question 8, says, "God executeth His decrees in the works of creation and providence."

We will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our further consideration of the doctrine of creation. We read, in Psalm 33:6–9, these words, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." The Psalm opens with a call to "Rejoice in the Lord," and to praise Him, and this is a response to seeing who God is and what God does. In verses 6 to 9, which we just cited, our minds are drawn to God the Creator and to His work of creation.

So first of all, we read that the Lord spoke the universe into existence. Now think about that

for just a second. Think about how vast the universe is. Scientists can only peer into a portion of outer space, but they cannot come close to reaching the borders of it. The number of galaxies and all the stars and planets that fill them is staggering. It boggles our mind. Yet God merely spoke, and they came into existence. And we do not think of speaking as something powerful, do we? Human breath is weak—it's just air passing through one's mouth. And yet God uses this metaphor, this image, to reveal that He did the most powerful thing ever, creating the universe, with what we think of as the weakest means, what Psalm 33 says is “the breath of His mouth.” Well, this manifests the glory of His divine power.

Secondly, we also learn that there was a point at which the universe—all that we see and know—did not exist. Only God existed before the world. The heavens and the earth have a beginning, which means that all of time and all of space have a beginning, and that God is the sole cause that brought about all that exists.

Furthermore, we see that God designed the created cosmos after His own will. Psalm 33 says, “He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses.” So it is His handiwork. The design reflects the intentions of the designer, and God's purpose was to show His glory. So we are taught to expect that, as we behold and study the created world, we will discover wonderful truths about God Himself.

Fourthly, this truth carries a practical impact. Notice the words of Psalm 33, “Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.” The doctrine of creation leads us to the fear of God—to fearing God. So we have to have a consciousness of God's transcendence—that He is far above all else, and that God sees all things; that He is, in fact, present everywhere; that we live and move and have our being in Him; that we operate in this world within the presence of an all-seeing God, and we have to have some consciousness of what the Lord requires of us. This induces the fear of God. It also results in us standing in awe of God Himself. That's what Psalm 33 says. When we think about, and when we behold the works of God and creation, we're brought to awe, to adoration. This was the effect upon David. Think of Psalm 8:3–4. He says, “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” Here is an expression of awe and reverence before the Lord.

Well, in this lecture, we will explore an introduction to the doctrine of creation, providing once again some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of creation reveals the majesty and the power and the goodness of God, thus stirring our hearts to adore and praise Him.

Having considered this scripturally looking briefly at Psalm 33, secondly, let's consider the doctrinal exposition of creation. This doctrine is simply stated in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 4, paragraph 1, which says, “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good.” In seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must have firmly fixed in our minds.

First of all, the author of creation is God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. The starting point of every Christian doctrine is God Himself. You see in Westminster Confession of Faith the words, “It pleased God.” This is God willing creation, which refers to the divine decree, God working “all things after the counsel of His own will,” Ephesians 1:11. “It pleased

God.” In Revelation 4:11 we read, “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” The created order did not have to exist necessarily. God requires nothing other than Himself. The universe exists only because the triune God chooses for it to exist. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created all things. And you’ll remember that all of the external works of the Trinity are undivided. There is one divine will: 1 Corinthians 8:6, “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.” You see references to all three persons of the Trinity in the work of creation, from the opening of Genesis. Notice the first three verses of the first chapter of the Bible. It refers to the Father: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” It refers to the Holy Spirit, in verse 2: “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water.” We read, likewise, in Job 26:13: “By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent.” But we also see reference to the Son, in verse 3—Genesis 1:3—it says, “God said, Let there be light.” Christ, of course, is the eternal Word. Well, is it right to see Christ here, in Genesis 1:3? Well, it’s interesting because the opening words of the Gospel of John are nearly identical to Genesis 1:1, but it substitutes Christ, “the Word.” It says, “In the beginning was the Word.” This places Christ in the opening verses of Genesis. It goes on, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” Christ first appears in Genesis 1, not in Matthew 1. This is Christ’s world. He created the universe that He would later enter, through His incarnation, in order to redeem it and raise it above and beyond how it began. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the author of creation. And so it’s no surprise, therefore, to see the pronouns that are used in Genesis 1:26. “And God said, Let us make man in our image,” and, “after our likeness.” The author of creation is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, the goal of creation is the manifestation of God’s glory. Creation has a purpose: the display of God’s glory, to the end that He might be known, loved, served, and worshiped by men and angels. When we say “manifestation,” we’re speaking of God’s revelation of Himself, and of His divine perfections. In Romans 1:20, it says, “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen”—a manifestation revealed—“being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” This revelation of God in creation enriches us with the light of His knowledge. We sing of this in Psalm 19:1–3, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.” All that exists comes from God and leads to God. As we read in Romans 11:36, “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”

