

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. William Macleod

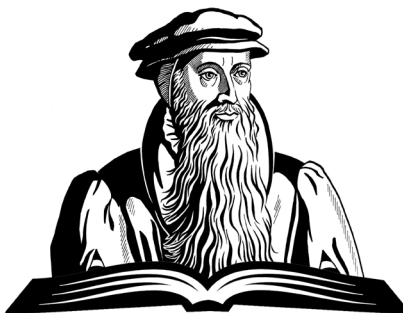
Module 7:

ESCHATOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Lecture 2

THE DOCTRINE OF DEATH



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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Module 7 ~ The Doctrine of Last Things

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Module 7 ~ Lecture 2

The Doctrine of Death

We come today to our second lecture in eschatology, and this lecture is on the subject of death. Death is a huge reality that faces everyone of us. All around us, we see people dying—grandparents, parents, siblings, sometimes even our own children. Scripture says, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment”—Hebrews 9:27. Nothing seems more natural than death. Benjamin Franklin wrote in a letter to Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, in 1789, with regard to the American Constitution, “Our new constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency, but in this world, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.” It may indeed be possible to avoid taxes, but there’s no escape from death. Every living creature around us is dying. Everyone of us, from the moment we are born, are terminally ill and slowly dying.

Let us look first then at the origin of death. Death is not natural, in the sense that it was not there from the beginning. When God first created the world, it was full of life, and there was no death anywhere. Adam was created in the image of God for fellowship with God. God entered into a covenant with him, promising him life on condition of perfect obedience, but threatening death on disobedience. If he obeyed God, he would live forever. But there was in the middle of the Garden of Eden the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God, in his covenant, said to Adam, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: 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 2:16–17. Sadly, our first parents ate the forbidden fruit, and so, fell from the state in which they were created, into a state of sin and misery. So the world became a place where death reigned, instead of being, as it originally was, full of life.

Sometimes the point is made that Adam did not die on the day on which he ate the forbidden fruit—he actually lived for another nine hundred and thirty years. But to argue in this way fails to take account of what really happened. We must remember that there are three kinds of death spoken of in Scripture. First, there is natural death, which is the separation of body and soul. That began as a process of aging, when immediately Adam ate the forbidden fruit. Then there’s spiritual death. This is spiritual separation from God. This took place immediately. It was evidenced in that Adam felt naked and ashamed. When God came into the garden, he and Eve ran away to hide. The loving relationship in which he was created had changed. Man was now under God’s wrath and curse, and he felt it. Then thirdly, there is eternal death. This is what happens when an unconverted sinner dies, and is sent forever to hell. It is an existence eternally separated from God and from all his blessings. But it is not simply missing what is good, it is also being forever tormented by the just wrath of God.

So when Adam sinned, he and Eve died spiritually to God, and natural death began to work in

their bodies. Thankfully, the sentence of eternal death was not carried out immediately. God, in his great longsuffering, gave Adam time, and in his mercy, proclaimed the gospel to Adam, telling him of the coming Savior—Genesis 3:15. God allowed man to continue to live in this world, giving to him a day of grace, in which he could repent, and be converted, and so escape from eternal death. Because we were represented by Adam, our covenant head, in the garden, we sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. We too ate of the forbidden fruit, and so are sinners even before we are born. And so too, every one of us is actually born dead—we are born spiritually dead.

That brings us then to the idea of imputation. This truth is wonderfully presented by Paul, in Romans, particularly in chapter 5: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous”—Romans 5, verse 19. God, when he created Adam, appointed him to be the covenant head of the human race. Because of this, when Adam disobeyed God, we too disobeyed God. When he sinned, we sinned. In the same way, the elect are in Christ. So Christ’s perfect obedience to his Father, keeping the law and suffering for sin, becomes ours, if we are in Christ, in the covenant of grace. “By the obedience of one, many were made righteous.” So Paul states, “Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. For if by one man’s offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life”—Romans 5, verses 14–18.

