

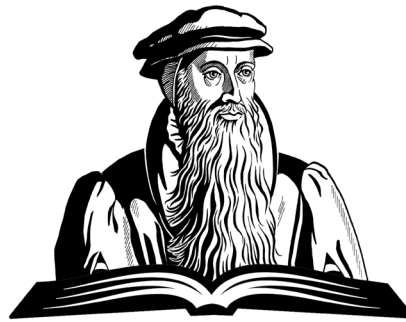
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

10 LECTURES



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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HERMENEUTICS

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Lecture 1

Introduction

You may know the ancient proverb that says you can give a man a fish, day, after day, after day, or you can teach that same man to catch fish themselves. Similarly, we can open our Bibles and turn from page, to page, to page, explaining to a person what this passage means, and what that passage means, and what another passage teaches, making our way through the whole Bible. But alternatively, we can also teach a person how to interpret and study the Bible for himself. This latter approach provides far more spiritual benefit to a believer.

The lectures in this module are designed to teach a believer how to interpret and study the Bible himself. Paul wrote, in 2 Timothy, chapter 2, and verse 15, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” In this passage, our gaze is set on the Lord himself, not the applause or favor of men. We’re to strive to please the Lord, the Master we serve, and to labor in a manner that does not bring shame. But specifically, what labor does Paul have in mind? He speaks of the labor of the labor of rightly dividing the word of truth. The picture of rightly dividing the word, conveys the idea of accurately cutting open the scriptures, or rightly handling the scriptures in a manner that is faithful to God, and faithful to what the scriptures themselves teach.

The purpose of this module is threefold. First, it aims to equip you with Biblical principles for interpreting the scriptures. Lord willing, this will enhance the accuracy of your own understanding of what the Bible teaches, as you read and study, and as you do so privately, or within your families, and in the teaching opportunities you may have in Christ’s church.

Second, this course is designed to be practical, by illustrating how to use the tools with specific texts of scripture. While you must understand the theory, you also need practice in implementing that theory. In these lectures, we will illustrate how the principles we learn can be applied in our study.

Third, this course is designed to be a basic introduction to the principles of interpreting scripture. It’s not a comprehensive or exhaustive course. It will provide you with a foundation upon which you can build in your future studies. The goal is to stay simple and practical, with tangible examples and applications. But you will need to commit yourself to the priority of a lifelong pur-

suit. With the Lord's blessing, by the end of this module, the training you receive should better enable you to rightly divide the word of truth.

In this first lecture, we will simply introduce why this subject is so important, and what the scope of this teaching includes. It's always important to have a reason for doing whatever we are doing. But in this case, it is especially appropriate to have a Biblical accurate reason, given our subject matter, which is, how to understand the Bible accurately. So we will focus in this lecture on the task of Biblical interpretation, and the person executing the task, or the interpreter.

So two things—first of all, the task of Biblical interpretation. Well, we should begin by defining some important terms. When we speak of interpreting scripture, the word “interpreting” or “interpretation” refers to the act of explaining the meaning of a passage of scripture. So when we read the Bible, we ask the question, “What does it say?” But when we interpret the Bible, we ask the question, “What does it mean?” Now you can see both of these points illustrated in Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 8, which says, “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly”—that's our first point—“and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” So there was both what it says, and what it means.

We should mention two other words that you may come across in your studies, both of which are technical words that are relevant for this course. First, we have the word, “hermeneutics,” which derives from a Greek word meaning “to interpret, or explain.” It refers to the rules or principles for interpreting a particular text. In theology, we often use the word “hermeneutics” to designate the study of the principles of interpreting scripture. So it would be correct, therefore, to say that this module is an introduction to Biblical hermeneutics.

Second, we have the word “exegesis,” which is a narrower word that refers to the application of hermeneutics, or the application of the principles of interpretation to a particular text. The word “exegesis” derives from a Greek word that means “to lead out,” or “to guide out.” It often entails a careful study of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of scripture. But the basic concept is clear enough. To exegete a passage is to draw out the meaning of the text. This would be the opposite of a common error, that is, to read our own meaning into the text. We would call that error “eisegesis” rather than exegesis. Exegesis is taking the meaning that God put in the passage and bringing it out, but on the other side, we're reading our own meaning into the passage, which we should avoid. And so, we have some basic definitions for a couple of important words.

Next, we need to consider the necessity of Biblical interpretation. Why is it important to study the subject? What benefits do we derive? How does it affect our Christian life? Well, the Bible supplies answers to these important questions, and we'll note several of them.

First of all, accurately interpreting scripture is part of the maturity that is required of every Christian. So the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question #2, provides its answer in the following words: “The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.” And so we need to understand the scriptures if we're going to glorify and enjoy God. Paul addresses the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 3, verses 1 and 2, saying, “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.” Paul is challenging them. He's saying that they needed to grow up, from drinking spiritual milk, to eating spiritual meat. This entails knowing how to understand more accurately, and to apply more faithfully the word of God. This is made clear elsewhere, in Hebrews, chapter 5, verse 12 to 14: “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God;

and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” You can see, this attributes Christian maturity to having spiritual discernment. Verse 14 describes a believer who, through practice, have their souls trained to distinguish between good and evil. This spiritual discernment, among other things, comes from a deeper understanding of the scriptures.

Secondly, another need arises from the fact that there is false teaching, which we must recognize and avoid. First John 4, verse 1 warns us, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” And Peter warns of those who twist the scriptures. In 2 Peter 3, verse 16, where he says that the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. The failure to be grounded in a solid understanding of the truth leads to spiritual vulnerability and instability. In Ephesians 4, verses 14 and 15, we’re told, “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” We are called to hold fast to the truth, and to defend it against all assaults. Those assaults often come in the form of misinterpreting and misapplying what the scriptures teach. So we need to know how to accurately interpret the scriptures.

Thirdly, this to test everything we hear by the scriptures applies even to the good teaching that we receive. We are to compare what we hear to what we read in the Bible. When we listen to sound, Biblical instruction, good preaching, we are to go back to search the scriptures and to compare what we heard to what the Bible says. And that actually deepens our comprehension. It strengthens our attachment to the truth. In Acts 17, verse 11, the Berean believers are commended for this very reason. We read: “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

Fourthly, we need to know how to accurately interpret the scriptures, in order to be of help and service in ministering to others. Apollos benefited from this sort of ministry, we’re told in Acts 18, verse 26, “And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” Parents also need to know how to interpret the Bible for instructing their own children. Deuteronomy 6, verses 6 and 7 tells us: “And these words”—the word of God—“which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” Husbands also need the same for teaching their wives. First Corinthians 14, verse 35 says: “And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” And so, if we’re going to be of help to other people, we need to be able to interpret the scriptures accurately ourselves.

Fifthly, we need ability to interpret the scriptures when we come across apparent contradictions between two passages. Now, listen carefully, I say “apparent contradictions,” because there are no real contradictions in God’s word. As we will learn in this course, the principles of interpretation enable us to resolve what at first might be confusing to us. The seventeenth-century English Puritan, John Owen, wrote: “The number is very small of those who diligently, humbly, and conscientiously endeavour to learn the truth from the voice of God in the scriptures, or to grow

wise in the mysteries of the gospel by such ways as wherein alone that wisdom is attainable. And is it any wonder that many wander after vain imaginations of their own or others?"

Well that brings us to our second main point—the person doing the task, that is to say, the interpreter. What are the qualifications and necessary characteristics of the person who is interpreting scripture. The short answer is that we must be true believers who seek the Lord with humble and teachable hearts. First of all, a person must be a genuine believer in order to accurately interpret the scriptures. Well, why would this be the case? Because their minds must be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. First Corinthians 2, verse 14, says: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." And so, in Luke 24, verse 45, we hear of Christ's ministry to the two men on the road to Emmaus. It says, "Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." In order to understand the Bible, we need the help of its author, God himself. As we sing in Psalm 36, verse 9, "In thy light shall we see light." John Calvin remarked, "The same Spirit who has spoken through the mouths of prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they have faithfully proclaimed what has been divinely commanded."

Secondly, every Christian has the ability, the duty, and the privilege of studying the Bible for themselves. Jesus calls us to search the scriptures, in John 5, verse 39. While the Bible limits the public preaching and teaching of the word to only men—men who are called and ordained by Christ—there is no limit to who can study the word, and no limit on how much they can learn. You'll notice in the Gospels the wide variety of people that listened to the words of our Lord during his earthly ministry. This included men, women, and children. The Lord commends Mary for sitting at his feet and receiving instruction. In Luke 10, verse 42, he says, "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." We read of Jesus receiving children to himself and forbidding them not. This continues after his ascension to heaven. Paul tells Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3, verse 15, "And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Thirdly, the believer's heart must be prepared for the study of the word, if he wishes to interpret it accurately. He must have a spiritual appetite, hunger pains to truly know the word. Think of how this is described in the Bible. Job, for example, in Job 23, verse 12, it says, "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food." Jeremiah says, in Jeremiah 15, verse 16, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart." The same thing with David, in Psalm 19, verse 10 says, "More to be desired are they"—God's word—"than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." Solomon says to search for God's wisdom in his word more than for treasures of gold and silver. If we're going to interpret scripture rightly, we need to come with a heart that's prepared to seek the Lord in that study of his word.

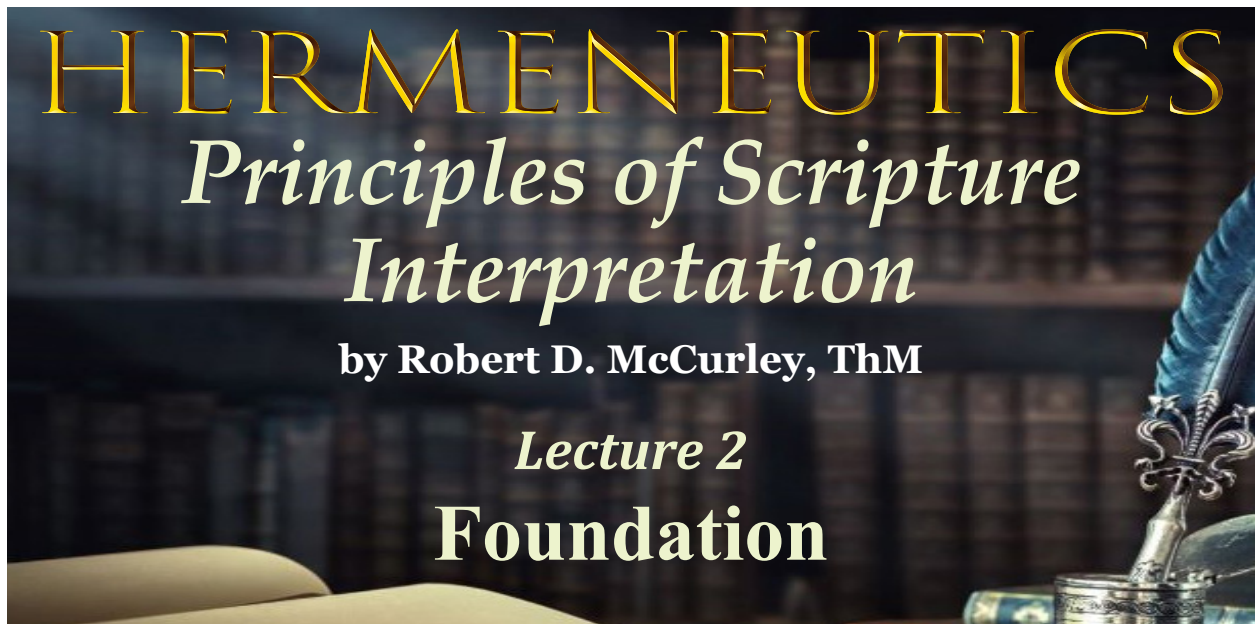
Fourthly, it is necessary to receive the word with faith, if we wish to interpret it rightly, and to understand it properly. Hebrews 11, verse 6 confirms this. It says, "But without faith it is impossible to please him." Hebrews 4, verse 2 speaks of the Israelites in the wilderness and says, "The word...did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it." But the Thessalonians, in the New Testament, provide the opposite example. Paul says of them, in 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, "When he received the word of God...ye received it as...the word of God...which effectually worketh also in you that believe." We cannot understand the scriptures rightly, without receiving what they say with a heart of faith.

Fifthly, those who interpret the scriptures must do so in humility and obedience. James 1,

verse 21 tells us, “Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” We must submit to, not resist, what the word says to us. Humility affirms that we are foolish, and God is all wise and knows best. And so we need a heart to receive humbly, and to obey whatever his word teaches. If a person comes to the scriptures, and is resistant, they don’t actually want the Bible to say what it really says, or their heart kicks against the implications of what the scripture means, they’re going to be inclined to make it say something else, to make it say something that’s palatable, and something that conforms to their own ideas and desires. So we need humility, we need meekness. But we also need a heart that is set on obedience. James 1, verse 22 says, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” In Matthew 7, Jesus warns about the difference between the foolish builder and the wise builder. He says that the foolish builder is the one who builds his house on sand, and when the storm comes, the house collapses. He says that’s a picture of the person who refuses to apply or do the word of God. Whereas the wise builder builds his house upon a rock, and the storms come, and the house stands. That’s a picture of a person who is not only a hearer, but also a doer of the word of God. We will fail to accurately interpret scripture if we do not have a mind to obey it. Ezra 7, verse 10 says, “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

Lastly, all our studies of the word, and all of our pursuits of interpreting the scriptures must be accompanied by much prayer and dependence upon the Lord. Paul knew this. He prayed for other believers, as in Colossians 1, verse 9, saying, “We...do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” Well, we learn to pray this for ourselves when we sing, in Psalm 119, things like, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law...give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments,” as we see in verse 18 and verse 73 of that Psalm. We should study the scriptures with the Lord, in the presence of the Lord, looking to the Lord, seeking the Lord’s help. Everything we have already heard reinforces in our minds that we are desperately dependent upon the Lord to help us rightly divide the word of truth. So we must depend upon him from start to finish.