Thirdly, the inception of creation was “in the beginning.” The Bible opens with these words, in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The universe and everything in it had a beginning. That means that this was the beginning of time itself, which is a finite, limited, measurable part of creation, along with all other created things. Before creation, only the eternal God existed. God created all things of nothing. He created the universe without any pre-existing material. That means that matter is not eternal. Only God is eternal. We sing in Psalm 33:6, “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.” He created all things out of nothing. Creation proceeds from

the decree of God.

Fourthly, the scope of creation was all things outside of God. Paul speaks about this in Colossians 1:16, “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him.” God created the unseen heavens and angels, and even the outermost reaches of the universe. Everything falls within the compass of His created work—everything, of course, but God Himself.

Fifthly, the duration of creation was in the space of six days. The Bible teaches that God created the universe in six normal days, contrary to the myth of evolution, which teaches billions of years—the world, the universe came into existence over the course of billions of years. Now the fact that God created in six days is clear from Scripture. You see it in Genesis 1. You’ll notice that there the word “day” is qualified by “evening and morning,” thereby limiting the time frame to what we think of as a normal day. We see that in a half dozen places throughout Genesis 1. “Day” is used on the fourth day to define the period governed by the sun (again, a regular day) in verse 14. Every time the word “day”—the Hebrew word that’s translated “day”—is used, in conjunction with a numerical adjective, like first, second, third, fourth day, fifth “day,” it is always a literal day in the Bible. And the plural use of “days” of creation always means literal days, throughout the entire Old Testament. And notably, if we don’t have enough already, in Exodus 20:11, in the context of the Ten Commandments, you’ll note the fourth commandment. In the fourth commandment, man’s workweek—“Six days shalt thou labour,” and on the seventh day, you’ll rest. Man’s workweek is patterned after God’s workweek. And so that, too, reinforces the fact that it is a true week and true days. If Moses meant six ages, he could have employed a different Hebrew word, not the word that we translate “day,” but the Hebrew word “olam,” which means “ages.” So the duration is clearly in the space of six days.

And then lastly and briefly, we should note the nature of creation. It was “all very good.” This is God’s declaration about His own work. God is good. All that He does is good. Therefore, the universe was created good. So we must reject any notion that that physical matter is inherently evil. No, God says it was created “all very good.”

Thirdly, we should consider this doctrine polemically. And there are a few things here. First of all, in order to get around the existence of God, some have tried to assert that the universe itself is eternal, without a beginning. Well, this falsehood leads to all sorts of absurdities. Even most scientists will say, in holding to their evolutionary theory, that there was a big bang, that something erupted at the beginning, and so on; that that was the beginning of the universe. They’re still asserting that there’s a beginning. But nonetheless, this idea of the created world being eternal, what would that mean? Well, every effect has a cause. So our parents were used in order to conceive us, and we were born, and their parents, and their parents before them. And you can say the same thing about the animal life and vegetation and so on and so forth. And if you keep going back, you can go back, and back, and back, and back in your mind. Eventually, what happens? You can’t have always had these things in existence, because there would be what philosophers call an infinite regress. So you would continue to go back, and back, and back. If there was no beginning to start from, you would ultimately not be here now. There would not be a present. You have to have a place to push off from, so that successive events can follow. If it continues to go infinitely into the past, then you would never reach, as it were, progression forward, because it’s infinitely to the past—there’s no beginning. So it leads to a rational contradiction and to all sorts of confusion. No, there had to be a beginning for a created

world to exist at all, which is not the case with a God who is outside of time and space, who is eternal, and who, indeed, Himself, is the One who caused and created the beginning of all else. And we considered some of that when we were thinking about God's eternity.

