



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

“Is There a Supreme Being?, or the Existence of God”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the privilege of the study of the word of God. As we consider its teachings, its doctrines, may our thoughts be clear and plain. And may we each profit from the study of the Scriptures together. We thank Thee, again, for Jesus, who is the key to the Scriptures and the key to our relationship to Thee. And may all that is said tonight contribute to the glorification and exaltation of his name.

For it is in his name that we ask it. Amen.

[Message] I would like to give you just a brief review of what we went over last week and complete what we studied. But at the same time, I want to give those of you who are studying seriously a little assignment. I mentioned last time that I wanted to give you a reading assignment, and so here it is. I want you to read in two books both are entitled Systematic Theology. The first by Professor Louis Berkhof -- it's BERKHOF, L. Berkhof -- and the other is Lewis Sperry Chafer. Now, I want you to read in Professor Berkhof's Systematic Theology, pages nineteen through one hundred and seventy-eight, nineteen through one hundred and seventy-eight. And in Dr. Chafer's book, volume one, pages one through one hundred and twenty-five, volume one, pages one through one hundred and twenty-five. Now, Professor Berkhof is a reformed theologian, Dutch

reformed. It is Presbyterian. Dr. Chafer was the president of Dallas Theological Seminary, founder of it, first president. And these two reading assignments cover, in general, the material that we will be covering in our studies.

Now, let’s go over the outline that we went over last time, very quickly. Some of you may not have realized I did have an outline but I did. And this was it.

You’ll remember I began by saying that systematic theology for a long time was considered the queen of the sciences. But prejudice against doctrine and against dogma had changed that evaluation. Last time we discussed the idea of systematic theology. We sought to define it as the science of God. We sought to discuss the aim of systematic theology, which was, as I put it, to perceive, arrange, and systematize the facts of revelation and to set forth the general truths that are involved. We discussed the possibility of theology. And we said that it grew out of three things, the existence of God, the revelation of God, and the endowments of man. We then discussed, fourthly, the necessity of systematic theology, or capital D on the outline.

And I sought to give you some reasons why systematic theology is a necessary thing. It arises or it is found in the instinct of the human mind for systems. It is important to a definite and just view of the truth, a balanced view of the truth. It is important to the Christian life because Christian morality is the fruit that grows from the tree of Christian doctrine. We cannot expect to produce the Christian life if we do not understand Christian truth. It is doctrine first and then life, not life and doctrine. That is why the study of the Scriptures and the doctrines of the Scriptures is so important.

We said it was important to the power of the church. And one of the reasons the church is not powerful today is because it has neglected the parts of the Scriptures that have to do with its order, its worship, its ministry. And so, consequently, the truth is encased in a system which is contrary to the Scriptures. And it is difficult for the doctrines of Scriptures to find their way out to the average man because the organization of the church is a hindrance.

Then we discussed the limitations of systematic theology, the finiteness of the human mind. We cannot understand everything about God, of course. The blindness of sin and every one of us to some extent still manifests the evidence of sin because we still have an old nature. This is why Christians can still fall into sin. Though we have been cleansed and we stand before God perfect in the righteousness which he has provided, we still possess a sin nature, and because we do we may fail. We cannot, therefore, understand because of the blindness that has to do with the old nature everything that we probably ought to understand. God has given us the teaching of the Holy Spirit, but we have to contend with our blindness.

We also pointed out that the Scriptures does not tell us the answer to a lot of questions that we might have. For example, what did our Lord look like? We don’t know. What was the state of the resurrection body of Jesus Christ? How would you describe him? What was his material or matter? What are the capacities of a resurrection body? We can only infer the answer to some of those questions and others we have to throw up our hands and say we are just ignorant.

Also, systematic theology is limited by the imperfect state of sound. It might seem strange to say that, but systematic theology is the consideration of knowledge not only from the Bible but from the revelation of God and the harmonization of what we find in the word of God for that stands firm and what we know about God’s creation. And the imperfect state of sound is a hindrance to the complete understanding of all the theology that we should understand. The incompleteness of our knowledge of Scripture itself, for many of us do not know the word as we should. The inadequacy of human language because it almost seems at times as if the Apostle Paul gives out of human words to express the teachings that he would like to give us. And those who study the Greek language know that every now and then the apostle coins a new word to express what, apparently for him, was something inexpressible in the language that he knew at that

time. We, by the way, do that for many things. Well, Paul did it in the New Testament to express his teaching.

And systematic theology is, of course, limited by the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit has not revealed everything to us. And throughout the entire age, from the time of cross on to the time of the Second Advent, the Spirit is teaching. Now, he has not taught us everything at once. It is my firm belief that there is still something left for us to discover in God’s word. No new revelations but new illuminations upon the revelation that we possess.

