

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. William Macleod

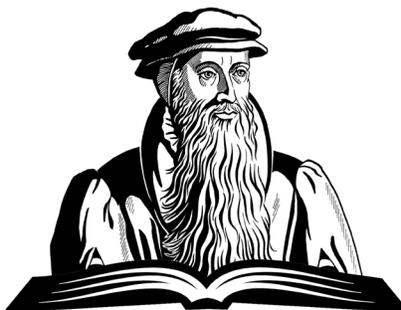
Module 7:

ESCHATOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Lecture 9

THE DOCTRINE OF HELL



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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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 7 ~ Lecture 9 **The Doctrine of Hell**

Today we come to lecture #9 in our series on Eschatology, and our subject today is Hell. No doctrine is more unpopular today than the Biblical teaching concerning the everlasting punishment of unbelievers. Even evangelical churches are reluctant to proclaim that the unconverted will be cast into the lake of fire to be tormented forever. When liberalism came into the churches in the nineteenth century, the doctrine of the Universal Fatherhood of God became very popular. This led, in turn, to the idea that because every man and woman was thought to be a child of God, therefore God could not possibly cast them, his children, into hell forever. So from this arose the false doctrine of Universalism—the idea that all will eventually be saved. Up till the late nineteenth century, it was recognized that in a very general sense, God as Creator could be thought of as parent to all. There are a few verses in Scripture which give some support to that idea. For example, Paul, preaching to the philosophers of Athens, quotes with approval, a heathen poet, who said, “We are also his offspring”—Acts 17:28. This, however, was not seen as a father-child relationship, but simply that God was the Creator and Originator of man.

The great emphasis of Scripture is actually quite different. It is that we only become God’s children by adoption: Romans 8:15—“Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” You cannot adopt your own child. In another place, Paul states: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus”—Galatians 3:26. Unbelievers are not the children of God. Indeed, Jesus can say to the Jews: “Ye are of your father, the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.” As fallen children of Adam, we are all born children of the devil, and need to be converted and adopted to become the children of God, and so to have the favor and everlasting love of our Divine Father.

Postmodernism today is even more radical. Political correctness demands that we affirm everyone else’s views. It is argued that everyone has their own truth. Postmodernism is totally against objective truth, and the idea that there is only one way of salvation, and that the followers of other religions will perish. To assert such views as these, in the eyes of the Postmodernists, is to be guilty of a hate crime. The idea is that whatever you believe is right for you, but you must not impose your views on others. Strangely, these views have totally captured the popular mind in the West. But then, these views have taken over the universities, the schools, the media, and the government. This philosophy is used to promote and exalt all kinds of sexual immorality. Freedom to practice the various perversions condemned by the law of God in Scripture is placed on the same level as ending slavery and racism. To speak of a Judgment Day, and the punishment of sin is therefore extremely unpopular, and sadly, the spirit of the age has invaded the Christian church. Some prominent and respected evangelical theologians, such as John Stott, and Philip E. Hughes, and Clark

Pinnock, have been affected to the extent that they have argued against the traditional doctrine of everlasting punishment. We shall return to this subject later.

Looking now at Biblical words for Hell. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, there are two main words for Hell. First, there is the word “Sheol.” It has several meanings, and these must be determined by the context. It can refer to the grave, or to the state of the dead, or to the place of torment for the wicked. The other word is “Gehenna.” It is the place of punishment of sinners. Originally, it meant the Valley of the Son of Hinnom. It was just outside Jerusalem, and it was there that children were burnt in the worship of the heathen god, Moloch. Good King Josiah desecrated the heathen shrine and turned it into the rubbish tip of the city. There fires burned constantly, destroying the rubbish, and there the worms fed upon the rotting remains of animals and food. Therefore, it presented a picture of hell—the dunghill and the rubbish tip of the world, a loathsome place, where worms and fire will be constantly feeding upon those rebels who end up there. In the Greek of the New Testament, the word used is “Hades,” and it’s the equivalent of the Hebrew word Sheol. It can refer to the grave, or to a place where all go when they die. But more commonly, it’s used for the place of eternal punishment for unbelievers.