Secondly, throughout history, various forms of false theology and pagan philosophy have taught that what is physical is evil, and what is immaterial is good. The true doctrine of creation teaches us to reject this unbiblical dichotomy. The error leads to perverse consequences. Why? Well, not only for the reasons that we've already noted, about God's works being good because they come from a good God and other things, but also because the second person of the Godhead entered into this world and assumed to Himself a true physical body and a reasonable soul. Created manhood was joined to uncreated Godhood. We must affirm the goodness of God's work of creation in the world around us, otherwise we would be attaching evil to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, which contradicts everything that the Bible teaches.

Thirdly, unbelief leads to irrational myths about the beginning of the world. The pagans had this, and the modern, unbelieving world has it. A prime example is the error of evolution under the false guise of science. But you need to think carefully here, because the question of origins is actually a theological question, not a scientific one. You say, "Well, why is that?" Well, science pertains to empirical observation. And so we have laboratories, and telescopes, and microscopes, and so on, and the material that science studies is the physical world. And it comes through empirical data, the observation of nature and so on. But the fact is that there was no scientist present at the beginning, and it is beyond the reach and scope of the scientific method to be able to pontificate about the beginning of time. There is only one that was there, and that was God Himself. And thankfully, God has given us a record of what took place, He being the prime witness. So it's a theological issue and not, first and foremost, a scientific one.

But this error of evolution also leads to absurd conclusions. We could list many of them, but think about the ethical implications of evolution. Evolution says that, basically, the human race has risen out of primordial slime, and that we have, over time, climbed our way up the food chain to becoming homo sapiens, that we are ourselves animals like other animals, that have evolved with rational intelligence, and so on and so forth. But if that were true, which it is not, then we are equivalent to the rest of the animal world. Now, when a lion eats a gazelle on the plains of Africa, no one considers that morally reprehensible. No one protests and says, "Well, this is terrible. A gazelle is being eaten by a lion." No, we say that a lion is doing what is in accord with its instincts, it's feeding upon its prey, and so on. Well, if the fable of evolution were true, the ethical implications are that I'm an animal, you're an animal; what one animal does to another is ethically amoral—it doesn't have any ethical implications. So if a person kills another person, you can't really object to it—it's just one animal doing to another animal what they wish. And of course, we revolt against that, and rightly so. We say, no, that is wrong. Man actually has dignity, there's inherent value in human life, the Bible teaches that man is made in the image of God, man is distinct from the rest of the created order. And so the biblical doctrine of creation provides us with the ethical framework and foundation for preserving life, whereas evolution undermines it, if they were consistent. So we have to continue to affirm that God alone created the universe, and He did so in the space of six days, as the Bible says.

Fourthly, we can now draw a couple of practical applications for ourselves. First of all, the Bible calls us to study all of God's works. That includes His work of creation. Psalm 19 teaches us that "the heavens declare," or they preach, in a way, God's glory. So the Christian cannot be disinterested in the world around them. David, for example, was captivated by the

glory of God and the expanse of the heavens. But the Psalms are also full of references to all parts of the created order. The proper use of the tools of science can help the believer explore the wonders of God in the stars and galaxies, the mountains, the depths of the sea, vegetation, animal life, even the human body. But that study is a means to the end of seeing the glory of God. So the Christian scientist approaches things differently from the unbeliever. They want to pull out what God has put into the design of His own world. You think of the parables and accounts that we have of Jesus in the gospels. He'll refer to the lilies of the field, He'll refer to the sparrow, and so on. It's not as if the Lord was seeing something, and then trying to think of a spiritual analogy. No, He was actually bringing out what God had designed. Those spiritual lessons were actually built in to the created order themselves, so that when we go to look upon the work of creation, we're actually thinking about and extracting, if you will, what God shows us about Himself, what He requires of us, and chiefly, of course, His glory.

Secondly, God's creation should lead us to worship God. His work of creation should lead us to worship God. The appropriate response to seeing Him must be adoring Him for who He is. We sing Psalm 104; and Psalm 104 is devoted to praising God for His work of creation. There are lots of things that are said, but in verse 24, and again in verses 33 and 34, we read these words, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches." It goes on: "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord." And so worship is the goal. God created the world, and He created it in order that He might manifest His glory, so that it would lead to Him being known, and loved, and served, and worshiped. So this doctrine of creation, once again, in opening, as it were, a vista, in showing forth the majesty of God, should lead us to worship Him, and to adore Him.