In this lecture, we’ve defined what we mean by Biblical interpretation, and considered why the subject is so important, and what is required of those who seek to understand and interpret the scriptures. In future lectures, we will explore, one by one, the principles God has supplied for accurately interpreting the Holy Scriptures, as well as explaining how we can apply those principles. But first, we must understand something about the nature of the book, the Bible, that we will be interpreting. And so in the next lecture, we will seek to lay a foundation upon which we can build in our subsequent studies.



The foundation of a building constitutes one of the most important parts of any structure. We may tend to forget about the foundation, because it is not seen. We see the walls, roof, doors, windows, and other features, some of which can make the building beautiful. But the foundation underneath everything provides stability to the whole structure. If the builders lay a poor foundation, and they're hurried to focus on the parts people would see, then the whole structure would collapse and come to ruin.

Likewise, in approaching the study of the principles for interpreting Scripture, we must begin with understanding the foundation underneath that pursuit. We must begin with understanding the kind of book we're seeking to interpret. Without a firm concept of the nature of the Bible, we will be led into the possibility of many errors, and our attempt to interpret Scripture could collapse and come to ruin. The Holy Scriptures are set aside from every other category of literature as the very Word of God. We read in 2 Timothy 3, verses 16 and 17, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." In this chapter, Paul warns Timothy about the character and activity of enemies who would oppose the truth of God. He exhorts his spiritual son to continue in the things he had been taught in the Holy Scriptures from his infancy. Well, why? Why should Timothy persevere in holding fast to these truths? Because the Scriptures are the words that God himself has spoken. We cling to the Lord, in part, by clinging to his Word. Jesus said that his sheep would hear the voice of their shepherd and follow him. The Bible alone thoroughly equips us with all that we need for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer #3 says, "The scriptures teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

In this second lecture, we will explore what makes the Bible so unique and special, by seeing what the Bible says about itself. This will guide us and prepare the way for then learning the individual principles God provides for how to interpret his own Word. We will consider, first of all,

the doctrines of Scripture, and then turn to spell out how these truths or doctrines influence our interpretation.

So first of all, we need to consider truths undergirding our interpretation. To conceal something is to hide it, whereas to reveal it means to expose or to make something known. In the Bible, revelation refers to God's unveiling and making known his truths to creatures such as ourselves. He takes what would otherwise be hidden from us and graciously condescends to show it to us. He's not silent. He opens up and discloses to us the knowledge of himself and the way of salvation. If we wish to know him, we must rely on what he tells us of himself. In the Bible, God provides us with special revelation of all that we are to believe and do, all that we need for life and godliness in this world. This is the only source for a person to come to know God as Savior and Redeemer. Romans 1, verse 16 says that "The gospel...is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." The revelation of God in his Word is complete and perfect, without any additions of new revelation, as we see in the opening verses of the book of Hebrews.

Our interest in this lecture relates to what we know about the nature of the Bible, and the influence that that has on how we interpret it. So we'll note a few things about what the Bible teaches regarding itself.

First of all, we see that the Bible must be understood as the inspired Word of God. "Inspired" means "God-breathed." Just we expel breath from our mouths, so ultimately God himself is speaking in the Scriptures. In other words, every word in the Scriptures originates from God and proceeds from the mouth of God. So we rightly speak of the Bible as the voice of God, and as the Word of God. The Lord inspired prophets and apostles to write the Scriptures, but they were never only the words or thoughts of men. Second Peter 1, verse 21 says, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." And again, in 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, "When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." So God is the ultimate source of every word, every letter in the Bible. Theologians speak of the "plenary verbal inspiration" of the Scriptures. Now these words carry a weight of importance. The word "plenary" means "something that is extended to all parts equally." So the inspiration of God's Word is full, and complete, and absolute—it's carried all the way through every part of the Bible. For example, Jesus said, in Matthew 5, verse 18, "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." A "jot" and a "tittle" are the smallest letter in the alphabet, and even the smallest stroke of a letter. And so, inspiration applies to the whole of God's Word. But we also call it plenary "verbal" inspiration, so "verbal"—it was given in written words. It's propositional. Inspiration extends to the words, and letters, the syllables themselves. Proverbs 22, verses 20 and 21 says, "Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, that I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth." Among other things, God provided Scripture in written words for their permanent preservation, and for the world's enduring benefit.

But we can add two more doctrines to this idea of inspiration—two more words. The first word is the word "inerrancy." Inerrancy means there are no errors in the Scriptures. Notice how Paul demonstrates this in Galatians 3, verse 16, where he builds his whole doctrinal point on the fact that an Old Testament word was given in the singular form, rather than the plural form. He says, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." And so, inerrancy extends to every detail. Every part of the Bible is without error. We also have the word "infallibility." Infallibility means that

God's Word is reliable, that it's sure, that it's unchangeable. That it's never wrong, indeed, that it cannot fail. Now this must be so, because God is the author, and God is truth itself. He's incapable of inspiring falsehood, or speaking anything that is untrustworthy. So the first thing that we learn about the Bible is that it's the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God.

But then, secondly, it comes to us with divine authority. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 4 says, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the word of God." So the Bible has divine authority because its author is the Holy Spirit, who is God himself. Consequently, the Scriptures speak to us with the authority of God. First Corinthians 2, verses 12 and 13, we read, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." And so, as we see in Hebrews 4, verse 12, the Bible, the sword of the Holy Spirit, is living and powerful, it's "sharper than any twoedged sword," and it always has the final word on everything to which it speaks. No outside source or no new information can supplant what God himself has said to us in his Word. The divine authority of Scripture extends over the opinions and traditions of men, over the decrees of councils, over antiquity, and over private judgments. Even into the details of theological controversy, we should be resorting to the Scriptures as having divine authority.

A third aspect of Scripture is its clarity. Again we can turn to the Westminster Confession, in chapter 1, paragraph 7, it says, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." And so we see that Scripture is clear. It's perspicuous, in reference to everything that is necessary for us to know for our salvation. The main message of the Bible, the gospel, can be readily seen and understood, even by a child. Most people can understand much of the Bible. The Scripture is clear in itself, as light, the light of God's Word. Where it is unclear, the fault is with us, rather than with God. Our sinful minds can be darkened. And for the unregenerate, the Scripture is always unclear, and always unprofitable. For the believer, Scripture may be more or less clear, requiring careful interpretation at times by employing the principles that we'll be learning in this course.

So the Scriptures are not equally clear in every part, or in relation to every doctrine. There are also what the Bible calls "mysteries," and what the Bible calls "deep things," as well as a difference between "milk" and "meat." Even Peter found some of Paul's writings difficult to understand, as you see in 2 Peter 3, verses 15 and 16. For that reason, God's ordained pastors and teachers to assist the Lord's people in understanding the Scriptures, as we see in Ephesians 4, and verse 11 and following. And while we ought to profit from the Lord's provision of faithful pastors, we must still test that teaching with the Scriptures themselves. If we compromise the clarity of Scripture, or deny the sufficiency of Scripture, then we endanger or negate the authority of Scripture. And all of that is going to lead to misinterpreting Scripture.

Another area that we learn about in reference to God's Word is "the sufficiency of Scripture." The Bible alone, and all of the Bible, is what God has given to us as our standard. Westminster Confession, chapter 1, paragraph 6 says, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things nec-

essary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." In other words, the Bible is sufficient in itself.

The sufficiency of Scripture teaches that all we need for faith and practice is found in the Bible. That's what makes us wise for salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's sufficient to make us complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work. It's sufficient for anything else that we need to direct us in knowing or serving God in life, and if we're looking outside of the Scripture, that will threaten the sufficiency of Scripture. This principle explains why the manner of the true worship of God has always stood at the heart of what it means to be a Biblical Christian.

Next, we need to recognize that the Scriptures are Christ-centered. The primary focus of the Bible is on the person and work of Jesus Christ. The centrality of Christ in the whole of Scriptures can never be lost—2 Corinthians 1, verse 20, "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen." The whole Bible points to Christ, and has its explanation and fulfillment in him. And Jesus himself said, 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." When Jesus met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we read in Luke 24, verse 27, and verse 44, "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." He goes on later, "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." If you're interested in exploring this whole matter of what it means to interpret the Scriptures accurately, you need to recognize that Christ is at the center of the Scriptures.

Now, the material that we've been touching on here with reference to the doctrine of Holy Scripture is covered in far greater depth in Module 1 of the Systematic Theology series on the John Knox Institute website, johnknoxinstitute.org. So if you're interested in exploring further some of the points that we've touched on in this lecture, I would encourage you to consider that material.

But that brings us to our second point—the implications of all of this for interpreting Scripture. Now that we have heard a little about the nature of the Bible, how does that influence the way in which we will interpret it? So let's consider a few implications that flow from these truths. We'll consider briefly why we must build our approach to Biblical interpretation upon this solid and indispensable foundation.

First of all, since the Bible is God's inspired Word, it is perfect, and without the possibility of a single error. This truth eliminates several possibilities when interpreting a text of Scripture. God cannot lie. He cannot ever contradict himself. Therefore, when we have two passages that seem to contradict each other, we know that that is impossible. The problem lies with us. And so we must dig deeper in our study to discover the right interpretation that shows how the two passages are actually consistent with each other. So for example, Paul says, in Galatians and Romans, that the believer is justified by faith alone, and not by works. But then James 2 says that we are justified by works and not by faith alone. Well, on the surface, this is an apparent contradiction, but we know that it cannot be a true contradiction. Now you'll learn more details about this specific question regarding Paul and James in Systematic Theology. But in brief, the principles of interpretation that we'll be learning in this course enable us to resolve the problem.

So for now, the answer is this: Paul is addressing legalism, in those that desire to be declared righteous by their own obedience to the law, which undermines the gospel. James is addressing a different matter. He's addressing licentiousness, in those that say they believe but have no fruit of

saving faith, which also undermines the gospel. Paul confronts dead works; James confronts dead faith. Paul is speaking to the declarative aspect of the believer's justification. James speaks to the demonstrative aspect of justification. The simple point to note right now is that inspiration, inerrancy, and divine authority undergird how we will interpret the Scripture. So among other things, it rules out the possibility of any contradictions. We know for certain that there will be consistency in the accurate interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, some will contend that the Bible is written for simple souls, and all of Scripture can be equally understood by everyone. Now we've already seen that's not true. We saw that there are deep mysteries in the Bible. Even Peter found some of Paul's writings difficult to understand. Well, how does this influence our interpretation? Well, as we will explore in more detail in a future lecture, this teaches us to interpret unclear passages, or less clear passages, in light of clear passages, comparing Scripture with Scripture, one text with another. So, for example, some of the prophetic passages may be difficult for us to understand, but we can use the more clear teaching elsewhere in the Bible to cast light on what is difficult for us to understand. Likewise, we may be reading a narrative portion of the Old Testament and be inclined to draw certain doctrines or moral lessons from it, but we need to test those conclusions by comparing them to what we read in the law, or epistles, or other portions which lay out simple instruction, to insure that our ideas that we're drawing from the narrative portions, actually conform to what the Scripture says elsewhere. This idea of understanding the clarity of Scripture influences the principles of interpretation that we're going to be learning, and how to employ them.

Thirdly, since the Bible is fully sufficient, nothing outside the Bible can undermine what is in the Bible. This is true in all parts of Scripture, including things that pertain to science and history. Man's unaided reason, or scientific investigations, or archeological and historical studies will never uncover faults in Scripture. In fact, ultimately, those pursuits can only confirm Scripture. At one point in history, unbelieving scholars attacked the Bible because they said there was absolutely no evidence of the Hittites in the historical record. This left the true believer unfazed, as the problem was clearly an inadequacy with the scholars, not the Bible. And sure enough, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they uncovered massive evidence that confirmed exactly what God taught in the Bible. The same is true with regards to science. We can rule out with perfect confidence the fable of evolution, which teaches that man descends from monkeys and evolved over millions of years. We should not twist the Scriptures to conform to unbelieving scientists. God tells us that he created Adam and Eve directly himself, and that the universe came into existence in the space of six normal days. Now, after over a century of protesting to the contrary, scientists are watching the theory of evolution crumble under the weight of scientific evidence which disproves it. Again, the simple point is that these foundational truths influence our approach to Scripture and undergird our interpretation of Scripture.

Fourthly, we saw that the Scriptures are Christ-centered, so in our interpretation of Scripture, we are taught to expect that the revelation of Christ is to be found everywhere throughout the Bible. And so, when we turn to Abraham, and him offering his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, it shouldn't surprise us to discover that this shows us something of Christ. Or in the life of Joseph, we see things about the Lord Jesus Christ being revealed. And how much more during Moses' day that all of the Old Testament ceremonial worship—the sacrifices, and altar, and sprinkling of blood, and the tabernacle and temple—all these things are filled with imagery of Jesus Christ. This is why the whole book of Acts speaks of preaching Christ, and it is why Paul insists that we must preach Christ and him crucified. God reveals himself in the person of Christ, from Genesis to Revelation.

So as we interpret Scripture, we are to keep our eye on how and where various passages of Scripture show us the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Well, in this lecture, we have laid a solid foundation in understanding the nature of the Bible, which will inform and guide us in how we interpret the Bible. In the remainder of this module, we'll begin to explore the specific principles, one by one, that God provides for interpreting Scripture, and consider how we can apply them. So in the next two lectures—the third and fourth lectures—we will consider the first two most fundamental principles of all of Biblical interpretation.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 3

Sense

Human language requires clarity and coherence to be intelligible. Making random sounds, or using a string of words disconnected from their recognized meaning leads to confusion. We express our thoughts and intentions by employing well-defined words, and putting them together into an order that makes sense to others. When you do that well, people will understand you. They may say to you, “I see your point.”

What is true of language in general is also true regarding the inspired words of Holy Scripture. As we saw in the previous lecture, the Bible is God’s revelation to man. It makes known to us infallible truth from the mind of God. It is communication from God. He intends for us, by his grace, to comprehend what he has revealed. The principles for interpreting Scripture assist us in understanding the meaning of God’s Word. And one of the things we need to understand early on in our study is that *there is only one meaning in any given passage of Scripture*.

We read in 2 Peter, chapter 1, verses 20 and 21, “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” When Peter writes that “no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation,” he is not prohibiting private, or individual men, from interpreting Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches us that we must all do that. It is warning that men must not interpret Scripture according to their own minds, or out of their own heads, making their private views to be the meaning of the Scripture. We must seek the Lord’s help, who shows us the true Sense of the Bible, from the Bible itself, thereby leading us to the understanding of God’s mind and meaning in the passage. Since God himself is the author of the Word, as we see in the very next verse, in verse 21, he is the best interpreter of its meaning. So we’re asking, What does God say? and, What does God mean by what he says?

