

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Rev. William Macleod

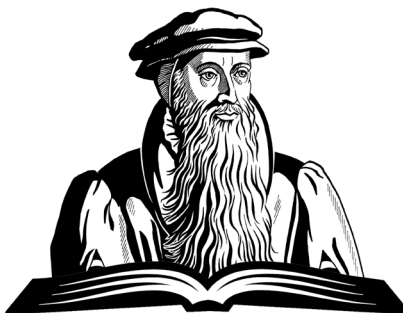
*Module 7:*

**ESCHATOLOGY—**

**THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS**

*Lecture 1*

**INTRODUCTION**



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

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# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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## *Module 7 ~ Lecture 1*

### **Introduction**

We now come to our final section in our Systematic Theology lectures. It will be ten lectures on Eschatology. Eschatology is the doctrine of the Last Things. It looks unto the future, and on the basis of the teaching of Scripture, sets out what will happen in the future. Some people allow their imagination to lead them into fantastical speculation. But theology should always be sober and restrained, and based upon what God has clearly revealed. In trying to interpret prophecy, we must exercise a measure of caution, as it is notoriously difficult to interpret. When Christ came the first time, he took almost everyone by surprise. Although the Jews had the wonderful and detailed prophecies of the Old Testament, and they had a clear idea in their own minds what would happen, it didn't turn out as they expected. As one writer put it, when Christ came the first time, they all got it wrong. So it will be when Christ returns the second time. Even the best works of theology would be found to be somewhat inaccurate.

Eschatology has to be looked at in two ways. First, there is general eschatology, which considers the future of the church, and of the world, and of mankind in general. It describes the events which will take place before Christ returns, and then the end of the world, the judgment, and the eternal state. But there is also individual eschatology, which looks at the future from the perspective of the individual. This involves a person's death, what happens after death, the intermediate state, the resurrection, the final judgment, heaven and hell.

To begin with, we'll consider some current views. The teaching of evolution by Charles Darwin (1809–1882), and its general acceptance within the scientific community, in the media, and in the population in general, has to a large extent undermined faith in God. Naturalistic explanations of the origin of the universe and of man are treated as fact in Western society. The so-called “Big Bang” is seen as the basic answer to all man's questions of origin. But no one tells us what caused the Big Bang, and how nothing can somehow or other explode into something. People are happy not to ask too many questions. As a result, our world today is very secular. And because of this, it has been felt by many that we no longer need God. For them, there is no Creator, and there is no Judge. Man came from nowhere and is going nowhere. Because of this, there is little fear of God in society. Many people hold to a form of scientific materialism—man has no soul, and death is the end; life expires like a candle that burns out. Similarly they argue that we can know nothing about the future of the world—it's all up to chance. Perhaps the world will go on for millions of years, or maybe it will end in a nuclear holocaust, or alternatively, pollution will make life on earth impossible. There are many today who fear that the world will end with man-made climate change. However, the Bible teaches, and all Christians believe that God created the world. He is the God of providence who preserves it and looks after the world. He will one day bring the world to an

end by the return of the Son, and all will be judged, and receive their eternal reward according to their work.

Within the Christian church, the growth of higher criticism and liberal theology have undermined belief in the afterlife. Liberal theologians like Rudolf Bultmann say Jesus' resurrection was not material, but simply a rising in the faith of his disciples—he did not actually, physically rise from the dead. Similarly, when people die, they live on only in the memory of loved ones. Others, greatly influenced by the idea of the general fatherhood of God, and the fact that God is love—1 John 4, verse 8—argue that all must eventually end up in heaven, whatever their works, and whether they believe in Christ or not. Some talk of conditional immortality. They say that the soul of man is not immortal, and only true believers live forever. Generally speaking, within the Christian church today, there is little preaching on hell and the wrath to come. We however must not be influenced by the society around us, or even by the church around us, but rather, we must follow the teaching of Scripture.

I would like us then to look, first, at Old Testament teaching to consider the fall of man. When God created man, he made him in his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Man was created with an immortal soul that will never die. The purpose of his creation was so that man would glorify and enjoy God. He was to have fellowship with his Maker. God entered into a covenant of life with him. Man was placed on probation. He was given the Garden of Eden to live in, which was very beautiful, and contained all that he needed for a happy life. It was paradise, and God himself walked in the garden with him. It was similar to the description of heaven given in Revelation 22, and contained the tree of life in the middle of the garden. However, there was one great difference from the future paradise. There was in the Garden of Eden also the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God's first covenant with man, the covenant of works, stated, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die"—Genesis 2, verse 17. Eternal life was promised to man, if he did not eat the forbidden fruit, but death was threatened if he did eat. Sadly, our first parents listened to the serpent, Satan, and broke God's covenant by eating the fruit. Immediately they felt naked and vulnerable before God. They had died spiritually. God came into the garden and pronounced his curse: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"—Genesis 3, verse 19. Physical death was coming to them. The aging process began, and it would be followed by the separation of body and soul. They were expelled out of the garden, and from the presence of God.