The first sin of Adam was ours, and brought about our condemnation. But wonderfully too, the last Adam, Christ, his obedience is ours, and makes us righteous. One sin condemned us, but Christ’s work contains pardon for those guilty of many offences. This salvation is available to all as a free gift. The only requirement is to receive it by faith. So faith is the condition of imputation in justification.

Later, in the same epistle, Paul writes, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”—Romans 6:23. Every sin is rebellion against God, and demands a response from God. It is a work for which payment is made. Unlike some human employers, God always pays wages in full. Our sinful works earn wages, which are either paid to us, or were paid to Christ in our place. The one condition of the covenant of grace is faith. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ benefit from Christ taking the wages for their sin upon himself. And so, “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”—Romans 5, verse 1. Christ is freely offered to all to be their Savior, and all who receive him have their sins forgiven. When we believe in Jesus, all our sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven.

Now, thinking about the long lives of the Patriarchs. It’s interesting to notice at this stage, that the early inhabitants of the world lived much longer than we do today, despite the advances that we have today in modern medicine and surgery. Methuselah lived for nine hundred and sixty-nine years. How is this? Perhaps, as some have suggested, before the great deposits of coal and oil were formed, greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, covered the earth and protected the inhabitants from harmful, and cosmic, and ultraviolet rays. Perhaps too, the various harmful diseases and viruses which are common in our world today took time to develop. The flood certainly brought

about catastrophic climate change. The flood itself came because of the wickedness and violence of man, which had grown to intolerable levels. God decided, “My spirit will not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years”—Genesis 6, verse 3.

Now, the hundred and twenty years here no doubt refers, first and foremost, to the remaining time before the world would be destroyed by the flood, and therefore, the time that Noah was given in which to build the ark. But it would also seem to refer to the fact that now one hundred and twenty years is the maximum length of a man’s life. We are told that “GOD saw the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart”—Genesis 6, verses 5–6. God hates sin, and in his common grace, he limits it. He notes that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”—Genesis 8:21. God’s longsuffering is great in allowing a life of threescore and ten years—Psalm 90, verse 10, or occasionally, up to a hundred and twenty years. But God has decided that that is long enough time for allowing man to repent.

We know, next, that all creation is affected. The sin of man didn’t just affect the human race. Man was the crown of creation, and therefore, his sin brought a curse upon the whole world. The animal kingdom was affected in many ways. God said to the serpent, “Because thou hast done this, thou are cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life”—Genesis 3:14. The implication is that instead of walking, snakes would now have to slither. With regard to the plant world, it is said, “Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field”

Genesis 3, verse 18. Weeds would now grow more readily than useful plants, and man would have to sweat to feed his family. Pain comes to the woman even in childbirth. What a wonderful blessing it is to have a child, but all good things in this fallen world have a negative side to them because of sin.

The whole of creation and life is under God’s curse and suffers pain. Death is universal, and that which leads to death too is universal. Sickness and suffering comes to every living creature. Paul picks up on this theme when he states, “For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body”—Romans 8:20–23. Wherever we look in the world there is pain and suffering. Nature is red in tooth and claw. In the animal kingdom, among birds, and fish there is fighting, killing, and eating one another. And even the inanimate creation groans. There are storms, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, typhoons, and hurricanes, all demonstrating a world writhing in pain, looking forward to the regeneration—the new birth, as it were, of the new heavens and the new earth, when the children of God will be revealed, and Christ will return to usher in his eternal kingdom.

Next, thinking of death. The words our Savior on the cross are very interesting and important: “And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost”—Luke 23, verse 46. He voluntarily dismissed his spirit. He did not die in weakness, as you and I do. He cried with a loud voice to show his continuing strength. He had earlier said of his life, “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I

have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father”—John 10, verse 18. Death had no claim upon him, because he was sinless. But he willingly offered himself as a sin offering for us, and he gave himself to death. He dismissed his spirit to the Father. When the time comes for us to die, we have no choice. People talk of fighting cancer, and imply that they can resist death, but death always wins. God has appointed the day of our birth, and the day of our death. When God calls us to give our account to him, none can say, “No.” As Solomon wrote, “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).