Well, in this lecture, we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of creation. God executed His decree in the work of creation. He did so freely and graciously, in order to set forth His glory. God also executes His decrees in the work of providence. So in the next lecture, we'll turn our consideration to the doctrine of providence, which teaches us that God governs all of His creation, all of His creatures, and all of their actions.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2 ~ Lecture 12 **PROVIDENCE**

Learning to drive a car includes focusing on several details all at once. You have to be thinking about what's happening outside the car, looking at the lines on the road, the stop signs and traffic lights, other cars that may be passing you or coming into the road, then there are all the turns and hills, and so on. But simultaneously, you have to be focused on things inside the car. You have your mirrors that you have to look at; you have a gas pedal and a brake pedal; there are gears, and most of all, the steering wheel, which determines the direction that you're going to drive. In addition to all of that, you have to know your directions—where you are, and where you are going. And all of this has to be coordinated to drive safely and successfully. The driver must be in control of the vehicle at all times. Well, if you know how to drive, you know that sense of control and responsibility. But we are only talking about one person and one vehicle. What about the universe as a whole? God sovereignly controls all things, at all times, in all places, from the microscopic world of cells and molecules, to large-scale matters like planets and galaxies, and every detail in between. This is what we call divine providence.

The series of lectures, in this second module on systematic theology, has been devoted to the study of the doctrine of God. The purpose has been to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the early lectures, we explored what the Bible teaches about God, in His being. In lectures 9 to 12, we have been turning our attention to all things outside of God, namely, the things of creation. You will recall that in lecture 9, we took up for consideration the doctrine of the decrees of God. We saw that the divine decree determines everything that happens outside of God, from initial creation through God's governing providence in history. In this lecture, we will consider the doctrine of providence—God's works of governing all His creatures and all their actions.

We will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture, to open up our further consideration of the doctrine of providence. In Daniel 4:34–35, we read these words by King Nebuchadnezzar: “And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: and all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” Well, these words come at the conclusion of the story. At the beginning of this account, we read of Nebuchadnezzar strutting about in his palace, boasting of how he has built his enormous kingdom, by his own power, for the display of his own glory. He had risen to great fame and wealth, as the leader of the world

empire of the time, with vast territories and power. He was lifted up in his pride, and Scripture teaches us that “pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall,” as we see in Proverbs 16:18. So, as Daniel had prophesied beforehand, God cast down Nebuchadnezzar and humbled him. His mind was taken from him, and he was driven from his palace. For seven long years, he lived in the fields as a beast. His clothes were wet with the dew of heaven; his hair grew; his nails became like claws. I mean, this is a picture of absolute humiliation. After seven years, God restored Nebuchadnezzar’s reason, and he returned to his position as king. The words that we were considering, in that text from Daniel, teach us, from Nebuchadnezzar’s own mouth, what he had learned from His experience. What do we see? He is led to humble himself under God’s hand. He turns from worshiping himself, to bow down and worship the Lord. He acknowledges that the Lord is high above all others, that He is the “most High” God. Unlike men who pass away, the Lord is eternal—He lives forever. God’s kingdom excels the kingdoms of this world, in its expanse, and its duration. By comparison, even the greatest men and creatures of this world are “reputed as nothing,” similar to what we read in Isaiah 40:17–18: “All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?” Nebuchadnezzar also confesses the absolute sovereignty of God, and proclaims His comprehensive work of providence. He says, “He”—that is, God—“doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth.” God controls all His creatures and all their actions. And His providential rule is certain, complete, comprehensive, irresistible. Nebuchadnezzar affirms, “And none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” Nebuchadnezzar proclaims the doctrine of providence, which he came to see the hard way, through his own humiliation. Well, we’ve been given the Scriptures, to know and understand this doctrine, and we would do well to receive and believe all that God has revealed to us about this doctrine.

In this lecture, we will explore an introduction to the doctrine of providence, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead. The doctrine of providence reveals that God is most holy, most wise, most powerful, in His sustaining and governing all His creatures and all their actions.

Secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of providence. This doctrine is simply stated in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5, paragraph 1: “God, the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence.” In seeking to expound this doctrine, there are several points that we must firmly have fixed in our minds.

First of all, God executes His decrees both in the works of creation and providence. In the previous lecture, we considered creation; here in this lecture, providence. This work of providence reveals to us who God is. It manifests the fact that God is absolutely sovereign and that the exercise of that sovereignty is holy, wise, and good. God controls all things. Indeed, for anything to be outside the control and determination of God, would mean that He is not God.