In this third lecture, we will consider our first Biblical principle for interpreting Scripture. And you will notice how this principle builds on the foundational doctrines we addressed in the previous lecture. The first principle is that *there is only one true Sense or meaning to any Biblical passage*. So there are not multiple meanings. Departing from this principle will lead to a deviation from true doctrine, ending in erroneous misinterpretation. This is clearly stated in *Westminster*

Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 9, where we read, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full Sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” Actually, we learn two principles in this paragraph of the *Westminster Confession*. First, that the true Sense of any Scripture is not many, but one, which we will explore in this lecture. Second, that we must also always compare Scripture with Scripture in our interpretation. And that we’ll consider in the next or fourth lecture.

And so, we’ll begin in this lecture by stating and explaining briefly our first principle. The principle is that *there is only one true Sense or meaning of any Scripture*. When God speaks, we are to accept the single, definite meaning he intends to reveal to us. There is no place for intruding our own multiple meanings into the text, or propagating arbitrary interpretations of a passage. We are to “receive with meekness the engrafted word,” as James 1, verse 21 says.

You can see this illustrated in Nehemiah 8. Ezra and the Levites built a pulpit of wood and read from the law of God before the gathered congregation. The purpose was to enable the people to understand the meaning of what God had written. Notice the language of Nehemiah 8, verse 8, “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the Sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” They gave the Sense, the single Sense or meaning, and caused the people to understand.

You see the same thing illustrated in the Lord’s own ministry. In Luke, chapter 4, verses 17 to 22, Jesus went into the synagogue, and they handed him the book of Isaiah, which he opened and read. Then we read in verses 20 to 22, “And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.” Jesus opened the Bible, read it, and explained the Sense or meaning of what he had read from the Scriptures.

No Scripture can have two or more meanings that are truly different from each other, or subordinate to one another. Well, why is that the case? And what is the Biblical reason for it? Well, we’ll seek to answer those questions briefly.

First of all, the veracity of God necessitates this principle. God is absolute truth. You’ll remember the words of our Lord, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” It is impossible for the Lord to send a mixed signal or a confused message. He cannot give revelation that misleads his people or promotes falsehood. This would be contrary to his law, which is a revelation of his character. In Exodus 20, verse 16, the 9th Commandment teaches us, “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” And as we read in Titus 1:2, God himself cannot lie.

Secondly, as we saw in the last lecture, the unity of God’s truth and the clarity of Scripture also require a single Sense of any passage. All divine revelation must be rational in order to be understood. And God has communicated to us as moral, rational creatures who bear his image. We’re created to think God’s thoughts after him, as we see in Isaiah 55, and 2 Corinthians 10, and elsewhere.

Thirdly, the nature of human language necessitates a single Sense. Comprehension would be impossible if a given word had multiple meanings in the same exact context. It would be absurd if the phrase, “He went up the hill” meant what it says, as well as meant, “He rolled down a tree,” or “The flower is red,” or “Please take out the trash,” all in the same context. No, Jesus said, in Matthew 5, verse 37, “Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

But secondly, we must clarify some misunderstandings that sometimes arise from this principle. We'll seek to remove some common misconceptions. As we've seen, the Sense of Scripture is not manifold, but one. Many passages of Scripture, however, have a complex meaning. Nevertheless, this only makes up that one and full Sense intended by the Holy Ghost. So we'll explore these points in greater detail later in the course, but for now we need to show the connection to this principle of the single Sense of any Scripture.

First of all, some Old Testament prophecies have several steps of fulfillment. In other words, prophecy can be fulfilled partially in successive events. So for example, there are Old Testament prophecies that unfold in the Jewish nation, and in the Christian church, and in the heavenly state. For example, the Lord promises and prophesies of Abraham's seed. And in the Old Testament, that seems rather clear. It's very obvious that that prophecy is being unfolded in what follows within Abraham's descendents. But then we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and you can go, for example, to Galatians 3, and we read, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (verse 7). It goes on, "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (verse 14). And at the end of the chapter, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (verse 29). And so we see the prophecy regarding Abraham's seed is blossoming. And in the New Testament, we recognize that it comes to include Gentile believers, not just those that we saw as Abraham's immediate descendents in the Old Testament. And then, of course, we can go from the days of the New Testament, to heaven itself. You'll note the language of Revelation 21, which is describing heaven, and how it incorporates language that was first given to Abraham, showing the fulfillment of that promise and prophecy in the ultimate state of glory, in heaven itself. So the point is here that there is one Sense to any passage, one meaning of any passage, but that doesn't rule out the fact that the full meaning of that passage may include, in the case of prophecies, multiple instances of the development of the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Secondly, some passages contain typology, where one thing is a type, or a symbol, or a picture of another thing. Now this does not involve a double Sense or a double meaning. Instead, we're to identify what is being described, and how God is using that to typify something greater. Distinguishing between the two allows you to see the one meaning being communicated. So to mention just a few examples, in the Old Testament, we have the Pascal lamb, we have the brazen serpent that was lifted up, we have the rock in the wilderness. All of these typified, or pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, as the New Testament makes perfectly clear. First Corinthians 5, verse 7, Jesus is described as the paschal lamb. In John 12, we're told he is what was pictured in the brazen serpent that was lifted up. In 1 Corinthians 10, we're told that Christ was that rock in the wilderness. And so again, you see that the single Sense of Scripture is not compromised by recognizing types or pictures that the Lord uses to point forward from one thing to a greater thing.

Thirdly, we must recognize that the knowledge of the human authors does not always exhaust the Sense or meaning of the passage. So we read in 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 10 to 12, "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. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into." So the prophets foretold of the grace to be revealed under the gospel, which often came through dark shadows and

obscurity. And so the prophets were left to search diligently into the things that would be made clear in the light of New Testament fulfillment. It's interesting, you'll notice that even the angels desired to investigate these mysteries, to peer into them. And so the full meaning of the passage includes the intention of the Holy Spirit himself.

Fourthly, the single Sense of Scripture is completely compatible with what we call "good and necessary consequences" that flow from what a passage says. Notice what *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, paragraph 6 says regarding this. We read, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." So good and necessary consequences are as equally binding as those statements expressly taught in Scripture. Now, why? Why would that be the case? Because legitimate consequences only bring out the full meaning of the words of a Bible passage. The conclusions that we deduce from Scripture, however, must be both good and necessary. They're good when they are of divine origin, inescapably contained in the meaning that is conveyed by the words of the text. They're necessary when they are inevitable, plainly seen, beyond dispute, without having to be proved by refined or remote arguments.

But perhaps it would be clearer to illustrate this from the Bible itself. In Matthew 22, verses 31 and 32, Jesus says, "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." So Jesus quotes a passage of Scripture, and then proves the doctrine of the resurrection of the body to the Sadducees, by showing the good and necessary consequence that must be deduced from that passage. We see Paul doing the same in Acts 17. Other examples could be given. And so good and necessary consequence is also in keeping with the one true Sense or meaning of any passage.

Fifthly, we need to make one more important distinction. Although there is only one proper Sense or meaning in any Scripture, there can be many applications drawn from a text. So applications refers to the impact of a passage on our life—how it should change our thinking, and speaking, and behavior, and what we're to do in response to the truths revealed to us. We understand the single Sense of a passage by asking the question, "What does this text mean?" Only after we understand the meaning of the text can we then ask the question, "What are the practical implications for my life?" And multiple applications can arise from the single meaning of a passage. So we sing in Psalm 139, verse 2, "Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off." Well, it's fairly simple to understand the meaning or Sense of this verse. We're taught that the living and true God knows and sees all things, both our external actions, and our internal thoughts.

But we can derive a wide array of applications from this, both for the believer's comfort, and for the believer's holiness. So if the Lord sees our uprising, and our sitting down, and knows our thoughts afar off, this is a great comfort to us. So he can see all of the fears that we have, all of the struggles that we're facing, the temptations, the trials that we are shouldering, and so on. He sees it all. He knows it all. He can read our thoughts and the anxieties that swell up within us, and so on. It's a great comfort to know that the Lord sees and knows all—that he's in fact with us.

We could say more on that point. It also speaks to the applications to the believer's holiness. Because if the Lord sees our rising up and lying down, if he knows our thoughts afar off, then we best be careful about where we go, what we do, and what we think. This teaches us the fear of the Lord, that we need holy thoughts. That though our friends and family and others can't see what

we're thinking, the Lord can see it, and therefore, we're to watch our thoughts, and we're to walk in holiness before the Lord. This leads us to the application of repenting of our unbelief. How often we think, Oh, the Lord is far away, and the Lord doesn't know or see, and the Lord doesn't care, and so on. This is unbelief, and this passage teaches us to repent of that, to repent of our pride. It also teaches us to grow in faith, confidence in the Lord, drawing upon his promises, thinking upon who he is, crying out to him, and it teaches us humility. We're to walk low before him. Well, we could easily list dozens of applications, really, from this one text. And so the Sense or meaning of a passage is singular, it's one, and yet we can derive multiple, many, many, many applications from that passage.

Well, thirdly, there are dangers to guard against in interpreting Scripture. Now, the Scriptures provide light. We sing in Psalm 119, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (verse 105). And elsewhere in that Psalm, "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (verse 130). But there are many who twist Scripture in order to spread darkness. This principle regarding the single Sense of any Scripture is a common point of divergence between heretical cults and orthodox Christianity. Though we cannot cover all the groups who reject this principle, we'll consider a few examples to illustrate our point.

First of all, there was a man named Emanuel Swedenborg. He was a heretic, and the founder of a cult called The New Church. He claimed that God came to him and made him a messenger of new revelation, which rejected the doctrines of the Trinity, the atonement of Christ, and many other cardinal doctrines. But underneath all of this was his claim that the church had destroyed the original meaning of the Scriptures. Instead, he advocated a fourfold Sense of Scripture. So rather than the single Sense we've learned in this lecture, he said, "Well, there's fourfold Sense to every passage." And he used this false principle of interpretation to promote his grievous errors. So that's one example.

A second example is Mary Baker Eddy, who began the Christian Scientist cult. She built an entirely new system of doctrine which displaced the Scriptures altogether, and she pursued this by rejecting the Biblical principles for interpreting Scripture. Instead, she turned the Bible into one giant allegory, so that she could make it mean whatever she desired.

Thirdly, we should take note of Karl Barth, the German theologian, who championed what became known as neo-orthodoxy. He taught that the Word of God was contained in the Bible, but not identical with the Bible. So Scripture could contain various errors in history, and science, and so on. He taught that the Bible only becomes the living Word of God when a person has an encounter with the divine Logos, through the medium of the Scriptures. Well, this removes the objective study of the Scriptures altogether and replaces it with our subjective experience. This too undermines what we've been hearing in this lecture.

Well then, fourthly, there's another error that touches closer to home in many Bible-believing evangelical churches. You may hear a person say, "This is what this passage means to me." Well, that's foolish, because that's very different from saying, "This is what this passage means." You see, it's meaning is not person-relative. The meaning is not derived from or dependent on anything in us. This error ignores the Sense of a passage, and reads into it a different meaning that the person applies to their own individual circumstances. This is especially seen in some believer's quest for God's guidance. Now, we can appreciate this. We want to know the will of God, we want to walk with the Lord, we want to know how he would have us to live, and so on. But the problem is, they may use the language of a passage in a way that is not the intended meaning of the passage, and which is torn from its context.

Well, to use an obviously ridiculous example, a person can read Philippians 4:13, which says, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” and then conclude that God is telling them that they can memorize an encyclopedia in one sitting. That’s not what the passage means. It’s not at all what’s conveyed or intended in those words. And as we will learn later in this module, we have to consider the context in which a verse comes, amongst other things. But in this lecture, we’re concerned about the one Sense or meaning of any given passage. So we can’t tear the language of Scripture out of its context and then give it a meaning that God has not placed in it.

Well, you can see how this first principle, which is that there is only one true Sense to any Scripture, protects the believer from many errors in interpreting the Bible. Well, in this lecture, we’ve explored our first principle of Scripture interpretation, *there is only one true meaning of any Scripture*. In the next lecture, we’ll consider another, closely-related, principle of interpretation, namely, that we must always *Compare Scripture with Scripture*.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 4

Comparing

In the course of a conversation, your friend may say that they are not happy about their job, but what does that mean? Are they unhappy about every aspect of their job? Or are they frustrated with their colleagues, or boss, or pay, or schedule, or something else. You will understand what they mean by everything else you have heard them say, not only in that conversation, but in previous conversations, and against the backdrop of everything else you know about your friend. You will compare their comment about their being unhappy about their job to everything else you have heard and know, in order not to misinterpret what they mean. In doing so, for example, you may understand that they actually like their job—and their boss, and their colleagues, and their pay—but they’re concerned about the upheaval of the renovations in their workspace. The point is that we can understand the meaning of what a person says in part, by comparing that to other things they have said.

Well, this illustrates the principle we’ll be considering in this lecture, the importance of *Comparing one Scripture to the rest of Scripture*. We read in Acts 15, verses 13 to 17, “And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.”

Well, we understand in Acts 15 that a controversy arose in the church as a consequence of the gospel going to the Gentiles. Questions began to emerge about the relationship of the Jews and Gentiles, and regarding what obligations the believing Gentiles may or may not have toward Old Testament Jewish regulations. So the apostles, pastors and elders gathered together the council that met in Jerusalem, to deliberate and decide on what must be done. They wanted to determine God’s will as defined in God’s Word. In the course of the discussion that ensued, you’ll notice how various Biblical arguments are presented. But I would draw your attention specifically to the words of the Apostle James, in verse 15, “And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written.”

Notice that he is not only citing Biblical texts, but he is also Comparing one Scripture with other Scriptures in order to understand the meaning, and to establish his point of clarity. He says that the meaning of one passage agrees with the words found in other passages of the prophets. Well, this illustrates for us the principle of Scriptural interpretation that we will be considering in this lecture.