So the first sin of man led to death spiritual—separation from God; death natural—separation of body and soul; and without salvation, would lead to death eternal—eternal misery and separation from God in hell. Thankfully, at the same time, God revealed the gospel to our first parents. He told them about the provisions of the covenant of grace. "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel"—Genesis 3, verse 15. A child would be born to the woman, who would crush the serpent's head, and in the process, his heel would be crushed. This was further illustrated by God providing them with a covering for their nakedness. "Unto Adam also and to his wife, did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them"—verse 21. Animals were killed in order to be skinned to provide a covering for the nakedness of Adam and Eve before a holy God. These animals were types of Christ—symbols of him who would die to provide an atonement for sinners. The Hebrew word for "atonement" is "kaphar," or covering. Jesus died to provide us with a robe of righteousness to cover us in the place of the useless rags of our own self-righteousness. Christ is our hiding place.



Next, I would like us to think a little about the covenant made with Noah. After the fall, the world deteriorated morally and spiritually very quickly. The first man born, Cain, murdered his godly brother, Abel. Because of the immorality and violence of the ancient world, God destroyed it with a flood, that is, with drastic and catastrophic climate change. However, following the flood, God made a covenant with all mankind, which contained a promise: “I will not again curse the ground again any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every living thing, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease”—Genesis 8, verses 21–22. God promised that the seasons would continue, and that harvest would continue. God undertook to care for the world, and for man in it. And further, God gave a rainbow as a sign of his covenant, a token of the covenant: “This is a token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth”—Genesis 9, verses 12–13.

Looking into the future, the prophets of doom say that the world would become uninhabitable because of climate change. Modern man does not believe in God, and therefore finds no comfort in divine providence and the covenant made with Noah. But despite man’s unbelief, God’s covenant stands and insures that seedtime and harvest will not cease. God is active preserving the world, and man will not be able to destroy it.

Next, looking at the covenant with Abraham. God called Abraham out of idolatry in Ur of the Chaldees, and made his covenant of grace with him. He promised: “And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed”—Genesis 12, verse 3. God further promised Abraham, “Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness”—Genesis 15, verses 5–6. Abraham was made by God “the father of the faithful.” For centuries, the people of God would be limited to the physical children of Abraham and Jacob, but the promise is that eventually all the families of the earth will be blessed. Salvation would come through the great child of Abraham, who is the seed of the woman earlier revealed to Adam and Eve. “In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”—Genesis 22, verse 18.

The church will grow to such an extent that it is not a mere remnant that will be saved—not just a little group. But the church will be as numerous as the stars. Further, it is not just some of the families of the earth that will be blessed, but so many will be blessed that it can legitimately be said that all the families of the earth will be blessed. Following the resurrection of Christ, and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, the gospel will be preached to all nations, and the church of God will eventually be “as the sand of the sea for multitude.” The promised future of the church is exceedingly bright, so Christians are to have an optimistic eschatology—a bright view of the future.

Next, thinking about Old Testament saints and the afterlife. Sometimes it’s asserted that the saints in Old Testament times had no clear understanding of life after death, and of heaven and hell. However, this can be shown to be clearly wrong. We are told, for example, of Enoch, that he walked with God: “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him”—Genesis 5:24. It is obvious that he went to heaven, where others go in their souls, as they await the resurrection. And Jude, in his epistle, tells us, “Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have

ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him”—Jude, verses 14–15. So we are told that he, that Enoch, in his own day, clearly declared the coming of the Lord, and that there would be a judgment day for the wicked. Hebrews tells us concerning Abraham that he had the expectation of going to heaven: “By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”—Hebrews 11, verses 9–10. Further, it is written, “But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city”—that’s verse 16. The land of promise was to Abraham a type or symbol of heaven. By living in tents, the patriarchs declared that this world was not their home. They were looking for an eternal dwelling place. Job displays his faith, when, in the midst of his horrendous trials, he exclaims: “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another”—Job 19, verses 25–27. He shows here that he believes in a physical resurrection. His body will rot in the grave, but one day, he will be raised again, and he looks forward to seeing God, and he believes that he will see God “in my flesh”—with his physical eyes.