Secondly, with regards to the nature of providence, therefore, we see that it is comprehensive and all-encompassing. God governs and sustains 100% of all creatures, and 100% of all their actions. Everything is “according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will,” as we see in Ephesians 1:11.

Thirdly, God is immediately operative in every act of the creature. He has absolute control in predetermining the actions of men. Well, you might ask yourself, Then what role does the creature have in determining their actions? Well, the Bible affirms that they make real choices

of their own volition, and that we are responsible and culpable for those decisions. To understand this, you will note in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5, paragraphs 2 and 3, that we need to distinguish between the first cause and second causes. God is the first cause, determining all things according to His eternal decree. He controls and works, however, through second causes, which are real causes, and not simply God's acts. This comes out in a familiar passage in Philippians 2:12–13, where we're told, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." So you see two things at work here. We're being told to "work out your own salvation," and we're being told that "God worketh in you both to will and to do of his own good pleasure." So God is determining both the means and the end. This is what we call the doctrine of concurrence. The doctrine of concurrence addresses the relationship of the simultaneous actions of God and men. You see this frequently in Scripture. I'll give you some examples. In Acts 2:23, "Him,"—that is, Christ—"being delivered by the determinant counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." So here are the Jews, who are culpable for their own wicked actions in crucifying the Lord, and yet simultaneously, His death was being brought to pass according to God's own counsel and predetermination. Or you think of Genesis 50:20, the account of Joseph speaking to his brothers after his father's death. Joseph says, "But as for you,"—speaking to his brothers—"you thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." So the brothers were making their own decisions, which were sinful and rebellious, and yet God was so ordering things in His providence, in order to bring about something beautiful and good. 2 Samuel 16:11 is another example: "And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life;"—it's a reference to Absalom—"how much more now may this Benjamite do it? let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him." This is David leaving Jerusalem, and there's the man that comes and is throwing stones at him and cursing him. Abishai wants to kill him, and David is saying, No, no, no, the Lord is in this. The Lord is, in His providence, sending him in order to carry out His work—"the Lord hath bidden him," as the passage says.

Well, we should also note that God is in no way tied to using means to His end. Miracles, for example, are extraordinary acts of providence, in which God works without the use of means, miraculously. And so we see, under this point, the fact that there is a relationship between God's sovereign decree being brought to pass in providence, in which He is controlling and governing all the affairs of men and bringing to pass His will perfectly and unchangeably, and that simultaneously, men are making choices, real choices, for which they're responsible. And these two things are brought together. And though it is mysterious and difficult for us to be able to get our minds around, nevertheless, it is not contradictory, and it is what the Bible teaches and what we are to receive by faith. We can know *that* these things are true without understanding *how* all of these things are true—*how* the relationship of God and His decree is connected to the decisions and choices that men make.

Well, then briefly, fourthly, what about the difficult things that happen to us? So is God controlling in His providence, the believers' trials? The answer is, yes. We learn about both God's purposes and His comforts in ordering and sovereignly disposing of the believer's sufferings.

So first of all, God's purposes in our sufferings. We see lots of reasons why the Lord causes His people to enter into seasons of trial. One of them is to try us. 1 Peter 1:3–7 speaks about this trial of our faith, in which the Lord is purifying His people, in which He is shaping them,

and bringing them forth to glisten like gold.

We also see that the trials are to expose our sins. This comes out in Job 42:5–6. In the midst of trial, so often in the Christian’s spiritual experiences, as they’re examining themselves and seeking the Lord in His word and in prayer, the Lord brings to the surface, through these trials, sins that have been previously unknown. And so it has a good salutary influence or impact upon us, in exposing sins that have to then be confessed, and that leads to repentance, and turning from those sins to the Lord. So that’s a beautiful thing, a positive thing.

Trials also build the godly character of His people. James 1:2–4, where we see that we are to consider the trials that God’s given to us, we’re to look upon those trials with joy, knowing that they lead to patience and that they perfect the good work that God is doing, in making His people like unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

They are also to bring us to know God better. And so through the trials, we are brought to see things about God, and about who He is, and what He does, in ways that we could have never seen before. The Lord takes us into the dark places, in order to open up disclosures of His glory and beauty to His believing people. So they bring us to know God better, and bring us into sweeter communion and fellowship with Him.

