

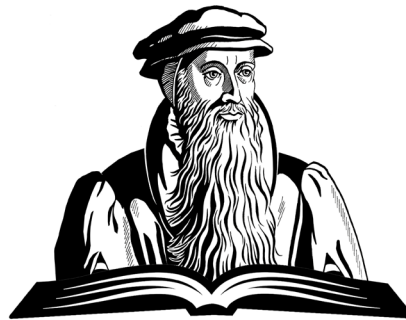
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

*Principles of Scripture
Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 9
CHRIST



The John Knox Institute
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HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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1. Introduction
2. Foundation
3. Sense
4. Comparing
5. Context
6. Words
7. History
8. Genre
9. Christ
10. Exposition

HERMENEUTICS

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Lecture 9

Christ

When reading a book, a person can become so engrossed in the details that their reading, that they get sidetracked and miss the main point of the book. Imagine a person becoming so focused on the fabric and design of a soldier's uniform, or the metals used in cannonballs, that they forget they're reading a chapter about a strategic battle, in a whole book on a significant war. The details are important, but they must be connected to the thesis, themes, and argument, that the book seeks to convey.

This is even more important when it comes to reading and understanding the Bible. We have learned indispensable principles that guide in accurately interpreting the Holy Scriptures. We've seen why those principles are important, and how they apply to our study of God's Word. But we must never lose track of the primary focus of the Bible, which is to set forth the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the revelation of God in him. If we do not intentionally ask ourselves, What does a given passage reveal about Christ? then we will fail to interpret Scripture properly. This ties together the other principles that we have learned. When Scripture interprets Scripture, it provides us with a sustained focus on the good news concerning Jesus Christ. When we pay close attention to the inspired words, we do so with *Christ at the center*. We also recognize that the historical context will not help us unless we understand how the God of history was using it to reveal Christ to his people. Well, the same applies to other principles that we have learned.

In the previous lecture, we considered examples of the various *genre* and types of language used in Scripture, and how we should understand and interpret them. We saw how several of the examples we considered pointed to the person and work of Christ. But there is more to the story. In this lesson, we will explore the principle of interpreting Scripture with *Christ at the center*. We'll consider questions such as, Where does the Bible teach this? and, Why is it important? and, What Biblical method guides us in implementing this principle? We will also explore examples of how this principle is applied.

And so, first of all, let's begin with this concept of *Christ at the center* of Scripture. Throughout this module, we've asked the question, What does the Bible itself teach us about how we should read and interpret it? Well, in addition to the other truths we have learned, we discover that God's

Word reveals the glory of God's Son. Jesus himself tells us that he is the center of the Scriptures, and that we should study them in order to discover the knowledge of himself. He says, in John 5, verse 39, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." Later in the same chapter, verses 46 and 47, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and says, "For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" After Christ's resurrection, we read of him explaining the Scriptures, in Luke 24, verse 27 and verse 44. It says, "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." And then verse 44, "And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me." Well, this is an important truth which should inform our expectations and our approach to interpreting Scripture. The whole Bible reveals the Lord Jesus Christ and the message of salvation in the gospel of his grace. So we trace the unfolding of this revelation of God in Christ throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

Consequently, it is impossible to accurately interpret the Scriptures without interpreting them in a Christ-centered way. In reading the Old Testament, we may have a clear grasp of the words, the details described in a passage, even the context and the background. But if we fail to understand the passage in light of Christ's person and work, we have not interpreted it rightly. The study of the Bible is a study of the glory of God in Christ. Now, this is not merely an abstract and theoretical principle. It's personal, isn't it? It corresponds to a crave in every believer's heart to see and understand, and know more about their Redeemer. Is it any wonder that Paul, a remarkable and diligent student of the Bible, could say, in Philippians 3, verse 8 and verse 10, "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ." He goes on in verse 10, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." This principle of *Christ at the center* of Scripture informs and guides our interpretation of God's Word.

Well, secondly, we will consider some related principles. Having seen this basic truth of *Christ at the center*, we need to understand what undergirds this idea, which helps clarify why it is so important. And we need guidance on how to apply the principle of *Christ at the center* to our interpretation of the Bible. Well, what are these principles?

First of all, the Bible is a unified book—one, single, coherent whole, centered on the person and work of Christ. This point of the unity and the continuity of the Scriptures is important in our approach to rightly dividing it. Jesus Christ provides the focal point and an interpretive principle for understanding Scripture. Christ, as the eternal Word, is both the messenger and the message. So to rightly interpret the Word, and then to rightly preach the Word that we interpret, is to preach Christ crucified—"Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God," in the words of 1 Corinthians 1, verses 23 and 24. Paul preached the whole person and work of Jesus Christ from the whole Bible. We read, and study, and interpret Scripture to learn, to gain knowledge, but to what end, and to what benefit? Well, ultimately, we seek the glory of God in the salvation of our souls and the souls of others. The hope of salvation, and the ability to glorify God is tied to the knowledge of God. Jesus says, in John 17, verse 3, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." In the inspired Scriptures, God purposed to reveal his divine glory in the person and work of the Son. We read in John 1, verse 14, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of

the Father,) full of grace and truth.” And then in verse 18, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Likewise we read in John 14, verse 9, “He that hath seen me,” Jesus says, “hath seen the Father.”