Now, we were about here I think. The qualifications for systematic theology, and they are simple. I’ll just state them quickly. Number one, there is need for the new life. No one can understand theology who has not been born again. It is useless to study the doctrine concerning God if we do not have the Holy Spirit of God as our teacher. And it is not until we believe in our Lord Jesus Christ that we receive the Holy Spirit. Then we are qualified to understand, or we -- I say qualified. Yes. That’s right. We are qualified and we have the capacity to understand the truth of God because we have the Holy Spirit. The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God, they are foolishness unto him. Neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned. We’re discerned by the spirit. It is the man who has been born again who possesses the Holy Spirit.

Then not only must he be born again, but he must have a healthy Christian life. The man who has just been born again may understand the milk of the word, but God desires that we grow so that we can come to the place where we take the meat of the word. Now, if instead of growing, we persist in our carnality and become fleshly, then we cannot understand the meat of the word. We can only understand the milk. If you remember that Paul wrote the Corinthians, and he told them that he could not speak unto them as unto spiritual. He had to speak unto them as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ because they had just been born again. But then in his epistle he said, even now after this time you are still carnal because whereas there is among you strife, envy, division, are

ye not carnal and walk as men and consequently they cannot understand the meat of the word because they didn't have a healthy spiritual life.

That's why many Christians who have sat in church for year after year after year never understand anything but just a basic little facts about the ministry of Jesus Christ and what it is to be a Christian, and that's the limit of their understanding of all of God's word because their Christian life is not healthy. They are carnal. Now, we could talk for a whole night on that subject, cannot do it.

The division of systematic theology. Just very quickly, I have listed four of them so that you might understand precisely where systematic theology stands logically in theology. Exegetical theology is the study of the background of the New Testament and the Old Testament. It is the study of Greek and Hebrew and questions such as this. That is exegetical theology. Historical theology is the study of the history of the doctrines of the church. In other words, if we were studying historical theology, we might start with the doctrine of Christ. And we would study what the church has believed about the doctrine of the Christ down through the centuries, historical theology. What men in the church have believed about the doctrines of the word of God, historical theology.

Our seminaries teach exegetical theology, they teach historical theology, then systematic theology -- we've discussed that. And practical theology has to do with such subjects as -- well, how you should conduct a wedding ceremony. How should you conduct a funeral service? What are the practical out-workings of the ministry of the truth that is found in systematic theology? Practical theology, of course, is not nearly so significant as the others.

Now, very quickly, Roman II, the Material of Systematic Theology. Now, since we are going to take this up, I'm just going to point this out. Systematic theology has, as its materials, two things, general revelation, the revelation of God in nature; special revelation, the revelation of God in his word. General revelation is revelation that is addressed to man as a man. And by means of general revelation, we understand that God

is a supreme being. Special revelation is addressed to man as a sinner. And it is by means of the special revelation in his word that we learn how to be saved from our sins. Now, since we are going to talk a lot about that, and I have devoted one night entirely to revelation, I think we can drop that.

And, finally, Roman III, The Method of Systematic Theology. The method of systematic theology is induction. What we shall do is to collect, arrange, and exhibit in their relationship to each other, the facts that are found in the word of God. We will not seek to impose upon the facts our ideas but on the basis of what we see in the Scriptures and in general revelation. From these facts, we will construct our theology. So the method of systematic theology as in the study of any science is induction.

Now, then tonight, our topic now, “Is There a Supreme Being?, or the Existence of God.” When we begin the study of systematic theology, in spite of the God is dead theology of today, we begin with two presuppositions. The first, God exists. It is really remarkable that the Bible does not contain a proof of God’s existence. You might have expected that the first chapter of the Book of Genesis would be devoted to just such a proof. Some might say, well, the Bible would have helped us a great deal if it had. Or you might say, if you do not believe in the existence of God, it couldn’t give it and so it is omitted. And yet, in spite of the fact that the word of God does not give us any proof of God’s existence in its opening pages, the existence of God is a fact that is accepted by almost all men consciously or unconsciously. Browning wrote of the reality of the unseen as “the feeling that there is God, he reigns and rules out of this low world.”

The first presupposition, God exists. The second presupposition is that God has revealed himself. And, of course, a correlate of this fact is that this revelation is authoritative. If he has revealed himself, then of course his revelation is authoritative. Now, it also might surprise you to know that the Bible contains no definition of God. We do not find anywhere in the Bible a definition of God. I wonder why that is.