Suffering is also used by God to produce fruit in our lives, and to prepare us for usefulness. The Lord comes, as John 15:1–8 tell us, and the Lord will prune His people, in order to produce greater fruit to the glory of the Father, and in order to equip His people for a greater usefulness. You will see this in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9, where Paul is brought, in his experience with the thorn in the flesh, to see that God’s grace is actually abounding in his trial, and that God is making His power perfect in the weakness of His people.

Lastly, these trials also lead us to make God our all, and to prepare us for glory. You’ll see this when you sing Psalm 73, the song of Asaph. They lead us to make God our all. All of the sudden the things of this world, the things associated with our health, our finances, our relationships, these other things which sometimes are so important to us—they, through trials, become less. The Lord becomes the one who is everything to us. And He’s preparing us for heaven itself, longing to be weaned from this world, in order that we might be with Him in glory.

But also under this point, not only are there purposes in God’s providential disposal of suffering, we also find the Christian’s comfort in suffering. We have to affirm, for example, that God’s love is behind all our trials—Romans 8:28–29, that this is the area in which the Christian is so often tempted to doubt, to unbelief, because in their pain, they feel as if it’s an expression of the absence of God’s love. Whereas, in fact, this is an expression of God’s love, and the believer is being called to exercise faith and trusting in that. We also recognize that often there are no immediate answers—Job 1:21. There are no immediate answers because sometimes the Lord is doing things with us, in us, by us, through us—He’s doing things that aren’t actually just about us. So in the case of Job, God was getting glory for Himself in the heavens before Satan and the angels, and Job was left without understanding. He didn’t know the purposes for which God was afflicting him. But that, too, leads us to a deeper exercise of faith and trust in the Lord. The solution is to cultivate nearness to God. Much of Psalm 119 is taken up with responding to affliction by communion with Jehovah. We also recognize that the outcome of our sufferings will always be big with mercy—James 5:11. The Lord will cause, in the end, His glory to abound over our difficulties.

We may be able to understand God’s providence in suffering, and we may be able to say,

Okay, we can see that God is orchestrating, God is the one who is sovereignly governing all of the very details of my circumstances, with regards to trials and suffering. But what about providence in the believer's sin? That seems to be a different matter. We can understand suffering and providence easier than we can understand sin and providence. I would encourage you to look at Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 5, paragraph 5. It's addressing these questions. But to be honest, it's one of my favorite sections of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Think for a second, just in a brief survey, of what we can learn from the Bible about God's providence in the believer's sin. First of all, we're affirming God's role—God's sovereignty. He is wise, He is righteous, He is gracious in His dealings with us. So He permits, or He leaves us, at times, to ourselves, occasionally, for a season. The Lord will allow us to be left in our own circumstances, and left to be assaulted with temptation, and left to be exposed to the danger of sin, and the Lord will enable us to see many things as a result of this. So we see God's role with regards to the orchestration of the believer's struggles with sin. But that brings us then to think about the believer. The believer is still responsible. The believer is still responsible when left with manifold temptations, because the sin comes not from God's hand, but from our own corrupt hearts, even when it's in response to the world, and the temptations of the devil, and so on. We are the ones culpable and responsible for every sin that is found in our lives.

So what are the divine purposes for these seasons? Here's an example of some of those purposes. The first is loving discipline. Hebrews 12 tells us that "whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth." So sometimes the Lord will leave us to the corruption of our own hearts as a means of lovingly disciplining us, to chastise us for former sins. The Lord will also use it to discover unto us the hidden strength of our corruption. We may be feeling proud about our own sense of holiness or something, and the Lord will allow us to discover the hidden strength of corruption that is within us. Sometimes He'll use it in order to discover the deceitfulness of our own hearts, to show us the dangers that lurk from the enemy within, and therefore, make us more watchful. Sometimes He'll allow these seasons, in order that we might be humbled, because God gives more grace to those who are humbled. He uses it to raise up the believer to more close and constant dependence for their support upon God Himself, and as I said, to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, so that coming up out of the wreckage of sin, and confession, and repentance, there's a greater vigilance in watching against sin. And there are many other reasons why the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, permits these things.