So the whole New Testament expounds this theme. Christ is the fullest and final revelation of God. The Bible describes Christ as the one “who is the image of the invisible God”—Colossians 1, verse 15. And elsewhere, he’s described as, “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person”—Hebrews 1, verse 3. So our knowledge of God is tied to his revelation of himself in the person and work of Christ. So to be God-centered is also to be Christ-centered. At every significant event in Christ’s life and ministry, we see the revelation of the undivided operations of the whole Trinity. At his birth, we see him, there Christ is conceived by the Holy Ghost. At the baptism, the Father is speaking, and the Spirit descends as a dove. In all of his teaching we see it. In his death we see it. At his resurrection, he’s raised by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We see it at his ascension, and at Pentecost. We could go on and on. Well, this guides our interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, even in the Old Testament, we find the prophets looking forward in anticipation to the coming of the Messiah, and studying their Scriptures to see and understand more of Christ. First Peter 1, verses 10 to 11 says, “Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.” Well, if the prophets themselves searched and studied diligently their own predictions to learn about Christ and his salvation, then how much more should we search and study those Old Testament prophecies to learn about salvation in Christ, especially since we can now read them in light of their full New Testament fulfillment. As we have seen elsewhere in this module, we can learn how the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, which is really to say, we can glean from how God interprets his own infallible Word.

Thirdly, having established this principle, we also need to identify the misuse and abuse of it. This principle, *Christ at the center*, works together with the other principles we’ve learned, not in opposition to them. We’re not permitted to take God’s Word out of context, or to twist the meaning of the words in our interpretation. We cannot come to a passage and create our own allegory from it, forcing the text to say and mean something it does not. There must be Biblical warrant derived from the text itself, and drawn from what the rest of Scripture leads us to conclude about the passage. So it is appropriate to read of the Exodus in the Old Testament, and to see Christ as the Paschal Lamb which God supplies for the redemption of his people, the house of bondage, slavery to sin, because the Scriptures themselves teach us to interpret it that way. By way of contrast, we would not interpret Abraham as representing Christ, when he deceives Abimelech about his wife Sarah in order to deliver himself from harm. You see the difference between these two things. It is inappropriate to arbitrarily insert Christ into every verse or detail found in the Bible, making him, as it were, magically appear. In the story of Joseph, we’re not led to conclude that his coat of many colors is a picture of Christ. But it is correct to ask, How is the Lord unfolding his gospel message throughout this passage in a way that culminates in Christ? Joseph himself does prefigure and represent the coming of God’s Son, who does deliver his people. And throughout the story, you can point at the various stages to the unfolding grace of the gospel that comes to fulfillment in Christ, and to thereby preach Christ from those passages. The principle of *Christ at the center* works together with the other principles we have considered, which prevents the misuse of this principle.

But thirdly, we gain further clarity by considering concrete examples of the application of