“Is There a Supreme Being?, or the Existence of God” by S. Lewis Johnson  
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Now, when I was a youngster and was in Sunday school, I was asked to memorize a definition of God. In fact, I was given a catechism, and it was the fourth question which said, who is God? And I was to learn, as just a little kid, God is a spirit infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. That’s what I learned. That was the answer to the question number four in the catechism.

Charles Hodge said that that was the best definition of God every penned by man. Well, you might expect that because Charles Hodge was a Presbyterian. And that was in the catechism that all Presbyterians learn, the Shorter Catechism.

Now, the reason that the Bible does not give us any definition of God is more significant than we might realize. You see the truth of the matter is we cannot give a definition of God. It is impossible for us to absolutely define God. Only God can define God. And consequently, there is nowhere in the Bible any definition of God. And, philosophically, I’m very glad there is no definition of God because it’s just one of those implicit proofs that what we have in the word of God is not a study that attempts to deceive people, but something that is true to the fact we could never define God absolutely.

We can however define him relationally, and the Bible does define him relationally. You remember when Moses asked God about his name, he repeats this answer. “I am that I am.” That’s who God is. “I am who I am.” And that’s all you can say. Once you start defining God, then you begin to limit him. And since ultimately we can never know him completely and fully in his fullness, in the fullness of his perfection, we can never really define God absolutely. But he himself defines himself relationally.

And in that great passage in Exodus chapter 3 -- and you might turn there -- we have a relational definition of God which is significant. In the 13<sup>th</sup> verse in the second book of the Bible we read, in verse 13, Exodus 3:13, “And Moses said unto God, behold when I come unto the children of Israel and shall say unto them the God of your fathers

has sent me unto you, and they shall say to me what is his name?” Now, you’ll remember in Hebrew the name refers to the character of a person. The name was descriptive of a person’s being. “What is his name? What shall I say unto them?” And God said unto Moses, “I am that I am.” I am who I am. And he said “thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, *I am* hast sent me unto you.”

Now, notice the 15<sup>th</sup> verse, and God said moreover unto Moses thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel the Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob hath sent me unto you.” This is my name forever, and this is my memorial unto all generations. In other words, absolutely he is who he is, and that’s all we can say. Relationally, so far as Israel is concerned he is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He’s the God who has entered into a personal relationship with them. That is his relational name, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. So we cannot define God absolutely, though he may define himself relatively.

Now, let’s consider the truth of God as the first the intuitive proof of the existence of God. Haman once said, “If he who denies God’s existence is a fool then he who would demonstrate it is a greater one.” And we are in danger of becoming that when we try to demonstrate it. But there is an innate knowledge which men possess. There are intuitive senses which we all possess. There are truths that arise out of these intuitions of the human mind as well as the human senses. For example, there are intuitive truths of the senses. We feel pain, and we don’t have to stop and reason about it. The moment we feel it we know we feel it. We don’t have to rationalize it. It’s there immediately. We have a sense of touch with which we are born. We don’t rationalize it. We have it. It’s one of those intuitive senses. And the truths that arise out of the intuitive senses, the truths with which we are born by our constitution, they are intuitive truths of the intellect. For example, just to be as simple as we can almost all of us know immediately that the part of a thing is less than a whole. We know that the shortest distance between two

points is a straight line. Now, I know that some women find it difficult to realize that that’s true, men. But that is one of the intuitive truths of the intellect which all men possess.

There are also intuitive truths of our moral nature. We, for example, as soon as we are conscious of anything, we are conscious of the fact that we are responsible for our conduct. We are conscious of the distinction between right and wrong. We are conscious of the fact that sin deserves punishment. We do not have to have these things reasoned into our understanding, but they are intuitive with us. Such truths we call universal, necessary truths. They are true of men generally everywhere. They are rooted in the fact that we are men. The moral law, the sense of touch, the sense of dependence, all of these things are part of human nature. We are born with these senses.

And so the knowledge of God, men are born with the sense of the knowledge of God because it is part of their constitution. It is the way they were created by God. Adam, I believe, believed in God the moment he was created for the same reason that he believed in the external world. He had an eye to see and he believed in the external world. He had a spiritual nature with which he was born, and out of that spiritual nature he comprehended the existence of God. That was the way he was created. And we, because we are men, intuitively have the sense of the existence of God. Now, of course there are men who seek to deny this. We do not question that. But this is one of the universal and necessary truths. And wherever you go you will find that men believe in God from the beginning.