Now thinking about Hell in the Old Testament. From the very beginning of Scripture, it was revealed that this life is not the end, and that there is a Judgment Day, and a Heaven, and a Hell. We are told, for example, that “Enoch walked with God: and he was not, for God took him.” Others died, but he went straight to heaven to dwell with God. Jude tells us that Enoch prophesied, “Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousand 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. We are assured by Jude that Enoch told these things to the ancient world. Even in these early days, it was clear that the wicked would be punished. David, in the Psalms, speaks of Hell as a place of punishment for the wicked: “The LORD is known by the judgment which he executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands...The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God”—Psalm 9, verses 16–17. The prophets also speak of Hell. Isaiah describes it in vivid terms: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of 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, and verse 24. These words are picked up by our Lord Jesus when describing the eternal misery of unbelievers and hypocrites. Daniel prophesies concerning the resurrection, that it will not simply for the reward of the righteous, but also for the punishment of the wicked: “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”—Daniel 12, verse 2. The prophet Malachi further describes the punishment of unbelievers: “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. So even in Old Testament times, it is plain that those who die in their sins go to a place of conscious punishment.

Turning now to think of Hell in the New Testament. No one speaks more about Hell, actually, than our Lord Jesus Christ himself. He is concerned to warn men and women to flee from the wrath to come. He himself suffered Hell on the cross to deliver us from the Hell to come. He leaves us in no doubt that rejecting his gospel and his saving work at Calvary will not only result in you missing heaven, but will also cause you to be thrown into Hell—a Hell of everlasting misery. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ warns: “And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from

thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell”—Matthew 5, verse 30. If your hand is causing you to sin, you should take drastic action—Hell is an awful place to end up in. Later, in the same sermon, Jesus reveals that there is a broad way that leads to eternal misery: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat”—Matthew 7, verse 13. Our Lord tells us on another occasion, the parable of the dragnet which captures good and bad fish. The fishermen then separate the edible fish from the useless: “So it will be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth”—Matthew 13:49–50. So there’s a place of great misery, of which Jesus spoke, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth in pain. Who can imagine ending up in such a state? Similarly, in the parable of the wedding feast, the command was given concerning the man who entered without a wedding garment—without the righteousness of Christ to clothe him: “Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth”—Matthew 22, verse 13. On the Judgment Day, which he explains is ahead of us all, it will be said to the unrighteous: “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels;” and it is added: “These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal”—Matthew 25, verses 41 and 46. Mark records how Jesus spoke of some as being “cast into hell fire, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched”—Mark 9:47–48.

There can be no doubting that Jesus taught that there are two destinations in eternity. There is a Hell as well as a Heaven. That Hell is a place of deep misery, weeping, and gnashing of teeth, a place of horrible pain, with the worm eating and the fire burning. Now of course, the worm and the fire are symbolical, but they do convey the idea of extreme pain. Further, this state is called everlasting punishment, and this lasting forever is the most awful aspect of it. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. There is no end of the pain and suffering.

The apostles described Hell in similar terms. Paul writes of the coming of Christ: “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power”—2 Thessalonians 1:8–9. This is one great motive for Paul’s preaching and missionary work. “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men”—2 Corinthians 5:11. Peter warns: “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished....But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; and shall receive the reward of unrighteousness,...These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever”—that’s 2 Peter 2, verses 9, 12, 13, and 17. The most graphic descriptions are to be found in the Book of Revelation, where it is said of the wicked: “The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name”—Revelation 14:10–11. Later, it is said: “And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire”—Revelation 20, verse 15. There is the idea of exclusion from Heaven: “For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie”—Revelation 22:15. And so those outside are missing the blessings of

Heaven. But there is also the idea of positive punishment. Hell is described as a lake of fire. Few pains are so unbearable as burns. Here, we are told of the smoke of their torment ascending up for ever and ever. The fire is unquenchable—it never goes out: “they gnawed their tongues for pain”—Revelation 16, verse 10. And it is a bottomless pit—Revelation 20, verse 3—where there is never ending, descending further and further into rebellion against God and blaspheming his name, and so experiencing more and more of his wrath.

As we have shown, this is the teaching of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. This has been the traditional teaching of the church for the past two thousand years. However, with the growth of higher criticism casting doubt on the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and liberalism undermining the penal substitutionary atonement, doubts began to surface about Hell. How could a loving God punish men and women, all mankind, forever in Hell? Some have gone on to advocate Universalism, the idea that every man and woman will eventually be saved. There are two forms of this teaching. Some have advocated that there are many roads to God. This is pluralistic Universalism. It teaches that all religions provide a way of salvation for their followers. Some get to heaven through Islam, others through Hinduism. Humanists have their own path. This pluralism is directly contradicted by Christ, who taught: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me”—John 14, verse 6. There is only one way to heaven, and that is through Christ.