In the last lecture, and in this lecture, we're really considering twin principles of interpretation that are very closely related to each other. In the previous lecture, we learned that there is *only one sense or meaning of any Scripture*, and we saw why that is important to understand. In this fourth lecture, we will consider another Biblical principle, the importance of *Comparing Scripture with Scripture* in our interpretation. You'll notice how this principle builds on and flows from the foundational doctrines that we addressed in the second lecture.

And so we'll begin first of all with the principle. The principle we are considering in this lecture is that *we must always compare Scripture with Scripture* in our interpretation of any Biblical passage. Now this is clearly stated again in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, paragraph 9, where it says, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." It says, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." In other words, sacred Scripture is its own interpreter. The meaning of any one passage of Scripture must be understood in light of what we read elsewhere in the Bible as a whole. So the meaning of one passage must always agree with what the Bible says elsewhere. Now this is not the only principle that we will learn, but it does govern all the other rules for interpreting Scripture. Our standard for rightly understanding the Bible is not tradition or new revelation, but Scripture itself. *Comparing Scripture with Scripture* clarifies and strengthens the accuracy of our interpretation.

As I noted, this principle flows from the Biblical truths we learned in the second lecture. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, and it is therefore consistent and coherent. God's revelation in his Word, unfolded over the history of redemption piece, by piece, by piece. And this gives a full-orbed picture, in which every part is mutually related and dependent upon the other parts. They provide one beautiful, harmoniously-connected system of truth.

Theologians also refer to this principle as *the analogy of faith*. So the word "faith" here is referring to the body of doctrine, or the entire system of divine truth, which the Scriptures as a whole teach us—in other words, the Christian faith. An interpretation of any passage must be compared with what we read in the other parts of Scripture. The Bible is one united book, without any conflict between its various parts. So if any interpretation truly contradicts the clear teaching of any other portions of the Bible, then we know it must be ruled out from the beginning. Our understanding of the meaning must agree with the analogy of faith. As we will see in this lecture, some things that are briefly or more obscurely handled in one place will be more fully and clearly explained in other places. Therefore, if we want to learn the true sense of Scripture, we must compare one passage with another. As Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 13, "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." Simply applied, when there are two possible ways of understanding a passage, with one that is in accord with the rest of Scripture, and with the other in conflict with the analogy of faith, then we must interpret the text in accord with Scripture.

Well, now that we have a grasp of the general principle, we need to open this up in greater detail, and see how to implement it, which brings us to our second point—implementing the principle. As we are *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*, we're going to be faced with an important question:

What method do we use for deciding which passages explain or shed light on other passages? When comparing two passages, which text gets the priority for explaining the other one, rather than the reverse. The answer can be summarized in a single phrase: Always interpret the obscure in light of the clear. In other words, always interpret difficult and more obscure passages by comparing them to simpler and more plain passages. This overarching idea ties together the guidelines that we are about to explore. Truths found in a difficult passage will be set forth more plainly elsewhere in the Bible. If this principle is followed, it will solve many of the misinterpretations within the modern church. So let's consider some examples of how this works, *Interpreting Obscure Passages in Light of the Clear*.

First of all, we should interpret *narratives* in light of *didactic* passages. Let me explain what that means. *Narratives* refers to the historical books of the Bible that recount the unfolding story of Biblical history. So it would include, for example, books, or portions of books in the Old Testament, such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, or, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles, and so on. All of these contain narrative portions of Scripture. And we find the same in the New Testament, for example, in the four Gospels, and in the book of Acts. These are largely narrative portions of Scripture. They're telling us the story that unfolds in God's redemptive history. So that's what we mean by the *narrative* passages. But we're to interpret the *narratives* in light of the *didactic*. The word *didactic* derives from a Greek word meaning "teaching, instruction, doctrine." So the purpose of didactic books or passages is to teach and explain. So this would include, for example, books or portions of books in the Old Testament, such as the law, and the teaching of the prophets. These are largely given in terms of clear, and systematic instruction. Or, for example, in the New Testament, we have the epistles. The epistles are largely didactic portions of Scripture. And so the didactic portions help shed light on the narrative portions. Now, this does not mean we should pit these two categories against one another. We're simply recognizing that most of the time, the doctrinal portions of Scripture help clarify how we are to understand the narratives. But it's also true, the historical passages can also illustrate and exemplify truths that are clearly taught in the doctrinal sections. So the four Gospels, they tell us what Christ did, and then the epistles tells us the significance, the theological implications of what Christ did, by expounding on it with doctrine, and exhortation, and application. The Old Testament narratives reveal what God did in redemptive history, but then we take God's Word that came through the prophets, and they were speaking at the same time that these narrative stories were unfolding. Their prophetic word tells us why God was doing what he did, and what we're to believe as a result, and the impact that it has upon our life. Well, this may be a slight oversimplification that illustrates the emphasis on didactic passages explaining narrative passages.

So, what are the implications? Well, we need to exercise caution and wisdom in drawing inferences from the records of what happened in redemptive history, both in terms of what people did, and what God did. Now, it could be appropriate to derive or draw out implications from the narrative passages of Scripture. It's especially warranted when it is in harmony with the rest of Scripture. But it can also lead to false conclusions. In the opening of the Bible, we read of God asking Adam a question, in Genesis 3, verse 11, "And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?" Well, if someone interpreted this passage to mean that God does not know some things, or that he is not in control of all things, they would be misinterpreting this passage and reaching false conclusions. Why?—because that contradicts what we read in dozens of other didactic passages about God being everywhere at all times, God knowing all things, and God sovereignly controlling all things. This

is an example of building a doctrine on a narrative passage without comparing our interpretation to the clearer didactic passages. And yet, it is a common mistake.

Another example would be basing Christian behavior solely on what Christ did during his earthly ministry. People ask the question, “What would Jesus do in my circumstances?” Well, this can be appropriate in some instances. In other cases, Christ’s actions fulfilled his unique commission from the Father as the God-man, which believers cannot and should not seek to emulate. Believers obviously cannot die as the substitute in the place of God’s people—only Jesus Christ can. But there are other examples as well. Jesus, as Lord of his church, cleansed the temple. But that does not warrant us to do the exact same thing in the exact same way. We could give other examples.

A second category that helps us learn how to implement this principle, is to *interpret the implicit in light of the explicit*. Well, how do we distinguish these two things. Explicit statements refer to what is clearly said. The implicit refers to what is left unsaid, but possibly implied. Explicit statements in Scripture should always inform and control what we might draw implicitly from a passage. Now, interpretations drawn implicitly from texts may be valid, as we saw in our last lecture regarding good and necessary consequences. But they do not stand alone, and do not contradict explicit passages. For example, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” The text explicitly states that believers will have eternal life. It does not say, who will and will not believe, or what is needed to believe. Can we draw implications from John 3:16 that conclude all men have a natural ability to believe? or that Christ died for all men indiscriminately?—no, we cannot. Later in the same book, the Lord explains the limits of man’s ability. We read in John 6, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (verse 44). And later on in that chapter, “Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father” (verse 65). And then you turn to John 10, and Christ teaches that he laid down his life for his own sheep, those whom the Father had given him to redeem. Explicit statements are given the priority in our interpretation.

Consider another example—we read in John 20, verse 19, “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.” Now, some have drawn implicit conclusions from this passage about the nature of Christ’s resurrected body, that his body was not physical but rather, immaterial, and that it could pass through shut doors, like a ghost or something. But the text does not say that. It says that Jesus came and stood in the midst of them. Now, he may have done a miracle, and had passed through the shut door. But he also may have knocked on the door, and they opened it for him. But in either case, we cannot draw implicitly from this passage that the resurrected body of Christ was not physical. Why?—because, again, dozens of other passages teach explicitly the physical resurrection of Christ’s body. Indeed, a denial of this would undermine the gospel and lead to heretical departures from Biblical orthodoxy.

One more example—Mark 12, verse 25 says, “For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven.” Jesus says explicitly that there will be no marriage in heaven. But we have no warrant to draw from this, as some have wrongly done, the implicit conclusion that there will be no gender distinction between men and women in heaven. Our resurrected bodies will retain the differences between men and women, though the temporary institution of marriage in this world will be set aside, and replaced by the far greater marriage of Christ to his bride.

A third category for learning how to implement this principle teaches us that we are to interpret earlier texts in light of later texts. As we noted earlier in this module, the revelation of God unfolded progressively throughout the history of redemption in the Bible. We move from Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets, and to the New Testament, the Gospels, and epistles, and so on. In each successive period, the Lord gave more and more light, and a fuller picture of who he is, and what he did for the salvation of his people. The John Knox Institute (johnknoxinstitute.org) has an entire module of thirty lectures that explain this from Genesis to Revelation. In Genesis 3:15, we have the first gospel promise after the fall—the seedling, if you will, of God’s revelation of the covenant of grace. This text is like a little bud. There is much that is unclear about it. But as time progressed, God caused that bud to open up into full bloom, so that we could see more of what it meant, as we read through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. Because later parts of the Bible give greater light to what we read in earlier portions, and latter sections can help us interpret the earlier sections. Now this emphasizes an important point—*You’ll never understand the New Testament well without the Old Testament, and, You’ll never understand the Old Testament well without the New Testament.* The book of Revelation, for example, requires a deep familiarity with the language, symbols, history, themes, doctrines of the Old Testament. I mean, you think the other way—the Book of Psalms shows us more of the depths of Christ’s experience on the cross than even the Gospels do. And so, you cannot understand either the Old or New Testament without the other. The book of Hebrews, for example, opens up and explains the gospel riches that are found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. If we read that earlier portion, of the book of Leviticus, in light of that latter portion, found in the book of Hebrews, you will get far more out of all that God is saying in the course of the book of Leviticus. In order to see Christ and the gospel in the Old Testament, and to properly interpret the Old Testament, you’ll need to read it in light of its New Testament fulfillment. John 12, verse 41 tells us that Isaiah was beholding Christ, in his famous vision in Isaiah 6. Or in John 3, verse 14, we learn that the brazen serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness was a picture of Christ who would be lifted upon the cross to save his people. And we can multiply examples of this. So we interpret earlier portions in light of later portions.

A fourth category is that *we should interpret figurative texts in light of literal texts.* The Bible uses figurative language at times—pictures, symbols, types, apocalyptic language, poetic descriptions, and so on. This figurative language must always be interpreted in light of more literal passages of Scripture. The Bible speaks of God having eyes, ears, hands, arms, and other human attributes. It also speaks of movement, of his coming and going. But we should not conclude, therefore, that God has a physical body like men. Why?—because countless other, more literal passages clearly teach us that God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being. The figurative language of human descriptions of God accommodates our creatureliness, and communicates to us truths in a way that we can better comprehend them. When it speaks of God’s eyes being in every place, or the strength of his right arm, it is teaching us that God sees all things, and that God is Almighty, omnipotent, limitless in power. And he’s telling us these things with pictures we can immediately understand. Likewise, our interpretation of the highly symbolic visions of John’s apocalypse in the book of Revelation, for example, can never contradict the clear teachings of Paul’s epistles, which are less symbolic, and hence clearer. But this large subject, the subject of figurative language, actually warrants further consideration, and so we’ll take up this whole topic of how to interpret figurative language later on in this module.

Thirdly, before we conclude, let me leave you with a few practical helps for equipping you to

use this principle of *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*. First of all, you must be engaged in a systematic reading of the Bible. We need a more comprehensive knowledge of what the whole Bible teaches. Paul told the Ephesians elders, in Acts 20, verse 27, “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” They needed the whole of Scripture. The Bereans, we’re told, searched the Scriptures daily. It was the whole Bible. It may be a temptation for you just to read your favorite parts of the Bible while neglecting other parts, but this will cause spiritual malnutrition for your soul, just like eating only select foods would for your body. For example, as we’ve noted already, you’ll never understand the New Testament well without a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. The New Testament is building upon the content themes, language, pictures, doctrines, history of the Old Testament, which you’ll never recognize without a systematic study of the whole Bible.

Secondly, if you can obtain a trustworthy book that provides a detailed survey of the Bible, explaining the message and themes of each book of the Bible, that may be a good start for acquainting you with some things you otherwise may not know.

Thirdly, when your reading a difficult passage, always consult other related passages. You’ll need to think about where else in the Bible speaks to these particular points. And look for other parallel texts that trace out these same themes. If you have a Bible with cross-references in the margins, that may be a help for starts. But on this point, you need to make sure that you find true parallels. Every verse or phrase has its own particular context, as we’ll learn the next lecture. The same word or phrase in two or more contexts does not guarantee that they have the same usage or meaning. For example, in Matthew 13:3, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven. But then, three chapters later, in Matthew 16, he speaks again of leaven, and he says that the doctrine of the Pharisees is like leaven. Well, the word “leaven” is used in both places. We would not conclude that because the kingdom of heaven is like leaven—and the kingdom of heaven is a good thing—and the doctrine of the Pharisees is like leaven, that therefore the doctrine of the Pharisees is also a good thing—no, that’s the opposite of what Jesus is saying. The point being made with the word “leaven” is the power that something has to permeate the whole. The kingdom of heaven permeates the whole earth, the doctrine of the Pharisees permeates everything that they believe. So be careful that you have true parallels.

Fourthly, and lastly, the study of systematic theology will greatly aid your ability to compare Scripture with Scripture, because the very method employed in systematic theology involves viewing everything the Bible teaches about a given doctrine, and organizing those truths in a logical and coherent manner.

Well, in these last two lectures, we’ve consider two fundamental principles of interpretation. In the last lecture, we learned that there is *only one Sense or meaning to any Scripture*. In this present lecture, we have explored the principle of *Comparing Scripture to Scripture* as the infallible rule of interpretation. In the next lecture, we’ll consider another principle of interpretation—the important place and use of *Context* in our reading and understanding of the Bible.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 5 **Context**

Has someone ever shown you a picture or painting of an obscure object which you could not identify? Perhaps it was a small detail of something that was seen up close, so close in fact that you could not figure out exactly what it was. Yes, you could see the shape, and texture, and color, and it even, perhaps, looked vaguely familiar, but you still could not identify the object. Then someone shows you another picture of the same thing, only zoomed out, revealing the broader context for the object, and you can immediately recognize it, and say, “Ah, of course! I know what that is.” Perhaps it was a single blade of grass in a large yard, or something similar. Seeing it in context enabled you to recognize it.