There are many passages in the Psalms which show that the Old Testament saints believed in the afterlife. Psalm 16 is quoted by Peter in his Pentecostal sermon with reference to Christ, but it obviously also has reference to all believers: “My flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell”—or in the grave—“neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore”—Psalm 16, verses 9–11. In the following Psalm, Psalm 17, there is another reference to the resurrection. After death, the psalmist will awake to see God: “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness”—Psalm 17, verse 15. Psalm 23 is often sung at funerals: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever”—verse 6. Psalm 84 also clearly speaks of heaven: “They shall go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God”—Psalm 84, verse 7. The coming judgment day is also clearly portrayed in the Psalms: “The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous”—Psalm 1, verses 4–5. Sinners are warned of their need to make peace with the Son of God because of the coming day of his wrath: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him”—Psalm 2, verse 12. The psalmist, in Psalm 73, is troubled when he sees the prosperity of the wicked in this life. They even seem to have an easy death. But then he visits the temple and realizes their ultimate end: “Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction.” Well, they seemed to be having a great life, and seemed to have an easy death. Actually, they were cast into destruction—Psalm 73, verses 17–18.

Solomon describes death: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it”—Ecclesiastes 12, verse 7. The godly have a blessed future: “But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day”—Proverbs 4, verse 18. The wicked are warned of the coming judgment: “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment”—

Ecclesiastes 11, verse 9.

The prophets also speak with assurance of the afterlife. Isaiah describes heaven: “Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended”—Isaiah 60, verse 20. He also speaks of hell: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh”—Isaiah 66, verse 24. Malachi writes of the future: “For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch”—Malachi 4, verse 1. Surely, no one reading the Old Testament should doubt that it speaks of the resurrection and judgment of the righteous and the wicked, when we consider the prophesy of Daniel: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever”—Daniel 12, verses 2–3.

Now I’d like us to look at prophecies of the coming of Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, there is a promise of the coming Messiah, and a longing for him to come. We are first told of his coming in the curse on the serpent, which is the so-called proto-evangelium, or the first statement of the gospel: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel”—Genesis 3:15. Isaiah foretells the coming one: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever”—Isaiah 9, verses 6–7. Yes, this mighty Savior who is coming, the greatest Prophet, Priest, and King. He is none other than the Lord. He will reign forever, but he would also suffer, as the suffering servant of the Lord. Indeed, this coming Priest will offer himself as a sacrifice: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all”—Isaiah 53, verses 5–6. And then the prophet adds: “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand”—Isaiah 53, verse 10. He will suffer and die for the sins of his people. But with these very words, there is reference also to his triumphant resurrection: “He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.” Though cut off, he shall prolong his days. We today are saved by looking back to Calvary, and putting our faith in the One who suffered there for our sins. In Old Testament times, they were also saved by faith, but their faith involved looking forward to the coming Messiah, and his sufferings in their room and in their place.

Now I would like to speak about the prophetic perspective. One problem that we have in many of the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah, is that the first and second coming of Christ seem to be combined. Think for example of Malachi’s prophecy: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to this temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall



come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness"—Malachi 3, verses 1–3. Now the messenger preparing the way here is obviously a reference to John the Baptist, as is confirmed by Matthew, chapter 3, verse 3, in describing the ministry of John. The messenger of the covenant though is the Lord, for who John prepared the way. He will come suddenly and unexpected by most. But then we read of him judging men and women, yet Jesus said, "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world"—John 12, verse 47. So there is here obviously a reference also to his second coming. So the two comings of Christ are merged into one.

This is best explained when the future is considered from the perspective of the Old Testament prophet. It's rather like a traveler seeing a mountain range in the distance. All the mountains appear together, but when the traveler gets closer, he can see that there are actually two mountain ranges, one in front of the other, and perhaps many miles between the two. In this way, the two comings are seen together, though they are thousands of years apart. Joel prophesies concerning the coming of the day of the Lord: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call"—Joel chapter 2, verses 28–32. Peter assures us that this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost: "But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." These are Peter's words in Acts 2, verses 16 to 17. The pouring out of God's Holy Spirit was an amazing and wonderful redemptive, historical event. But in the words of Joel, there is much that obviously refers to the second coming of Christ: "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come." This must refer to the end of the world, the second coming of Christ, and the great judgment day. From the perspective of the Old Testament prophet, both comings of Christ merge into one.

It will be important in following lectures, as we consider the New Testament prophecies of the future, that we remember this principle of interpretation gleaned from the Old Testament prophecies concerning the viewing of the first and second comings of our Lord, as if they merged into one. This will be especially relevant when we consider, for example, Matthew 24, with Christ's prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem, and of the end of the world. Amen.