An illustration of how God uses even our sin for good is found in the life of David. You all know the story of David murdering Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, and then taking Bathsheba and committing adultery against her. And this is grievous—this is a heinous sin, and a wicked scandal that brought great harm to David and Israel as a whole. But out of that, we have Psalm 51. So one of the fruits that comes from David's sin is a song of penitence that remains within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we ourselves are able to take up the very inspired words of the Holy Spirit, penned by David, and to use them as an expression of our own contrition, our own repentance for sin. You'll also recall, of course, that it is out of the union of David and Bathsheba, subsequently, that Solomon is born; and Solomon, of course, is in the line of the Messiah. So the Lord is pleased to bring the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the greatest gift, and the brightest and most beautiful of all events in the history of the world—He brings that out of the wreckage, if you will, of David's sin, in taking Bathsheba to himself. So the Lord is able to rule and overrule in the sins of His people, bringing beauty out

of ashes.

Lastly, all that we have considered relates to the believer. But what about God's providence and the reprobate? This is covered in Westminster Confession, chapter 5, paragraph 6. Very briefly, God is a righteous and just judge, so God's wrathful dealings with men are caused by their sins, and He is right in His providential punishment for those sins. At times, God does this through His judicial hardening of sinners. God will blind them; God will harden them; He'll withhold grace; He'll withdraw their gifts from them; He'll expose them to opportunities for sin; He gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, the power of Satan. And the Lord uses this as a means of punishing those who are obstinate sinners against Him, though at times, the Lord uses the same things to soften others.

Well, thirdly, we have to consider this doctrine polemically. Very briefly, there are false views of providence. So on the one hand, first of all, there are those who believe that providence is merely foreknowledge, in the sense that God had a foresight of events before they happen. So people think of providence in terms of God looking down through the annals of history, and seeing how things would unfold, and therefore determining that that's how they would happen. But that contradicts everything we learned about the decrees of God, as well as what we're learning here about the exercise of the work of providence.

On the other hand, there are those who hold what is called deism—that God does not govern and sustain creation at all, that creation operates by itself. The picture that is often used is of someone winding up a clock, and then setting it on the shelf, and then it runs on its own, as if God created the world, and wound it up, and then it runs on its own. That is false—that is not what we learned from the words of Nebuchadnezzar, or any of the other material that we've covered in this section.

Then there is the idea of fatalism. Rather than divine providence through a personal God, orchestrating the events of time and space, fatalism is this idea of an impersonal blind determinism, that the world unfolds as a matter of fate or, in some of the Eastern religions, karma, and so on. And it's this impersonal kind of blind determinism. That contradicts what the Bible says as well. The Bible teaches us that God is the one who governs and sustains all His creatures and all their actions.

Well, lastly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves, in addition to what we've already covered previously. First of all, you see that this is a comforting doctrine, the doctrine of providence. The believer is always safe. The believer is always secure. The believer is always in the hand of God. In the words of Moses, "Underneath are the everlasting arms." And so it's always good for the church. Whatever the Lord is doing, whatever the Lord is orchestrating, that is being used by God to accomplish His infinitely wise, good and holy purposes, in a way that will bring blessing to His people. God is both all-wise and all-loving. So not only is it loving, but He is wise in the way in which He orchestrates it. So there is security for the Christian. There's divine purpose in all of our temporal pain, and in the confusion of the world around us. So it's a comforting doctrine.

It's also a humbling doctrine. We cannot take credit for anything good in our lives. Everything is from God. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says, "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" All that we know, all that we own, or that we are and have become, all that we have done for good—all of these things are from the hand of God. He receives the glory. We received them from Him. All that we can call our own is our sin. So it's a convicting doctrine. We're daily stripped of self and forced into self-conscious dependence upon the Lord. He alone is the one

who keeps us. He alone is the keeper of Israel, who keeps both our body and our soul in our going out and our coming in, and so on. So it leads us to depend upon the Lord.

Well, by way of conclusion, we have been, in this lecture, considering a survey of the doctrine of providence. God executed His decree in the work of providence. This teaches us of God's most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.

Well, this lecture brings this second module in systematic theology to a conclusion. Over the course of these lectures, we focused our attention on the doctrine of God, learning more about who God is, as He reveals Himself both in His word and His works. There's much more to study in this area, but we hope that this will furnish you with the basic tools to a deeper knowledge of learning about the great God of glory.