Well, this illustrates the principle of interpretation that we will be considering in this lecture—the importance of *reading verses of Scripture in their Context* in order to rightly understand them. Peter writes about Paul’s epistles, in 2 Peter 3, verse 16, and says, “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” Peter identifies a problem. He says that some of Paul’s writings, like some other parts of Scripture, are difficult to understand. But that is not the problem. We learned in our first and second lectures that there are diverse parts to the Bible, and some passages are more easily and clearly understood than other parts. Peter tells us the problem is with people, with those who interpret Scripture. He describes those who are unlearned, that is, ignorant and untaught, and who are spiritual unstable. When the Bible was placed in their hands, they twisted it, they distorted it, that is, rather than receiving and understanding the Scriptures properly, they mangled the true meaning of Scripture. One way in which men can do this is by ripping what the Scripture says out of its Context, and trying to make the Scriptures mean something other than God intended. And the results are spiritually catastrophic. Peter says it resulted in their own destruction.

Well this introduces for us the principle of Scriptural interpretation that we’ll be considering in this lecture. In the last lecture, we explored the principle of *comparing Scripture with Scripture* in our interpretation. In this fifth lecture, we’ll consider another Biblical principle, the importance of *interpreting every Scripture passage in light of its Context*. So the previous lecture taught us

to understand the meaning of a passage by comparing it more broadly to what we read elsewhere in the Bible. In this lesson, we will learn that we also must narrow our scope, and focus on the Context in which the passage is placed, in order to understand its meaning.

And so we'll begin again, first of all, with the principle. The principle we are considering in this lecture teaches us that *we must interpret every passage in light of its Context*, in order to understand it correctly. So let's first define our terms.

The word "context" literally means "a weaving together." You can think of a beautiful tapestry in which all of the threads are woven neatly together. The context of a Bible passage is the fibrous material which binds every individual text to the surrounding passage. Every part of a Scripture is part of a whole. In English, we have a quaint phrase that says, "Every text without a context is a pretext." A pretext refers to using a passage for our own hidden purposes—making it mean what we want, rather than submitting to the true meaning of the text. One of the simplest errors in reading the Bible is the failure to consider the immediate context of the verse or passage under consideration. In attempting to prove a point or establish a doctrine, some people will string together a number of verses taken out of their context that sound as if they substantiate what they're teaching. However, whenever we remove a verse from its context, we will distort its true meaning. This can take various forms. Well-meaning people will sometimes put select verses on a card, or others compile a whole book with random promises. And this can be very edifying, when done properly. But words of Scripture can also be lifted out of their context and applied in ways that contradict their original meaning. Now even worse, the cults are especially guilty of committing this error, in order to promote their false doctrines. Many examples could be cited, but the Mormons, for example, appeal to 1 Corinthians 15, verse 29, in order to prove—so called—their false doctrine of encouraging individuals to be baptized for their dead ancestors. That's not at all what that passage is teaching.

Well, now that we have a grasp of the general principle, we need to open this up in greater detail and see how to implement it. And that brings us to our next point—the *types of Context*. There are several types of context we need to consider. So two broad categories would include the *Historical Context*, and the *Biblical Context*.

The *Historical* considers questions such as, Who is the author? Who was the audience? What was the time, place, and circumstances of the writing? and so on. Knowing the historical circumstances can enable us to better understand the meaning of a given passage. We'll consider the place of the *Historical Context* in a future lecture. In this lecture, we're focusing on the *Biblical Context*.

Now, in our Bibles, we have verse and chapter divisions and numbers. While these are incredibly helpful for locating and referring to specific texts of Scripture, the verse and chapter divisions are not inspired. Now, the Book of Psalms would be an exception to chapter divisions, as they were composed as individual songs. Now, this may come as a surprise to some people, but the original authors did not include the numbers that are inserted into our translations of the Bible, for verses and chapters. While they are useful, these tools can also hinder us, in our failure to draw important connections between various verses or chapters, because of where they break or divide. For this reason, studying the Context is even more important. We will consider a gradation of levels, in which an individual text can be viewed and interpreted.

First of all, the most obvious should be the *immediate Context*. And so, the immediate context is comprised of the few verses or words before and after a verse we are studying. This may form the paragraph in which the verse occurs. Nearly every verse—with the exception of some Proverbs—

nearly every verse has an immediate context. For example, when you read the word, “therefore,” you should always ask the question, “What is it there for?” Now, also, look for words such as, “for,” “because,” “wherefore,” or, “for this reason,” and similar language, because that language points your attention to a conclusion that follows, based on what was said before it. So make sure to understand the previous verses that come before it.

Let me provide a simple example. Second Corinthians 7, verse 1, is the start of a new chapter in our translations. It begins with these words, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” So this verse includes an exhortation to cleanse ourselves and to perfect holiness. But notice the word “therefore.” This is a conclusion drawn from what was said in what went before it, which is actually in chapter 6. More specifically, Paul refers to promises, in chapter 7, verse 1, which also must be found in chapter 6. And, who is being addressed? Those described as “dearly beloved,” who are they? Well chapter 6 supplies this answer too. So if you just open your Bible and start reading at the beginning of chapter 7, without reading chapter 6, you would be less able to understand chapter 7, verse 1. Chapter 6 makes clear that he’s addressing true believers, not everyone else. They are those who are the temple of God, chapter 6 says—the people of God and the children of God. Furthermore, we can’t heed the exhortation without believing and depending on the precious promises that were referred to in chapter 6, where God says, “I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters.” Those are the precious promises that are being referred to in verse 1. And so you can’t properly understand how to cleanse yourself or perfect holiness, without first of all absorbing and understanding everything that was said previously. Now, you can apply the same principle to countless other passages.

A second category is *the Chapter Context*. So we need to identify the relation of a single verse or a few verses to what is being taught in the whole chapter. Sometimes the audience, or a topic that is addressed is at the beginning of the chapter, and that may shed light on a verse later in the chapter. Romans 8, verse 28 is a popular verse for good reasons, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” But this does not apply to everyone indiscriminately. He’s speaking to the believer, those who are loved by God and called by God. The chapter opens by saying, “There is therefore now no condemnation” for those in Christ. And it ends by saying there is no separation for the believer from the love of God in Christ. No condemnation at the beginning, no separation at the end. And even the next verse, verse 29 that follows verse 28, speaks of those who are predestined by God unto salvation. And so we understand Romans 8, verse 28, properly by placing it in the *Context of its chapter*.

Sometimes, what follows in the chapter helps us interpret what comes earlier in the chapter. So Hebrews 6 warns about unbelief and a failure to persevere. We come to very heavy words in Hebrews 6, verses 4 to 6—it says, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” Now some read these words and conclude that a true believer, who is in a state of saving grace, can fall and lose their salvation. But keep reading. We read in verse 9, after that, these words: “But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.” So he’s not referring to the regenerate in verses 4 to 6, as verse 9 makes

clear. He's referring to those who look identical to someone who is saved, but is actually not saved. We can also use our previous lecture on *comparing Scripture with Scripture*, and see further that a true believer cannot lose their salvation. So the *Context within the chapter* is also essential for proper interpretation.

A third category, by way of *Context*, is seeing *the Context of an entire topic under discussion*. So this may include several chapters in a book. For example, 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, which addresses gifts within the church. Or, it could include less than the length of one chapter. Jesus says, in Matthew, chapter 18, verse 20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." But this is the conclusion of a topic that began in verse 15, in which the Lord is addressing his church as gathered, and more specifically, the church formally gathered for church discipline. It of course, applies to Christ's church gathered on all occasions, but the context adds more, in teaching us that Christ is present in the pronouncements of the censures of church discipline against wayward and unrepentant members. And this is further corroborated by what we read in 1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5, about this aspect of church discipline. That is a true parallel, in terms of *comparing Scripture with Scripture*, to what we find in Matthew, chapter 18.

Fourthly, we should *consider the Context of an entire book of the Bible*. Every book has its own divine purpose for why God included it in the Scriptures. An individual verse should be understood in light of the theme of the book. We can also consider the structure that God gave to the book. So this was true regarding what we saw in Hebrews 6, verses 4 to 6. The whole book sets forth the supremacy of Jesus Christ, in order to strengthen faith and perseverance among God's people, and to prevent the Christian or believing Jews from returning to unbelief, to the Old Testament ceremonies. Or, when Paul writes in Philippians 4, of rejoicing always in the Lord, of peace, and not being anxious, and contentment in all circumstances, it helps to place this in the light of what he said way back in Philippians 1, verse 13, where he said, "So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places." He was under trials, persecution, and hardship, and so the rejoicing, and contentment, and peace of chapter 4 are not just for comfortable times of ease, but actually the fruit that the Christian can enjoy in times of difficulty.

Fifthly, we should also *consider the Context of a passage in light of the testament in which it is found*, whether Old Testament or New Testament. Both testaments have peculiar characteristics and features, though the primary emphasis is on the continuity of Old and New Testament, not discontinuity. They represent one God, one gospel, one Savior, one people of God. But there are very different things that are addressed. Because the Old Testament is all speaking prior to Jesus' coming, whereas the New Testament is speaking when and after Jesus comes. And so, understanding the relationship of the Old and New Testaments is fundamental to an accurate interpretation, and to theology in general. But, of course, this is a huge topic. For those interested in exploring this in detail, as noted in a previous lecture, we have another module, John Knox Institute does, on understanding the history of redemption from Genesis to Revelation. But the point here is that we place a text or passage in light of the testament in which it's found. Reading a passage out of the Old Testament places us in circumstances and in a context in which we understand all of this is pointing forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that will help us clarify sometimes what we're reading.

Lastly, and briefly, *we need to view every passage within the Context of the whole Bible*. And I only raise this in order to tie the principle of *Context* in this lecture to the principle we learned in the last lecture, about *comparing Scripture with Scripture*. They actually go together. *Comparing Scripture with Scripture* is the broadest way of interpreting a particular passage within its overall

context, that is, *the Context of the whole of Scripture*. Every component of Scripture is woven together as one seamless revelation from God.

Thirdly, before we conclude, let me leave you with a few further points of counsel regarding the practical use of this principle.

First of all, be careful not to take a verse out of Context when seeking guidance from the Lord. So for example, if a young lady is praying for direction on whether God will give her a husband, and then she comes across, in her reading, Zechariah, chapter 9, verse 9, which says, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation,” and so on. She cannot use this passage to conclude that the answer is “Yes,” that the Lord wants her to marry a given man. Why?—because that’s taking it out of its Context. Zechariah 9, verse 9, is referring to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we need to try to understand what the passage means, and not just try to think in terms of what it may mean for us. So be careful on that point.

Secondly, be careful not to take a verse out of Context when formulating your theological convictions. When we read in Romans 9, verse 13, “As it is written Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,” you cannot conclude that the reason for God’s love or hatred was based on Jacob and Esau’s behavior. The Context tells us, in verse 11, “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth.” God’s sovereign will determined the state of Jacob and Esau, not their behavior. So be careful when formulating theological convictions not to take a verse out of Context.

And then thirdly, be careful to read around the passage you are studying. As we’ve seen in this lecture, always consider the *various types of Context* in which a passage is found. It’s good to single out a verse, and to dig down, and mine its riches, to meditate upon it—we’ll talk more about this later in the course. But never do that to the exclusion of reading around the passage. Because the various types of Contexts will cast light on enabling you to understand that verse or passage more clearly.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we’ve explored the principle of *interpreting every passage in light of its Context*. In a future lecture, we will return to the idea of Context by learning to also analyze the *Historical Context* of a passage. But before we go there, in the next lecture, we will consider the principles related to our study of the *words and grammar* in Scripture, and how this influences our reading and understanding of the Bible.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 6

Words

Learning a new language introduces you to a new world of words. In some cases, you may need to learn a new alphabet or symbols. You need to learn how they sound, so that you can say them, as well as recognize them when you hear them. You also learn how to read and write them. From the very beginning, you have to start learning vocabulary in your new language, and rules of grammar for how the language functions. Well, this can be daunting, but it is necessary for acquiring proficiency in the language you are trying to learn. But even in your own native language—your mother tongue—words are important. If you scramble the letters or symbols in a word, it will change the meaning of the word. Likewise, in many languages, if you change the order of words in a sentence, you change the meaning of what is being communicated. Language requires us to be careful with words, both how we use them, and how we understand them.

But it is even more important that we pay careful attention to words, when it comes to God's Word, the Bible. Paul writes, in Galatians 3:16, and says, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to [thy] seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." Paul insists that words matter. He argues that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise that God gave to Abraham two thousand years earlier. But he builds his argument on a single word to prove his case—the difference between a singular and a plural noun.

Well, this introduces us to another component in the interpretation of Scripture, what principles guide us in reading and studying a particular portion of Scripture. In examining a given text, we must take into account the words themselves, and the relation of those words to one another. When we speak about studying words and grammar, some people may object and question whether this is really that important. After all, not everyone enjoyed studying language in school. But remember the foundational truths we learned in an earlier lecture—the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. Every single syllable is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, every letter in Scripture has great importance to us. This leads us to the conclusion that we must carefully study *the Words* that God has given to us.

In the last few lectures, we have been narrowing our scope in each lesson. We saw the importance of *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*, that is, considering what the rest of Scripture, or the whole

of Scripture teaches about truths we find in a single passage. Then, we explored the importance of interpreting every Scripture passage in light of its *context*. Well, in this lesson, we learn to further narrow our scope, and to focus carefully on *the specific and syntax of a word or passage*, in order to understand its meaning.

Well, first of all, to begin, it may be helpful to think about what tools could help us in the task we will be considering. The more we read the Bible, and the better we know the whole Bible, the more effective we will be in rightly interpreting the Bible. There are no shortcuts around the need to prayerfully read as much of the Scriptures as we can each day. When reading one passage, this enables us to recall in our minds what we've read elsewhere in other passages. But there are some other basic tools that can assist us. Now, everyone will not have access to all of these tools, but it's good to know about them, in case you're given the opportunity to get them.