The other form of Universalism is Christian Universalism. This position agrees that we can only be saved through Christ, but argues that Christ atoned for the sins of the whole world, so that, at the end of the day, the whole world will be saved through the mediatorial work of Christ. There are variations, with some speaking of a kind of purgatory after death, when the individual is purified and some punishment is endured. Traditional Roman Catholicism, for example, taught that there is a purgatory, but it is for believers who are purified there before going to heaven. Purgatory of all kinds undermines the finished work of Christ, who atoned for all our sins, and only ascended up to heaven when he had purged our sins—Hebrews 1, verse 3. But Roman Catholicism also believes in a Hell of everlasting suffering for the wicked.

Others, who hold to a Christian Universalism, assert that the unconverted will get a second chance to accept Christ as Savior after death. Jesus, however, taught: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”—John 3, verse 3. He also taught that the rich man went straight to Hell when he died—Luke 16, verse 23. In the parable of the ten virgins, there was no second chance for those who had no oil in their lamps—Matthew 25, verse 12. Jesus even warned respected professing Christians, when he said: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity”—Matthew 7, verses 21–23. From this, it is plain that many will not be saved, even many church members, preachers, and miracle workers. There is not a hint of a second chance after death for those who die as unbelievers.

Now, looking at Conditional Immortality. The false teaching of Conditional Immortality has recently become quite popular. It is the view that only true Christians will live forever, and so experience everlasting life. Many today regard the idea of God forevermore, throughout the endless ages of eternity punishing men and women as totally unacceptable. They ask, How could a loving God ever do that? Does the Bible not say, “God is love”—1 John 4:8 and 16? Surely, this implies that love is the nature of God, and so they reason that it is essential for God to show love to his

creatures. This reasoning, however, forgets that God is not simply love—he is also truth, and justice, and wisdom, and holiness, and power. Just as the Scripture says “God is love,” it also says, “God is a consuming fire”—Hebrews 12:29. That is terrifying. But it would be a blessing to the church today if Christians, and all mankind in general, are more aware of it, and have more of the fear of God. Furthermore, when Scripture states that God is love, it means that God is holy love and just love. Interestingly, in both the Old Testament and New Testament, we find words of adoration, focusing specifically on the holiness of God. The Seraphim, in Isaiah 6, are seen in that awesome vision by Isaiah, as crying to one another: “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory”—Isaiah 6, verse 3. We are told concerning the living creatures in John’s vision of Heaven: “They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come”—Revelation 4, verse 8. More than anything else, holiness is revealed to us as distinctive of God. Nowhere in the Bible can the words be found, “Love, love, love, is the Lord God Almighty,” though this would be true of God as well. God is all his attributes. God is holy, God is just, God is true, God is wise, God is loving.

Sometimes it is even argued that it would be unjust for God to punish someone forevermore in Hell. Surely, they say, no sin committed in time could demand everlasting punishment. But what is forgotten is that sins against an infinitely good God demand everlasting punishment. Also, sinners in Hell go on blaspheming God, and so deserve further punishment. Exalting man, as over against God, is what is taking place here. There is always that tendency of man to make God in his own image. Scripture lays particular emphasis on the holiness of God, which is essentially the “otherness” of God. God’s holiness is especially his majesty, his exaltedness, his separation, as well as his moral purity. Modern man thinks of himself, and of his own work, and of his own rights, and thinks very little of the greatness or the glory of God. Today’s churches make God small, and man big. It is because God is regarded as small, that a sin against God is not seen as deserving eternal punishment. The Puritans rightly taught that even one sin against such a great and good God deserves eternal Hell. Sadly, all of us commit millions of sins in thought, word, and deed in our lifetime. The worst sin of all is rejecting the Savior, the Son of God who came into this world and suffered so much to atone for our sins: “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him”—Hebrews 2, verse 3. It was a wicked crime to crucify him, but it is an even worse crime to crucify him a second time, and that is the way unbelief is regarded in Scripture: “They crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame: Hebrews 6, verse 6. The writer to the Hebrews adds: “He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?”—Hebrews 10, verses 28–29. To ignore Christ and his work, and the call to put our faith in him, is regarded by God as a great insult, and is therefore worthy of the most awful punishment. It is because God is diminished and the work of Christ despised, while man is exalted, that modern theologians find the eternal conscious punishment of human beings incredible and unacceptable.