Now, secondly, the scriptural truth of the existence of God. Now, of course, we all recognize the limited apologetic value of appealing to the Scriptures. But for the sake of most of you here who are Christians, we’ll just look at a couple of passages to remind ourselves of the fact that the Bible does claim to speak of God. Notice the first verse of the Bible, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” No warning, no previous definition but simply, “In the beginning God created.” Someone has said that

this simple statement denies materialism or God created the heavens and the earth; denies atheism or in the beginning God; it denies polytheism, or it is God singular not Gods as chapter 2 verse 4 makes very plain; it denies pantheism, for God is not in his creation. He has created the heavens and the earth. It denies agnosticism or, of course from the Scriptures we know there is a God when we read in the beginning God. And it denies fatalism, for it is God who exercises creative power. And there is also a denial of evolution as it is popularly understood.

Hebrews chapter 11, verse 6 is another passage we might look at for a moment. Hebrews chapter 11, verse 6. Here the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states the existence of God is one of the basic tenants of the faith. Verse 6, Hebrews 11, “But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he that cometh to God must believe that he is” or as the Greek text says that he exists and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him, the existence of God.

Will you also turn to Romans chapter 1, Romans chapter 1? And let’s read verses 19 through 21, Romans 1, 19 through 21. In this passage, which we shall look at later, you see that the Apostle Paul believed that it was possible for us to know that God existed from his creation. Romans 1:19, “Because that which may be known of God is manifested in them, for God hath shown it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made even if eternal power and Godhood not head, so that they are without excuse.” In other words, by the creation we are able to understand the eternal power and deity of God so that men are without excuse. In general revelation, there is a revelation of the existence of God.

Now, let’s move on finally to the rational truth for the existence of God. Now, these rational truths are very ancient proofs. Some of them go back as far as Plato and Aristotle. It might surprise you to find in a discussion of Christian theology rational proof that go back to Plato and Aristotle. But you see these truths about the existence of God

are truths that, as we have said, are true to the constitution of man and because men are men they have been able to understand why there must be a God to some extent. Now, these are not convincing proof. In the final analysis the only one who will ever convince you that God exists completely and finally is God himself. But for those who are persuaded or who are open, the rational proofs of the existence of God do have some testimonial value.

And the first is the -- now, I don’t want to apologize for big words, but we do have one -- the cosmological argument. Wouldn’t it be interesting tomorrow when you go to work and you young ladies who are secretaries, you go in and ask your boss, do you know what the cosmological argument for the existence of God is? Now, this is the first of the rational proofs for the existence of God. Now, I’ll just go through it briefly, if you have any questions, remember you can always come and ask me. This is the argument from effect to cause. Every effect, not everything, but every effect must have a cause. And because every effect has a cause, we must ultimately posit someone who is responsible for all of the effects. And the fact that there is a unity in God’s creation argues logically for a creator. In the cosmological argument, we can at least come to the conclusion that there is an ultimate cause for everything. We, of course, cannot tell that he is personal necessarily but that there is a cause.

Then the second argument is that -- nowm this the much shorter word, this is the teleological argument --it’s T-E-L-E-O-L-O-G-I-C-A-L. *Tele* in Greek means the end, a goal. *Elios* means perfect or mature. Permissible argument from the design to a designer. In other words, as we look at God’s creation, the material world, the moral world, the intellectual world, but particularly the material world, there is an indication of design. And design suggests purpose, which in turn indicates intelligence or a designer. If we could say that this first argument indicates that there is a cause. This one is that there is an intelligent cause responsible for the universe.

Now, you can think of all kinds of illustrations. I don’t have time to give them to you, but the illustrations would come to all of us. If I were to hold a watch before you, you would immediately say, if you were interested, who made it or what’s the make? Watches do not come into existence apart from purpose, design. And the fact that we have this glorious creation about us immediately suggests to us that someone must be responsible for it.

C. now this is really a little word. The moral argument, the moral argument. Now, the moral argument for the existence of God is an argument that is related to the conscience of man. Conscience is a word that means with knowledge. In other words, conscience is that part of man which expresses a moral viewpoint with regard to the knowledge that we have. With our knowledge, we have moral sensibilities. We have a sense of ought. Well, how do we get that sense of ought? Well, it’s because there is written in the constitution of man the existence of God. We have our consciences as a gift from God.

Man did not say at a point in history, you know I think it would be very useful to me if I had a sense of ought because then, of course, he would have already had that sense of ought, wouldn’t he? It’s something with which we are born because it is part of our nature, our sense of ought. We do not impose upon ourselves any golden rules. If they were self-imposed, they would be of no significance whatsoever.