However, there is all the difference in the world between the death of the Christian, and the death of the unbeliever. For the Christian, death is the doorway to glory. But for the unbeliever, death involves the sentence of condemnation. Death for the child of God is an exciting new beginning. In contrast, the psalmist says of the death of the wicked, “Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors”—Psalm 73, verses 18–19. Stephen was the first Christian martyr following the resurrection of Christ. To prepare him for death, he was given a vision into heaven. He could see the Lord Jesus standing to receive him. He was so filled with the Spirit of God that his face shone like an angel. We are told that, “They stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep”—Acts 7:59–60. What a glorious and victorious death that was.

Then, thinking about this “falling asleep”. It’s interesting to notice the difference that the New Testament makes between the death of a Christian, and the death of the unconverted. The Christian’s death is always called “falling asleep”. But that term is never used of the death of the wicked. Falling asleep is such a lovely picture—there’s nothing more peaceful. It is true that death is called the Christian’s last enemy—1 Corinthians 15:26. But it is the last enemy. And once death comes, there are no more enemies. The body is buried and rests in the grave till the resurrection, but the soul is transported to heaven. The Catechism states that the bodies of Christians are still united to Christ while they are dead in the grave. This is amazing. How could a rotting body be united to God? The reason for this is that when we become Christians, we are united to Christ. The Spirit of Christ enters into us and takes possession of us. Our bodies become temples of the Holy Spirit, and God dwells in us. Another way of looking at this is that we are brought into Christ at conversion, and we become part of his body. Christ is the Head, and Christians are the members of the body, as it says in 1 Corinthians 12. Now human beings are not just souls. Remember how it’s put at creation: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul”—Genesis 2, verse 7. Man is body and soul. So when we are converted, our body and soul, that is, our whole person is united to Christ. And that union is eternal and can never be broken. Paul states, “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”—Romans 8:38–39. So our bodies are precious and are to be treated with great respect. Whatever happens to our bodies, they are united to Christ, and then at the resurrection, they are raised from the dead.

Now I’d like us to think a little about “soul sleep,” so called. One of the heresies that has been around for a long time, and is still here today, is the idea that when we die, the soul sleeps, or goes into some kind of suspended state. You see this in the early church—it refers to a small sect in Arabia that held to this view. Then there were some Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation,

and later Irvinites who held to this view. The Jehovah Witnesses today teach this. Various arguments are raised in its support. For example, the term “sleep” being used of death, but it should be remembered that it is the body which sleeps, and not the soul. It is sometimes argued that when individuals are raised from the dead, they say nothing about the state they had been in before being raised. But this could simply be explained by their memories being blanked by God. Alternatively, it could be that they were not allowed to say what they saw and experienced. Paul once had an amazing vision into heaven: “I knew such a man, (whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter”—2 Corinthians 12, verses 3–4. The vision was so real to Paul that he was not sure whether he had been bodily transported into heaven, or whether it was simply in his mind. He adds that he heard words which it is not lawful for a man to utter. He was not allowed to say what he heard. That may be the case also with those raised from the dead.

Another argument is that the traditional view would require two judgment days—one when the individual dies, and another at the end of the world. We accept that in a way. Immediately when a person dies, they are sent either to heaven or to hell. If they have Christ, they go to heaven; if they don’t have Christ, they go to hell. However, this argument about the two judgment days fails to understand the purpose of the final judgment day. It’s not for settling the final state of the individual—that’s done at death, but for vindicating God’s justice and publically displaying the wickedness of the wicked, and the good works of the righteous. It is for openly acknowledging and acquitting the people of God.

There are various passages of Scripture that clearly teach the consciousness of the soul after death. For example, Jesus says to the thief on the cross—Luke 23:43, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” The converted thief was not heading for some dreamy grey place of sleep, but for the joys of paradise. Paul speaks of the tension that he felt, on the one hand desiring to die and be in a blessed heaven, and on the other hand wishing to remain so that he could benefit the church: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you”—Philippians 1, verses 21–24. It is far better to die because of the blessings of paradise which he will enjoy in his soul. At the end of his life, he looks forward to dying, because he knows the bliss that is awaiting him: “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing”—2 Timothy 4, verses 6–8.