Now there are different forms of this teaching of Conditional Immortality, or Annihilationism, as it’s sometimes called. Some argue, for example, that all human beings are annihilated at death, and only the saved are raised at the resurrection. This is the belief held by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Socinians, and as we showed elsewhere, it’s unbiblical. The more common form, among those who claim to follow the Bible—many modern evangelicals—is that the conscious punishment

of the wicked after death is temporary, and then they are annihilated. They argue that it is said in Scripture to be eternal, because eventually the unbelievers are annihilated, and so, destroyed forever—eternally destroyed. Their experience of punishment is temporary, but the punishment itself is eternal, in that it ends their existence forever. Such theologians would take a verse like: “Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord”—2 Thessalonians 1:9, and reason that the destruction means complete destruction, so that the wicked no longer exist. We will return to this matter later to show that, while it could mean that, yet the rest of Scripture shows that this interpretation is not accurate.

It is also argued that only God is immortal: “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”—1 Timothy 6, verse 16. God, of course, is eternal and immortal in a way that no creature is. He has no beginning, and will have no end. He is independent and self-existent. He is dependent on no one. Man has a beginning, and man is dependent on God every moment for his continued existence.

Further, it is argued that eternal life is something which only believers attain. Scriptures such as the following are quoted: “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him”—John 3, verse 36. From this, it is stated that only those who believe in the Son of God have everlasting life. But in this verse, everlasting life means life in heaven. The existence of those in Hell is described as the second death. It is a constant dying, and yet complete death is impossible.

Considering that the church has always believed in the conscious experience of eternal punishment of Hell, it is somewhat surprising to see how popular Conditional Immortality is becoming. John Stott was an Anglican evangelical who wrote many excellent books, and was hugely influential amongst evangelical Christians across the world. It was therefore surprising when he questioned the everlasting nature of punishment in Hell, in the book, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, published in 1988. Others who promote these heretical views are Philip Hughes, and Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, and Edward William Fudge.

Hell is eternal, conscious suffering. This is revealed in a number of Biblical passages. Jesus speaks of a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth”—Matthew 12:13. This involves ongoing suffering. He further describes Hell as a place where there is fire that never shall be quenched: “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched”—Mark 9:44–48. If Hell is a place where there is fire that is never quenched, it obviously needs fuel, something to burn forever. The worm will die if it has nothing to feed on. So the whole idea of fire that is never quenched necessitates ongoing existence for the wicked, and similarly the undying worm demands the ongoing existence of the wicked. The Judgment is portrayed for us in Matthew, chapter 25. The final statement there, in which Christ states with regard to the wicked: “These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal”—verse 46. In the Greek original, the same word is used to describe the life of the righteous and the eternity of the suffering of the wicked. If eternal life goes on forever, and Heaven is everlasting, conscious enjoyment of God, then Hell must be everlasting punishment by God also. There is no end envisaged in the Hell that the rich man went to, in the rich man and Lazarus: “And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame”—Luke 16:23–24. “And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us,

that would come from thence”—that’s verse 26. There is no second chance. None who go to Hell will ever get out. The book of Revelation describes the endlessness of Hell: “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever”—Revelation 20, verse 10. And then it’s stated: “And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire”—verse 15. Earlier in the book, we are told, with regard to the wicked: “The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb”—Revelation 14, verse 10. Surely that must be unending suffering. Sometimes it is argued that the existence of Hell would be a blot on God’s universe forever. How could God allow that there should be a place of blasphemy, and rebellion, and suffering throughout eternity. What is often forgotten in this type of reasoning is that God will be glorified in the destruction of the wicked, just as he is glorified in the salvation of the saints. God glorifies his mercy, his love, and wisdom in saving sinners. God also glorifies and displays his justice and wrath in punishing the wicked forever. Hell will be a constant reminder to the people of God, what our Savior endured for us, and what he saved us from. This will take nothing from our eternal songs of praise, but rather will add to them.

One problem many have is how they could possibly be happy in heaven, thinking of their family suffering in Hell. What about a loving parent, a dear spouse, a child who is precious to us? It is indeed hard for us to envisage ourselves being content while they are being punished. However, on the Judgment Day, we will see the true wickedness of the unbeliever, as we have never seen it in this life. We will know as we are known. We will have such love and admiration for God that we will acquiesce fully in his judgment. Amen.