First, some Bibles come with cross-references in the margins. So these cross-references are a list of other places in Scripture where similar words or themes in the verse you are reading are used. So when you're reading a verse, you can glance at the margin to see suggestions of other texts that may be related to the verse you are reading. Well, this can be a helpful reminder that points you to where similar words are used elsewhere. There are also separate books published with a compilation of extensive cross-references for every verse in the Bible.

Second, you should know that some modern languages have a Bible concordance. So a concordance is like a dictionary, in that it lists the words used in the Bible in alphabetical order, and provides references for where those words are found in the Scripture. Some Bibles have an abbreviated concordance at the back of the Bible with a list of a select number of words. But larger, more comprehensive concordances are published as separate books. There are also Bible dictionaries. Well, Bible dictionaries give a brief description of words, and people, and places, and so forth, found in the Bible. You also find the publication of study Bibles in some modern languages. These Bibles incorporate notes underneath the text of Scripture, which supply help in understanding the passage. One example, in the Mandarin language, would be the *Matthew Henry Study Bible*, published by Hudson Taylor Ministries. You can also consult commentaries on books of the Bible. So commentaries are books that comment on, or help explain each text of Scripture. They often include insight drawn from the Hebrew and Greek texts that readers may not know. But not all commentaries are theologically sound. So you should look for those written by godly Reformed writers.

Lastly, you probably know that the Old Testament was written originally in the ancient Hebrew language, and the New Testament was written in Greek. Ministers, or other who want to go on to do more advanced study in the Scriptures will want to learn these languages, so that they can read the Bible in the original language. If so, there are Hebrew and Greek lexicons, which, like a dictionary, trace the etymology, and the use and the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek words. Some modern languages, like English, also have books for those who do not know Hebrew or Greek, but who wish to see where specific Hebrew and Greek words are used in the Bible.

Well, some of this may sound a little overwhelming, and if you do not have access to any of these tools, do not worry. It's good to know about them, but you are able to study without them. It will just require more effort on your part, which in the end, will make you a superior Bible student. John Brown of Haddington, a godly minister from the eighteenth century, grew up very poor, and did not have anything other than his Bible, no other tools. And he became one of the most remarkable Bible students in history. Through diligent study, he created his own cross-references, his own concordance, and Bible dictionary, and a brief commentary, or compilation of

notes gleaned from his studies of the Bible. And he wore out five copies of the Bible in the process. But in the end, he knew his Bible far better than those with many, many tools. He even ended up teaching himself both Greek and Hebrew. We do not have time to give the details in this lecture. My point is that you can master your Bible regardless of your circumstances.

Well next, we need to think a little more about words. We know that the Old Testament was written originally in the ancient Hebrew language, and the New Testament was written in Greek. So our modern Bibles are a translation of the Hebrew and Greek into our own language. So understanding the meaning, and even connotations of the individual Hebrew and Greek words in a Bible passage can be a great help to proper interpretation. The study of the root meaning of words, by tracing the history of their usage and development, is called *etymology*. Studying individual words can have tremendous benefits, as well as several weaknesses. We'll explore both.

The study of words forces us to give attention to detail. You know the difference between the pronoun for the second person singular—we would say, “you,” and the second person plural, we might say, “you all.” The singular refers to one person, whereas the plural refers to two or more people. Well, in Luke 22, verses 31 and 32, Jesus speaks to Peter, and says, we read, “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” In the words, “desired to have you”—Satan hath desired to have you—the word “you” is in the plural—it’s referring to all the disciples. But in the words that follow, “I have prayed for thee,” it is in the singular, referring to Jesus praying specifically for Peter. And so you can see how that is a help to us in understanding exactly what is being said, and how we should interpret what is being said in the passage.

Sometimes several Greek words are translated with the same word in our modern languages, whether that is English, or Chinese, or Spanish, or Arabic, or whatever it is. I'll use English for my examples. In the New Testament, there are a few words for “love.” In John 21, verses 15 to 17, Jesus asked Peter a question three times, and Peter responds three times. We read, “So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him. Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.” Jesus uses the Greek word *agapaō* for “love.” But when Peter answers, he uses the word *phileō* for “love.” Both translated in English with the same word, “love.” But there are two different Greek words. The third time that Christ asks Peter whether he loves him, he switches to the word Peter was using, the Greek word, *phileō*. Similarly, the Greek words *kosmos*, and *oikoumenē*, and *aiōn* are all translated at times with the English word “world.” And so, you see how there can be various Greek or Hebrew words translated with the same English word.

And there are various words that can have differing connotations, or shades of meaning. In the New Testament, there are ten Greek words for “sin.” In the Old Testament, there are three primary Hebrew words for “sin.” And to give you an idea of how there can be different shades of meaning or connotation, one of those Hebrew words has the connotation of “missing the mark.” Another describes something crooked rather than straight. And the third word for sin carries the idea of crossing a boundary, going over a restriction. Similarly, the New Testament has two Greek words for the word “to know,” the verb “knowing.” One of them emphasizes factual knowledge, while the other stresses experiential knowledge. So this gives you an idea of how various words can have different shades of meaning or connotation.

But then also, different words can have the same or similar meaning. So in 1 Timothy 2, verse 1, we read, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of

thanks, be made for all men.” And then, in Colossians 3, verse 16, we read, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Well, in both passages, there are a string of words that Paul puts together to make one point. In the 1 Timothy passage, he’s speaking about prayer. He uses several different words to describe prayer, but his point has to do with prayer. And in the Colossians passage, he uses different words to refer to the Book of Psalms. When he says, “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” they’re all referring to the inspired Book of Psalms, the songs in the Old Testament. Well in those instances, he is stacking up similar words for the sake of emphasis. So he’s not making fine distinctions and referring to different things. You can appreciate how this helps you in terms of your interpretation. You wouldn’t come to 1 Timothy or the Colossians passage, and begin trying to make these things refer to totally different things. That would scramble the meaning of the passage. But you understand that he’s using emphasis. He’s using similar, synonymous words to drive home his point.

Furthermore, with regards to words, the same word can have various meanings, even in the same context. So I’ll supply again an example in English. The word “trunk” can refer to three different things in English. It can refer to, first of all, a chest to put clothes in. Secondly, it can refer to an elephant’s nose. And thirdly, it can refer to the compartment at the rear of a vehicle. So the context when a person is speaking makes clear which is intended. Sometimes in the Bible, the same word can also be used in both a literal and figurative sense in the same passage. So we read in Ezekiel 44, verses 5 and 6, “And the LORD said unto me, Son of man, mark well, and behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears all that I say unto thee concerning all the ordinances of the *house* of the LORD, and all of the laws thereof; and mark well the entering in of the *house*, with every going forth of the sanctuary. And thou shalt say to the rebellious, even to the *house* of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; O ye *house* of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations.” Well, the word “house” is being used in the same place for both the literal temple where the ordinances take place—earlier in the passage it’s referring to the literal temple of God in Jerusalem. And it’s used, at the end of that section, it’s used figuratively for a nation. When it says “the house of Israel,” it’s speaking about the nation, not a literal house. And so again, we’re focusing here on the details of words in our proper interpretation of Scripture.

For those who have the opportunity or tools to study the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, we must beware of what can be called *the etymological fallacy*. Remember that etymology refers to the study of the root meaning of a word, which can be helpful. But it is not appropriate to take the whole history of the meaning of a word, and to import all of that meaning back into the text under consideration. Why?—because root meanings can be misleading at times. Again, to give another example from the English language, the word “prevent” originally meant “to go before.” However, the present use of the word means “to hinder, to stop, to restrain.” So if I said today that I prevented the dog from running out the door, it would be wrong to conclude, based on the root meaning, that I ran out the door in front of the dog. No, I, rather, stopped the dog. So the key here is not to misuse the study of root meanings of Bible words. And this is a mistake that you’ll hear Bible teachers and preachers in various contexts, where they try to introduce a root meaning in a way that is inappropriate. The primary focus must be on understanding the usage of a word at the time it was written.

Lastly, Old Testament passages are often quoted in the New Testament. Whenever this happens, go back to the place in the Old Testament, and study what is being said in that passage, to better understand its bearing on the New Testament text. God never takes his own Word out of

context. The New Testament use of the Old Testament trains you on how to understand and use the Scriptures. We'll come back to this point in a future lecture.

But then thirdly, we've spoken about the study of the words used in the Bible, but we must also consider the relation of those individual words, and the relationship that they have to one another in a sentence or paragraph. So, in grammar, this is called *syntax*—the relationship of different words in a sentence or paragraph. Different words have different functions in a sentence. For example, we have the *subject* of a sentence—who is doing the action. Then we have the *verb*—the action itself. And then we have the *object*, or the thing being acted upon. So if we say, “John threw the ball,” then “John” is the subject, “threw” is the verb, and “ball” is the object. So paying attention to syntax can help us rightly interpret Scripture. We will only consider this briefly, in order to give you a sense of how this can be helpful.

First of all, you can ask the question, What words are central in this text?—what words are receiving the focus, or emphasis, or attention in a particular passage? So in John 3, verse 16—a very well-known passage—the Greek text places the words “so loved” at the beginning of the sentence for the sake of emphasis. So we could translate it, “So loved the world, God gave his only begotten Son.” Well this helps us. It helps us understand that the greatness of God's love stands behind the giving of his Son for his people.

Secondly, paying close attention to the verbs also contributes to our proper interpretation of a passage. So, in 1 John 3, verse 9, we read, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” Well some could conclude that this text teaches that true believers must be sinless, that they are unable of sinning. But before we look at the words, you should know that cannot be the correct interpretation, because you'll recall the principle you learned in a previous lecture, namely, we must *compare Scripture with Scripture*. And you would recall that earlier in this epistle, John stated strongly, in 1 John 1, verses 7 to 9, that those who say they do not sin deceive themselves, call God a liar, and the truth is not in them. Rather, they are to confess their sins and to receive forgiveness. But we can also consider the words themselves, in 1 John 3, verse 9. In the Greek, the tense of the verb conveys the idea of a continuous action, which means that it's saying that a believer does not habitually continue on under the power of sin, like the unbeliever. So it's not teaching that he never commits sin, but that he's not continuing on under the power of sin. And so we're *Comparing Scripture with Scripture*, as well as *looking at the individual words* themselves.

Another example is Ephesians 5, verses 22 to 23. We read, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife.” Well, the verb “submit” is a command—it's in the imperative. Whereas husbands are not commanded to be head of their wives, they are told as an inescapable fact that they are the heads of their wives. So the question becomes whether those husbands reflect Christ or not, to their wives, as they ought to do.

Well, much more could be said on this point of the importance of *grammatical syntax*. It is most useful for the more advanced student, who has some training in the original languages. But it's good for you to be familiar with what's possible, in addition to what you can do on your own. Some of the tools we discussed at the beginning of this lecture could supply these insights for those who do not know Hebrew and Greek. To be clear, however, these more technical aspects are not necessary to understand the general flow of most of the Scriptures. They are vital, however, for theological precision.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the importance of *words* in our interpretation of Scripture. In the next lecture, we are going to consider the idea of *Historical Context*. So we're

coming back to this concept of *Context* that we looked at before, but this time, our focus will be on the *Historical and Cultural Context* in which a passage is written, and how this influences our reading and understanding of the Bible.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 7 **History**

The study of *History* is the study of the works of God. He sovereignly orchestrates all of the details at every stage in his unfolding plan and story. God's providence supplies purpose and significance to all that takes place in history. So as we zoom in on a particular time and place, we need to familiarize ourselves with the details of the *Historical Context*. For example, you cannot understand or rightly interpret the unfolding events around World War II, without knowing about the aftermath of World War I, and being familiar with what was going on in different nations, and in the thinking of the people involved. Knowing something about the *Historical Context* enables you to make sense, not only of what happened, but how, and why it happened. It aids your interpretation of history.

This is also true with regards to the Bible. The Word of God originated in a *Historical Context*, and we can only rightly understand it in light of that History. We learned in an earlier lecture that we must resist the temptation to lift a passage out of its textual surroundings. But in this lecture, we will learn that we must not isolate a passage from its *Historical Context*. It is another form of eisegesis to read something into the text when we interpret the Old Testament and the New Testament by importing twenty-first-century context and culture into the passage we're considering. As we shall see, in some, not all instances, it is helpful to have a comprehension of the historical setting and social peculiarities in order to grasp the significance of what an author is writing. We aim to accurately understand the meaning in its original setting. And so we must ask questions, like, Who is the author? What was the time and place? What were the circumstances of the writing? Knowing the force of the original author and circumstances can enable us to better interpret the meaning of what is written.

Well, this introduces us to yet another element in the interpretation of Scripture. A couple of lectures ago, we explored the importance of interpreting every Scripture passage in light of its Biblical context. In this lesson, we return to the idea of context, but in this case, we learn that in examining a given text, we must take into account the historical setting and context of the writing.

We're going to consider a few things. First of all, we begin briefly with consideration of the author that is writing a given Bible passage. Each Biblical author was affected to some degree by

the time and circumstances in the world in which they lived, all of which influenced their writings. Without knowledge of the author's background or tendencies would be to fall back into the mistake of merely asking, What does this mean to me? without first asking what it meant to the original author. It can be helpful in our minds to transport ourselves back in time, and to place ourselves in their situation. You can think by way of comparison, for example, 150 years from now, how will students understand the events that are unfolding in our time and world?

So we begin by asking questions like, Who was the original author? What do we know about his temperament, his disposition, his character, his gifts, and background. Well, the Bible itself supplies us with these answers. We interpret Scripture with Scripture. So we have to go to the Bible to discover the answers to these questions. And immediately, you begin to think of the differences, for example, between Moses, and Jeremiah, and Paul, and Peter, and Luke, and John. Moses was raised in an Egyptian home, in a palace, and had a fine education. And we know that he was reticent to receive the call that God gave to him, that the Bible describes him as the meekest man on earth, and we could go on and on. Or you think of Jeremiah, who was also reticent to receive the call God gave him, and the burdens that were placed upon him, the historical context of exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem. No wonder he's called "the weeping prophet." You think of Paul. Paul was the Pharisee of Pharisees, of the tribe of Benjamin. We read in various places about his background. He was a persecutor of the church. He was also a scholar—he had studied under the greatest scholar of his time, Gamaliel. He knew the Old Testament inside and out. And we have people like Peter, with his personality. Peter seems to be impulsive at times. He's bold, and he speaks quickly and so on. We know his background of being a fisherman. Or Luke—Luke's a physician, and Luke's style, his Gospel, and the book of Acts reflect the refinement of a physician. And then there's John, the Apostle John, who was the one that laid his head in the bosom of the Lord. He's referred to as "the disciple whom Christ loved," and whose writings have complexity and theological depth. Well, I'm really just touching the surface. I'm mentioning just a handful of examples of the kinds of things—not all that we know, but the kinds of things that we know about some of the authors in both Old and New Testaments.