But let’s just suppose that there was no such thing as the moral argument. And let’s suppose that there were two men working for a firm and John is one of them and his friend is the other. And John knows that while he’s very good in mathematics, his friend is just a little bit better. But he doesn’t like his friend very much. And so the word gets out that in the organization, a job is open with a superior pay for the man who has the best knowledge of mathematics, and John is approached, but he knows that really this friend of his, whom he doesn’t like much, has a better sense than he does. And so let’s suppose with no sense of ought, let’s suppose that John would say, you know he ought

to have the job and I ought to have the sense of ought whereby he might have this job.

Well, you can see that such a thing is ridiculous because any kind of self-imposed ought is of no significance whatsoever to anyone else. And so, consequently, the fact that we have a sense of ought cannot be explained apart from the fact that it has been given us by someone else, by God. And we can say now, if this is true, that the cause of the universe is not only intelligent but also moral.

And, finally, the ontological argument, O-N-T-O-L-O-G-I-C-A-L. The ontological argument. This is an argument from abstract and necessary ideas. This argument, by the way, has been stated in several different forms, but sometimes it’s stated like this and usually like this. We have an idea of an absolutely perfect being. That is something that each of us possesses. Existence is an attribute of perfection. And so because we have an idea of an absolutely perfect being and existence is an attribute of perfection then he must exist. If he did not exist then, of course, we could conceive of someone who was greater. And so the very fact that we have the idea of an absolutely perfect being and since existence is an attribute of perfection there must be such.

Now, these arguments, the cosmological, the teleological, the moral, the ontological, do not, it is obvious, prove the existence of God. They do help. I think they indicate that what we see in the nature of man is understandable on the basis of the existence of a God. There are many illustrations, of course, of individuals who have sensed that there was a God apart from teaching. One of the most famous was Helen Keller. As you know, Helen Keller was born blind and deaf. And for a long period of time she was taught. She was taught to speak. And her teacher who was very, very, patient with her felt that after a long time that Miss Keller should have some instruction concerning God. And so she asked Phillips Brooks, the famous preacher, to come and speak to her about God. And so Phillips Brooks came, and he spoke to Helen Keller about God. So far as the teacher was concerned, Mr. Brooks was concerned, it was the first time that she had ever heard about God. And when Mr. Brooks finished she said

“Oh, Mr. Brooks, I always knew there must be a God, but I didn’t know his name.” Well, she had that innate sense that comes from the fact that she was a human being.

Now, let me conclude. It is impossible to prove God. Only God can really prove that he exists. As in law, psychology, philosophy, so in theology, too much depends on personal judgment. Much of the Bible teaching lies beyond our observation. We weren’t there when the creation took place. At the moment, we are -- we cannot understand the facts that the Bible speaks about concerning the future world because it has not come to pass, and we’re on this earth. Much of the Bible is suprarational, the miracle, the virgin birth, the trinity. Who could ever rationalize these things?

We must remember that in the light of them we cannot expect to prove God. But Christianity is not a leap in the dark. I think that some Christians are frequently on the defensive. They think because they cannot prove God that they are in a worse situation than the man who doesn’t believe in a God. But remember, he cannot prove there is not a God, and the fact that you cannot prove that there is a God does not mean that there is no God. Men could not prove for hundreds of years that the earth was round but it was. In fact, they were very vehement in believing just the opposite. But the facts were different. And so because you cannot prove that there is a God, do not be discouraged. He cannot prove that there is not a God.

I think in the light of the fact that we have the intuitive evidence, the rational evidences, and then, above all, the testimony of the Holy Spirit of God that out of these things and the facts concerning the ministry of the Lord Jesus we can reach the place where we have an overwhelming probability that there is a God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. And when we take the leap of faith, which opens our eyes, then the Holy Spirit confirms the truth to the believer. And so while we cannot prove God as we believe, we do come to know him and to know him surely indefinitely.

In the final analysis, the test of an adequate hypothesis is its ability to explain the facts as we experience them. And Christianity is able to explain the facts as we

experience them. Atheism, Agnosticism, they cannot explain the facts as we experience them. Christianity has the best answers to the problems of life and the remedies of them. And when men are willing to accept the testimony of the word of God and believe, then they can come to a sense of certainty in the biblical truths.

Well, we shall stop at this point for next time our subject will be “Canst thou by searching find out God?, or the knowability of God.”

Now, let me say that tonight we have had to engage in some things which I know were probably a little heavy for some of you, but I believe it will get a little lighter as we move on. These opening topics are important for us, but they are heavy. So if you can keep up above water, why things will be better in the future.

Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the privilege of the study of the word of God. Guide our thoughts that we may be, as the Scriptures say, equipped for every good work.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.