But then a word about purgatory. Roman Catholic theology teaches that there are three states beyond death. The unbaptized wicked go straight to hell. The saints, a very small number of mankind who have earned God’s favor by their good works, go straight to heaven. Most Christians, they say, go to purgatory for further purification before they can enter heaven. There, they will be subjected to fire and torment because of their sins. Prayers and masses can be offered for the dead, so that their stay in purgatory will be shortened. The church on earth has power to grant indulgences, so that the time spent in purgatory is reduced. But the Scripture makes plain that when death comes, we enter our final state: “If a tree falleth toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where it falleth, there it shall be”—Ecclesiastes 11, verse 3. This doctrine has no support in the Scriptures, but very much the contrary. In fact, this doctrine denies the sufficiency of the work of Christ in making full atonement for all our sins. It is, therefore, an attack upon the work of

Christ. The Lord Jesus bore our sins and was punished fully in our place: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus”—Romans 8, verse 1. Our sufferings anyway can never atone for our sins. “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”—Isaiah 53, verse 5. Yes, in this life, we are chastised and corrected, and the fires of trial purify us. But the Christian is never punished. Christ endured all the punishment in our place. “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”—Romans 5, verse 1. In fact, Christ purged our sins before he ascended up to heaven: “When he had by himself purged our sins, he sat on the right hand of the majesty on high”—Hebrews 1, verse 3. There are only two places in the next world—the glories and joys of heaven, and the misery of hell.

Let’s think of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, because it’s very helpful on this subject, and it teaches us what happens at death—Luke 16, verses 19–31. We note that there is no purgatory here—only heaven and hell. An obvious contrast is drawn between the rich man and the beggar in their lives in this world. “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores”—Luke 16, verses 19 to 21. One appeared to have all the good things, and the other all the miseries. But the beggar’s name, Lazarus, is significant. Lazarus is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew name, Eleazar. It means, “his health is in God.” A further contrast is noticed in their death. Lazarus has angels around him as he dies, and they carry his soul into heaven. The rich man, presumably, has devils around his bedside, and they carry his soul to hell: “The rich man also died, and was buried, and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments”—verses 22–23. The nameless rich man was surrounded by every earthly comfort, and medical aid, and no doubt given a huge funeral. But meanwhile, he was in torments. The rich man asks that Lazarus be sent with a drop of water to comfort him in the flames. When that is refused, he asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, lest they end up in the same place. So obviously, he was conscious in his misery immediately after death, as was Lazarus of his joys in heaven. The rich man also was suffering while his brothers were enjoying the pleasures of this world. From this, it is plain that the soul does not sleep, but goes immediately either to heaven or to hell.

Let us now look at the intermediate state. A further fascinating passage of the Scripture which deals with the state of the believer between death and the resurrection is 2 Corinthians 5. Here, Paul states that the ultimate bliss follows the final resurrection: “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”—2 Corinthians 5, verse 1. The earthly house which he refers to here is obviously the body in this world. One day soon, each one of us will experience this body being dissolved. That means the soul and the body will be parted. The lifeless body will be laid in the grave where it will decay. However, the dead will continue in conscious existence in their souls. Houses in this world are made with hands. But our eternal house, or our eternal body, will be made not with hands, but by God. The eternal house is the resurrection body which will be fit for eternal existence. Paul says, “For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life”—verses 2–4. He states that we groan. We are longing for something that we do not have. We do not wish to be naked spirits. We do not wish to be unclothed, but clothed. We are fully redeemed only following the resurrection.

Death and the separation of body and soul are the result of sin. It comes as the curse upon us as covenant breakers. But then, at the resurrection, all the effects of sin and the curse are removed. Body and soul are united again. Mortality is swallowed up of life. So Paul is asserting that the intermediate state, where the soul is naked without its body, is not ideal, yet he asserts that it is still better than the present state. For “whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord”—verse 6. Being present here below in our bodies means that we are absent from the Lord. Then he adds, “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord”—verse 8. It is better to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. We have great comfort when our loved ones fall asleep in Jesus. We know that they are with Christ and happy in heaven. Amen.