this principle drawn from Scripture itself. What does this principle look like in action, when we apply it as an interpretive principle to passages that we're considering? What shape does it take? Well, first of all, to build on what we've already heard, in the previous lecture, we saw how God employed various metaphors, symbols, and Old Testament types, and ordinances to reveal the glory of his Son. So we think of the sacrificial lamb, which is offered as a picture of atoning sacrifice. The shedding of blood in order that the people of God might receive forgiveness of sins through the substitute on their behalf. We heard about the temple, and how the temple is a picture of God coming to dwell among his people, and to manifest his presence to his people, which we find fulfilled in Jesus, who is Emanuel—God with us, who comes and tabernacles among us. We saw how Paul recognized that the rock in the wilderness in Moses' day was a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. From him flows all of the resources of living water and life for his people. We saw how the pillar and cloud in the Old Testament was too a picture of Christ dwelling with his people. You could point to other things, like the cities of refuge that God spread throughout the promised land, and how a person was to run, when being pursued by the manslayer, and to run into the city of refuge in order to gain safety and deliverance. That's a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our refuge. You could think, for example, of Noah's ark, and how Noah and his family were taken into the ark—God shut the door. And that through that ark, they were delivered from the wrath that descended from heaven in the destruction of the world for their sins. It's a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ, and finding safety and salvation in him. We saw how the brazen serpent lifted up in the wilderness is something that pointed forward to Jesus. John 12 makes that clear. And there are a whole host of others. These metaphors, and symbols, and types, and ordinances, they point to Jesus Christ. And if we're going to understand them, we don't just study the details about the cities of the refuge—where were they, what were the details of how they functioned, and circumstances in which they were used. To fully and rightly interpret them, we have to see how they're connected to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, as we turn to the writings of the New Testament, we also discover God drawing many parallels between Christ and various Old Testament historical figures or people. So there's a connection here. Adam, for example, both in Romans 5, and 1 Corinthians 15, there's a connection between Adam and Christ in this sense: Adam is referred to as the first Adam, and Christ is referred to as the last Adam. Christ comes and, as it were, takes the place of Adam, and he undoes what Adam did wrong, and he does do what Adam failed to do. The history of humanity hangs from the belt, if you will, of Adam, as their representative and first father, whereas the Lord Jesus Christ is the representative of his people. We think of Moses. The Old Testament tells us, God said to Moses that he would raise up another prophet who would be like unto Moses, that the people were to heed and hear. Well that's pointing to Jesus Christ. Moses stood in the gap and mediated on behalf of the people. Something of Christ is reflected in that as well. Jesus is the final and greatest Prophet to come in the room of Moses. You think of Aaron. You turn to the book of Hebrews. Aaron is a high priest, and as a person and in his office, he was reflecting something better and greater than Aaron, in the person of Jesus Christ. So there's points of continuity, as well as discontinuity, Hebrews says. You can think of Melchisedec in the book of Genesis. Again, Hebrews tells us that the words of Psalm 110 about a priest after the order of Melchisedec is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. You think of Joshua, which is the Old Testament name that is equivalent to the name Jesus. They both mean "Jehovah saves." And Joshua is the one who was sent into the promised land to conquer it. He leads the people into their inheritance. And the Lord Jesus Christ is the one who comes to bring about the greatest conquest over sin, and Satan, and death, and hell, and to bring his people

into their eternal inheritance. And the Judges, with all of their failures, still set forth something of Christ as a Savior who delivered his repentant people. You think of David. There is King David, but then there is David's greater son. As we're looking at the Psalms, and we're looking at the narratives regarding David, there's a pointer to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great King without failure or fault. Solomon's the same. Jesus himself says, he describes things about Solomon, then he says, "Behold, a greater than Solomon is here." He does the same thing with Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights. Jesus says, "So will the Son of man be in the belly of the earth, and will be raised up again." There's connections between people and Christ. Not perfect parallels, but they're given nonetheless, as pointers to the Lord Jesus Christ. And understanding what the Bible tells us about these figures has to include in our interpretation their relationship to Christ.

Thirdly, the New Testament also draws connections between Christ and many Old Testament events which inform us of how to read Old Testament history. The flood, Peter says, is a picture of the judgment that is to come, and there are a number of parallels there that Peter highlights. We noted in a previous lecture how Mount Moriah, and what transpires with Abraham and Isaac there, is pointing us forward to what will be fulfilled in that same region with the coming of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice upon the cross. Joseph's use in delivering God's people fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Exodus, as we've already noted, is an event that depicts God's people in bondage, far worse than the tyranny of Pharaoh, and how Christ is the one who delivers them from that bondage, brings them through the wilderness of this world, and brings them into the eternal inheritance in heaven. That wilderness is a picture of life in this world. The land, the promised land, Hebrews tells us, is a picture of the heavenly and eternal inheritance of God's people, all purchased by Jesus Christ. Even the conquest of the promised land. There are great parallels between Joshua 1 and the great commission in Matthew 28, where the Lord tells his disciples to go out and, if you will, conquer the world with the gospel, under the blessing of God and the ministry of his Holy Spirit. We could say more, but the point is that there are connections between Christ and Old Testament events.

Well, with the extensive revelation of Christ in the Old Testament, it's no surprise to find godly believers, who knew their Old Testaments, anticipating his coming. We read of Simeon, in Luke, chapter 2, verses 25 and 26, "And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ." The same thing could be said with regards to Anna, in that same chapter. This old woman who stayed in the temple, who served the Lord. She comes into the temple at the time of Christ being presented, and she "spoke of him to all them that looked for the redemption of Jerusalem" (verse 38).

For those desiring a deeper and fuller study of how the whole Bible teaches Christ and the gospel, John Knox Institute (johnknoxinstitute.org) has another module or course on this whole topic—30 lectures entitled, "Biblical Theology." But here, we see Christ is all in all. He has all the preeminence. He is the center of the created universe. He's the center of human history. And he is the focal point of all of Scripture. And so, if we miss this principle, in a sense, we miss everything. We will not rightly understand what the Bible says, and what the Bible means.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the principle of *Christ at the center*, which further informs how we interpret the Holy Scriptures. In the next and final lecture, we will turn our attention to how men can employ these principles that we've been learning in teaching and

preaching the Scriptures. This will forge an important link between *exegesis* and *Exposition*, or between accurately interpreting the Bible and faithfully proclaiming the Bible.