It is also helpful to keep in mind the history of the author's life, as it is recorded in the Scriptures. What was their ethnic and religious background? What was their spiritual experience? And what role did they have? Did they hold an office in the church? What were other significant events in their life? Often this will alert you to allusions and references, and even purpose within their writing that you might otherwise miss. So I mentioned Paul's history—his background is described in places like the opening of Philippians 3. And we know about the events of Acts 7, where he is there overseeing the martyrdom of Stephen. We know about his Damascus road experience, and how he's brought to Christ. And we see something of the internal work of God in his soul, in Romans 7, his struggles with sin. Or you think of 2 Corinthians 11, verses 23 to 28, where we have a long catalogue that he provides of all the various kinds of suffering that he endured. Well, having that in mind enables you, for example, to go back to the beginning of 2 Corinthians, in chapter 1, where he speaks about comforting those with the comfort with which we have been comforted. Paul knew something about the need for comfort, and having received comfort out of the context of his deep suffering. Or you think about how he speaks of having been taken up into the third heavens and given revelations that are not lawful to speak of, and the thorn in the flesh that was given to him, and all of these things. We could say much more. They provide insight, so that when we're reading his writings in a particular book, we can understand some of the background behind what he's writing. That aids us—that helps us in our interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, we have consideration of the *General Historical Context*, so a consideration of the sociopolitical and economic setting will sometimes bring light to a text. Questions to consider would include: Who was in political power? What were some common practices within the social sphere of that society? What did people do for a livelihood? So you think when David wrote of God as our Shepherd in Psalm 23, you remember that he himself had served as a shepherd in his youth, and really, later as a king he was shepherding the nation. Or you will know well the story of Jonah who God called to go to Nineveh. But what helps us to understand his reaction both of not wanting to go there, and then once he goes, his reaction to the repentance of Nineveh that resulted. Well, it's helpful to know, Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, and Assyria is the archenemy of God's people. So they are the greatest threat, the ones that were seeking to destroy God's people. So he's being sent into the heart of enemy territory, the capital of their enemy. Well that's helpful, but there's more than that. Because, if you go back to 2 Kings, chapter 14, and verse 25, there's a reference there, that you may have passed over, to Jonah, when he was serving as a prophet, home in his own nation, and how the Lord used him in preaching about the Lord's displeasure with his people, how the Lord visited them with mercy and in his compassion, brought them to repentance. Well, that's in the background of Jonah's mind. And so when he's told by God, go and declare that in forty days he's going to destroy Nineveh, Jonah is likely thinking to himself, Well, I've seen all this before. You go and proclaim that the Lord will judge a people, and sure enough, he'll bring them to repentance. Well, he doesn't want good to be brought to Assyria—they're an enemy. And so, in chapter 4 of Jonah, when he responds to their repentance, he's saying, in essence, "I knew this is how God was; I knew this is what God would do, that he would grant mercy to these people." And he sulked as a consequence. Do you see how the *Historical Context*, the backdrop, gives light to our understanding of the passage.

You think of Jesus, in the New Testament, his exhortation to carry a soldier's cloak an extra mile. Well, this is humiliating. It's demoralizing for a Jew who's been stomped on, and suppressed, and lived under the tyranny of an invading empire that's conquered them.

Or you think of Ruth, and all of the background there, of being a Moabitess. Or even how Naomi leaves Bethlehem, she leaves Judah, the promised land—not a good sign—and is sent away and the hardships happen. And then she returns to Bethlehem, which is "the house of bread"—that's what "Bethlehem" means. And all that's taking place with Ruth and the development with Boaz, there's things in God's law that we need to understand about that relationship, what a "kinsman redeemer" is, what Boaz's responsibilities and privileges were. All of this enables us to unlock and understand the nuance of exactly what's taking place. And that, of course, is a help, because then we go from that to understanding what it points forward to, as we heard in an earlier lecture, how it's pointing forward to Christ, as the kinsman-redeemer. Well, we'll never get there if we don't understand something of the background.

Or you think of Psalm 137. When we sing Psalm 137, "By Babel's streams we sat and wept; we hung our harps upon the willow trees." The historical context is exile, of Judah having been taken into the Babylonian captivity. And when you understand that, you begin to sing Psalm 137 and understand it more clearly.

Or in the New Testament, Philemon—this epistle to this remarkably godly man, Paul's epistle to Philemon, and his relationship to his slave, Onesimus. It would be helpful to know something about that context of the presence of slavery, and the relationships of masters and slaves, to be able to appreciate what Paul is saying. So I'm just giving you some passing examples of how this contributes to our interpretation of Scripture.

Another area of study is the religious background of the original audience. Questions include: What was the area's religious orientation? and possible tensions? Were there any peculiar customs? So, for example, there are these two parties, in the New Testament, among the Jews, of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Well, knowing something about these two groups helps us understand when they surface in the passages that we're reading or studying together. The Pharisees were the archconservatives, and they were entirely opposed to Rome and its intrusion in Judah. The Sadducees were more theologically liberal, and they were accommodating, and they had capitulated and compromised with the Roman government. Well, knowing that helps when you hear the Pharisees and Sadducees coming back to back to tempt Jesus about questions related to Caesar. It also helps you to understand, the Pharisees believed in the existence of the soul, and of angels, and they believed in the physical resurrection on the last day, whereas the Sadducees denied these things. So when you reading in the book of Acts and Paul cries out in the midst of them that he's being tried because of his attachment to teaching the doctrine of the resurrection, and it creates division between the Pharisees and Sadducees, you understand what exactly is going on.

You also think of social customs, like in Mark 7, verses 1 and following. There's this passing reference to "Corban." So the whole issue has to do with the relationship of children to parents, the obligation that children have to parents in light of the 5th Commandment. And what the Jews would do in order to sidestep God's law—adding to God's law their own traditions—they could declare something to be sacred and devoted to the Lord—Corban—and yet keep it and use it themselves. And that would enable them to get out of fulfilling obligations that they had to their parents. Well, this isn't the time and place to discuss that in detail, but you understand how some of these social peculiarities provide insight into accurately interpreting what the passage is saying. So there's a *General Historical Context*.

But then thirdly, the *Specific Historical Context*. In addition to learning about a particular author and the general context, it's also pertinent to inquire about to whom he is writing—are they believers? Are they in danger of apostasy? Were they Jews? Were they Gentiles? Where were they located—in Asia? Or are they in Europe? Where are they? What events were transpiring in the background, in their setting in which they lived?

You come to the book of Hebrews, and you recognize immediately, this is written to believing Jews—Jews that had been converted, and had become Christians. And as you're reading through Hebrews, you recognize, of course, from chapter 1, that he's setting forth the supremacy, the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's with a view to strengthening the faith of the Hebrews, and to exhorting them to perseverance. And so there's this threat, where because of persecution and other pressures, these Jews, these Christians who had previously been Jews, were under pressure and temptation to go back to the Jewish religion. And so Paul is establishing and strengthening them in their perseverance. More could be said.

You think of the Colossians, which was a Gentile church in the Lycus Valley, and all of the paganism that was a part of their own history, and their community. And so here's Paul addressing philosophical errors that were swirling in the environment around them, calling them to hold fast to the Head, and to cling to Christ.

Or you think of Deuteronomy. Here you have the Lord bringing the book of the covenant. He's bringing his law, and it's being given to his people before they enter into the promised land. So this isn't what was given at Sinai, that we have in Exodus, but rather, a second giving of the law, and there's the context of covenant keeping, and the whole doctrine of the covenant that is woven throughout Deuteronomy for a reason. They've gone through the experience of the wilderness to

prepare them to enter into the promised land. That gives nuance.

Same thing with regards to 2 Corinthians. You have problems that have arisen in Corinth—divisions, a lack of unity, sinful scandal that's been disciplined, and many other things. And you pick up on this from the text itself, the background that Paul's addressing. As well as, at times, we read his epistles, and we have a background in the book of Acts. So you're reading, for example, the book of Philippians. Well, it's helpful to go back to Acts 16, where Paul's described, in the historical narrative of Acts, of being in Philippi, and what's happening, what he experiences there. That provides insight for us. So you can see how this is helpful.

Another question regarding the specific context is, What was the purpose for a given book or epistle? What occasion prompted the writing of this book? Well, knowing that helps you understand the details within the book. And this can be discovered through both internal information in the book itself, or external information outside the book, in other places of Scripture—like we saw with Jonah. That passage in 2 Kings helps us understand some of the background for Jonah. Examples of the purpose found within a book itself include the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verse 31, toward the end of the book: “But these things are written, that”—or so that—“ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” He's given us the whole purpose for why the Gospel was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The same thing with regards to 1 and 2 Peter. There's this theme of remembrance. We read, “Wherefore I would not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance” (2 Peter 1:12). In 2 Peter, he also goes on to say, “This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance.” He's giving us something of the purpose of the book.

The same thing in Jude, verse 3, “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should [steadfastly] contend for the faith, which was once delivered unto the saints.”

Luke wrote both his Gospel, and the book of Acts. And you'll notice the historic context for both books. In Luke 1, verses 1 to 4, he says, “For as much as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word”—he's speaking of the other apostles and their Gospels. He goes on, “it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.” So he's writing this to a disciple, to Theophilus, that he would know the certainty of these things.

And then look at Acts 1, verses 1 to 2, “The former treatise have made, O Theophilus”—referring to his Gospel—“of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen.” So he picks up and tells the rest of the story to Theophilus, after Christ's ascension.

Well, you can also think about the relation of books to each other. For example, compare 2 Peter and the book of Jude—very similar themes, even similar language. But 2 Peter is speaking about what will happen, whereas Jude is speaking about what is happening.

Another part of the specific context includes geographical reference which also aids our understanding of a passage. So if you have access to Bible maps, either at the back of your Bible, or in separate books, I would encourage you to study this Biblical geography. Because when you're

reading your Bible, and you're reading about cities, and your reading about surrounding nations, you're reading about mountains, and bodies of water—rivers and lakes, when you're reading about these things in a passage of Scripture, it's helpful to have a picture in your mind of where these are and what is around them. You can see on a map the distances and directions between two places. When they traveled from this city to this city, how far was it? and what kind of terrain did that include? This will sometimes clarify what you're reading.

It's also good to remember and to connect the events of different points of history that occur in the same location. Why?—because sometimes a given place has theological significance, and it ties together with another event later on. Abraham goes to Mount Moriah to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice unto the Lord, and God provides a ram. We know that story in Genesis, and its theological significance, and how it's related to Christ. But then you move on in history, and David comes to Jerusalem, and then following him, Solomon. Solomon builds a temple, and it's in the same general vicinity as Mount Moriah. And all that that temple pictures is connected to what was happening with Abraham. And then, of course, you fast forward further, and you come to the New Testament, and there is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lamb of God provided, who is sacrificed as such on Golgotha, on Calvary, which too is in the same vicinity and location. These things can be helpful to us. You can see the themes that are unfolding in the same place—geography.

I mean, David pens Psalm 63, and when we're singing Psalm 63, we're told, in the title to the Psalm, that David wrote it in the Judean wilderness when he was fleeing from his enemy, which in that case was Absalom. So you sing Psalm 63. Well, it helps to keep that in mind. When you come to the New Testament, and you come to Matthew 3, and there is John the Baptist in the same exact place as David was, in the Judean wilderness. And you flip another chapter, and there in Matthew 4, the Lord Jesus Christ is taken by the Spirit into the wilderness. That's the Judean wilderness in the south. It's the same place for the setting of Psalm 63. And some of that gives us insight into Psalm 63, as well as into the experience of John the Baptist and Christ in the New Testament. It works both ways. And so geography is not something we should just pass over. We should familiarize ourselves with it, because it too is part of the *Historical Context* that aids us in our interpretation.

Well, in this lecture, we've explored the importance of the *Historical Context* in our interpretation of Scripture. In the next lecture, we will consider the principles related to our study of particular *Genres*, and the kinds of literature within Scripture, and how this influences our reading and understanding of the Bible.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 8

Genre

Thus far in our studies, we have surveyed some of the basic overarching principles of interpretation that apply to understanding the whole Bible. But there are other important principles to learn that correspond to specific parts of the Bible. One of the unique qualities of the Holy Scriptures is that they contain many types of literature. We have history, laws, poetry, proverbs, epistles, parables, apocalyptic literature, and so on. We sometimes refer to these as various *Genre* within Scripture. “Genre” simply means various kinds of literature. Furthermore, the Bible includes different ways of using language, such as metaphors, typology, figurative language, and so forth. Well, it is incumbent upon us to acquaint ourselves with some of the peculiarities of these different parts of the Bible, and more specifically, with the principles of interpretation that assist us in better understanding the meaning of passages located in those parts of the Bible.

In a previous lecture, we considered the importance of words—words matter. We need to be careful, and to give careful attention to the words that God has given to us, since every word is inspired by God. When we focus on the literal meaning of those words, we must also recognize that words can be used in different ways. For example, when Jesus says that he is the door, he’s telling us an important Biblical truth. But we do not understand him to mean that he is a literal door made of wood that swings on hinges. We know that he is teaching us that he is the only way to God and eternal life, which we must spiritually enter by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this lesson, we will explore an introduction to the principles that help us interpret the different kinds of language and *Genre* that we find in our Bibles. And we will not consider all of the *Genre* here, or all of the uses of Biblical language. But what we do learn will provide us with a basic grasp of the kind of tools we need to learn to employ of our study of Scripture. So first of all, we will begin with *metaphors* and *symbolism*.

A “metaphor” is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of idea is used in the place of another to illustrate an analogy between the two things. So the example earlier of Jesus as the door is an example of a *metaphor*. Well, there are many other examples in both the Old and New Testament. Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life that is come down from heaven. He refers to himself as the light of the world, and many other things. And the same is true in the Old

Testament, where, for example, believers are described as mounting up with wings like an eagle, at the end of Isaiah 40. These are examples of *metaphors*. You'll find them in many, many, many places throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Similarly, the Bible also contains *symbols*. A "symbol" is an object that stands for something else. So the object does not need to be real, though sometimes it is real. In the book of Revelation, Christ is symbolized as a Lamb, in chapter 5. And Satan is symbolized as a dragon in chapter 12. And the church is symbolized as a woman in several places, but in Revelation 21, the church is described as a bride that is prepared for her husband. *Symbolism* most often occurs in prophetic and apocalyptic literature. But the varying contexts account for the differences between a *metaphor* and a *symbol*. So the main point is that we learn to recognize them when we see them, not mistaking them for something literal. So we begin with the *metaphor* or *symbol*, what is it, and understanding the picture itself, and then we interpret them in light of the divine truths that they convey and communicate. In other words, we derive the meaning that is to be found within them, the purpose for why they're being employed.

Secondly, we've spoken about *metaphors* and *symbols* briefly—"figurative language" is simply a broader category which includes *metaphors* and *symbols* and more. So we need to think a little bit more about figurative language. An example of figurative language is a phrase, "The moon is a silver fish swimming through a sea of clouds." Well, if you interpret this literally, you'll miss the meaning. So it's actually figurative language that's poetic and beautiful to describe something about the moon. So what are some of the principles that guide us in interpreting the figurative language of Scripture?

Well, first of all, when the natural reading of a passage contradicts what the Bible teaches elsewhere, that is a clue that in fact figurative language is being used, at times. We sing in Psalm 91 about God. It says, "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler." Well, it would be a grievous error to conclude that God is a literal bird. Indeed, that would be blasphemous. The meaning of the passage conveys the warmth, and care, and protection that Jehovah provides for his people—that's the point. Figurative language is loaded with valuable content and meaning.

Secondly, we can examine the internal indicators within the text itself. So, in what kind of literature is the text found? Is it in poetic literature? apocalyptic literature? or in narrative literature? or in prophetic literature? Well, that helps, because poetry and apocalyptic portions of Scripture contain greater amounts of figurative language. But you can go further. Are there indicators within the book itself that things should be taken figuratively? Now, for example, in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, Revelation 1 tells us explicitly that it contains symbolism that represent other things. And in fact, in chapter 1, it defines the meaning of some of those symbols. And it tells us, that Jesus is walking in the midst of the candlesticks, and that the candlesticks are the churches, and that he holds the stars in his right hand, that the stars are the angels of the churches, and so on. Well, this sets our expectation, doesn't it, that the rest of the book will contain, and be dominated by symbolism, where a symbol stands in the place of something else. And that's exactly what we find in the book of Revelation. In this case, most of that symbolism is drawn from Old Testament figures.

Thirdly, to be clear, figures and figurative language teach factual, literal, and historical truths. So the language itself is figurative, the truths are to be taken literally. So in Daniel, chapter 2, you have that long section in verses 31 to 45. And we are given a description of an image, and the image, we are told, was symbolic. Well, the image was symbolic of five literal kingdoms, from the

head of gold, to the iron and clay in the feet. They were symbolic of the kingdom of Babylon, the kingdom of the Medo-Persian empire, the kingdom of the Greeks, and the kingdom of the Roman empire, and lastly, out that emerges the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, the third category is typology. The word “type” originally meant a print, mark or impress made by a hard object on a soft surface. But when we use it today, a “type” means a representative character or object. So to understand the role of typology in the Bible, we need to remember the Doctrine of Progressive Revelation, that is, that God used different means to unfold his plan of redemption throughout Biblical revelation, from Genesis through the Old Testament, into the New Testament, culminating in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, in the opening of the book of Hebrews, we’re told that “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.” Well, this included a long period of time throughout the Old Testament given in successive epics. And as God continued to unfold his special revelation, which came into the pages of the Old Testament, redemption became clearer and clearer, until at last he gave us the fullest and final revelation in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we have to remember that. There’s much more that could be said, but that’s in the background of our understanding of typology.

Types are related to antitypes—types, and antitypes. So a type is an Old Testament picture that pointed forward to something fulfilled in the New Testament. And an antitype is the thing to which the type points, the reality being depicted, the thing that is ultimately fulfilled. And so a type is something real that is designed by God to represent and prefigure something else. In interpreting typology, we must first identify what is literally being done or said, and then what it is intended to typify. So distinguishing and connecting these two things enables us to see the one meaning that’s being communicated. Most often, types point forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. So for example, in the Old Testament, you have the paschal lamb at passover. That paschal lamb was a type that was pointing forward to what would be fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, and indeed we see that in John 1, and we see that in the book of Hebrews as well. He is our passover, he is our Paschal Lamb. He is the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. And then in the Old Testament we have the bronze serpent that was lifted up in the wilderness. Well, that was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, you turn to the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 14, and Jesus tells us that, that it was a picture that would be fulfilled in him, ultimately as he is lifted up, not only upon the cross, but in the preaching of the gospel, so that as men look unto him by faith, they’re healed from their sins. You have the example of the manna in the wilderness. The manna was a type as well. And we see that fulfilled in John, chapter 6, verses 32 and 35. Christ is that manna, that bread that is come down from heaven, which God’s people feed upon by faith, in order that they might have life that is eternal. Or you think of the pillar of fire in the Old Testament—that was a type. In John chapter 8, verse 12 tells us that that’s also fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. Or you think of the rock in the wilderness. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 4, refers to that rock in the wilderness, and he says, “That Rock was Christ.” Or you think of the temple. The Old Testament temple was a type that was pointing forward to the New Testament. First and foremost, it was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember Christ’s words, They will “destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.” He was referring to himself. But interestingly, the temple points forward to more than one thing. It points forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, in the first instance, in the preeminent instance, but it also points forward to the believer, because when Paul writes to the Corinthians, he says that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost—we’re indwelt by the Lord. And the church is referred to in the language of the temple, the house of God that God indwells, as you see at the end of Ephesians 2

and elsewhere. And the temple is also a picture and type of heaven. Indeed, the book of Hebrews says that it was designed after the heavenly model, and therefore ultimately, it culminates in the fulfillment of heaven itself, which is the dwelling place of God.

Well, typology is vast. It's an entire field of study on its own. But you can appreciate why it's important, and how it functions, and why it's essential that we interpret it accurately. But for starts, reading the Old Testament and New Testament together will enable you to accurately draw connections between types and their antitypes, as the New Testament often explains these Old Testament pictures for us. So for example, you should read the book of Leviticus and the book of Hebrews together, because they will cast light in understanding each other. You'll understand the book of Leviticus better, because you'll understand it in light of the fulfillment described in Hebrews. But also, when you're reading Hebrews, you're going to understand it a lot better if you're familiar with all the typology in the book of Leviticus itself. And so typology is another field, another *Genre*, that includes the use of language that we need to be careful about. We do not want to create a type of something in the Old Testament that's unwarranted, that's not actually a type. So you can see the care that has to be applied here.

Fourthly, another area or category would be parables. So we'll consider actually a couple of specific *Genre* within Scripture, first of all, parables in the New Testament, and then, secondly, poetry in the Old Testament. So these are two different *Genre* of different kinds of literature.

First of all, parables. We learned earlier about *metaphors*, which is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of idea is used in the place of another to illustrate an analogy between them. Well, this is distinguished from a "simile", which is another figure of speech, in which one thing is likened to another. And we'll say, "This is like that," or, "This is as we see in something else." A parable is an extended simile. And so, for example, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and then he gives us a parable. If you turn to Matthew 13, and you'll see several of these one after another. The word "parable" literally means, "a throwing along side of." In a parable, a truth is presented in terms of a story that illustrates that truth. Christ uses parables throughout the Gospels, as you know. He tells us that the purpose of parables is both to reveal and to conceal simultaneously. It would reveal truth to his people, his disciples, and it would conceal truth from his enemies. And so Jesus gives a parable about a king who takes his workers and sets them about caring for the vineyard, and he goes off into a far country. And he sends his servants in order to collect the produce, and they abuse them and kill them. Ultimately, he sends his son, and they say, "Hey, here is the heir. We can kill him and have the things for ourselves." And the king comes back, and he destroys these wicked servants and gives it to another. That parable is speaking about how the Lord has sent his prophets, and the Jews didn't receive them, and ultimately God sent his only begotten Son, and they killed him. And the Lord would take away the kingdom from the Jews and give it to another. The gospel was going to go to the Gentiles. And so his disciples and those who know the Lord would understand the truth. They could see how this explains and illustrates for us this important Biblical truth. Whereas, the Jews would be ignorant of the significance or meaning of what was being said often.

The important principle for interpreting parables is to recognize that most of the time there is one central point, one central truth to each parable. We're to look for one primary truth being communicated. We're not to draw diverse meanings and significance from every part of the parable. People begin to put meaning into this thing, and that detail and another detail. No, it's given as a whole to illustrate one primary truth. So in Matthew 13, verses 31 and 33, we read, "Another parable he put forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed,

which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.” And then he gives them another parable, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.” In both of these parables, the kingdom of heaven is being likened unto something. It’s being likened unto something that begins small, looks small, but like the mustard seed, it’s going to grow and fill the earth. Or like the leaven, which is small, sown into the meal, and it leavens the whole lump. You can see how the point is singular and it’s simple. In Matthew 7, verses 24 to 27, Jesus says, “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him”—so, clearly, we have a parable—“I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.” Then it speaks about the rain coming, and the storms, and the wind, and so on, and it doesn’t fall, because it’s founded upon that rock. And Jesus draws the conclusion, “Every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand.” And so here’s the contrast, and the rain and the floods come, and the entire house falls, or collapses—“great is the fall.” So the Lord is saying, those who hear his Word and do his Word are like those built upon the rock, and withstand the storms of life. And so we have a basic introduction, just a few examples to give us an idea of what parables entail.

But then fourthly, Old Testament poetry. Hebrew poetry is different from poetry in many other languages. In some languages, poetry is characterized by rhyme and meter, and so on. But Hebrew poetry is characterized by exaggeration, and personification, and vividness, and parallelism. The poetic books of the Old Testament would include Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations. Well, for the sake of brevity and simplicity in this lecture, we will limit ourselves to the most prominent feature within Biblical poetic literature. Hebrew poetry makes extensive use of what we call “repetitive parallelism,” which is used to express vivid emphasis in the Old Testament. And we’ll consider just a few of the types of parallelism. Remember, we’re seeking to learn how to interpret Scripture. And so, understanding the nature of Hebrew poetry and its parallelism keeps us from misinterpreting Scripture. So three types of parallelism.

First of all, there is “synonymous parallelism.” Here you will often find two phrases with the second phrase saying the same thing, only in different words. In Proverbs 19, verse 5, we read, “A false witness shall not be unpunished”—second phrase, “and he that speaketh lies shall not escape.” Well, “a false witness”—“speaking lies,” there’s a parallel; “shall not be unpunished”—“shall not escape.” There’s a parallelism there. Or in Psalm 95, verse 6, we sing, “O come, let us worship and bow down”—“let us kneel before the LORD our maker.” And so when we come to these texts, we think, Ah, here is synonymous parallelism. We wouldn’t make the mistake of thinking that the second phrase means something totally different than the first phrase, that they’re actually saying the same thing in different but similar words.

Secondly, there is “antithetical parallelism.” Antithesis is opposites. And so this emphasizes a truth by stating the opposite—the second phrase saying the opposite of the first phrase. In Proverbs 10, verse 4, “He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand”—second phrase, “but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.” So these two things are set in contrast. They’re still communicating the same truth, but by stating it in opposite ways. Or Proverbs 13, verse 1: “A wise son heareth his father’s instruction: but a scorner heareth not rebuke.” You can see how the point is being made by way of poetic contrast.

Thirdly, there is what we call “chiastic parallelism.” So that word “chiastic” comes from the Greek letter, *CHI* or *KAI*, which forms two crossing lines: X. Here, the words of a second half-

line reverse the order of the parallel words in the first half-line. You can think of it in terms of two phrases, and the order is, the first part is (A), the second part is (B). And then in the second phrase, you have (B) first, and then (A). AB—BA, in the two phrases. So the Old Testament uses this very frequently. I'll give you one example, in Psalm 51, verse 1: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness," and then it flips the order: "according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." That's a chiasmic parallelism. It enables you to appreciate the beauty of what God gives us in his inspired Word. But it also enables you to interpret it properly. The Lord is giving us one truth, and he's stating it in two different ways. So we don't want to misinterpret the Scripture by making these two parts different things when they're saying the same thing.

So again, why is this helpful to know and recognize? First of all, it prevents you from making unwarranted distinctions between related phrases—there's one meaning, not two. And then secondly, it can clarify your understanding of a difficult phrase by noting the synonymous parallel. So in the first phrase, you may find you're having difficulty understanding what it means, but then it's clarified when you recognize that it's stated again, in the case of synonymous parallelism, in the next phrase. So if one phrase is difficult to understand, the second may often explain it.

Well, this gives you, again, a little taste, a little example of how there are different *Genre*, and how poetry, Old Testament poetry in particular, has its own distinctive features. And therefore, we have to employ a set of Biblical principles for interpreting those particular passages. What I've illustrated here applies far more broadly, and in more advanced courses, you could have many more details.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the different uses of words, and a couple of the *Genres* found in the Bible, along with the principles that help us to interpret them accurately. In the next lecture, we will consider the principles related to a *Christ*-centered reading and interpretation of the Scriptures.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

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.

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by **Robert D. McCurley, ThM**

Lecture 10

Exposition

Imagine building a barn on a prepared sight. What would this entail? Well you would first need a plan, a blueprint, or a design. You would need to purchase and collect the raw materials, carefully selected boards and beams of wood. You would need screws and nails, roofing material, and so on. You would also have to assemble the appropriate tools—hammers, screwdrivers, saws, instruments for measuring and leveling, and ensuring things are plumb. Then you would need to employ these tools and materials in building the barn. But what is the goal? You do not aim at merely admiring the fine quality of the wood, or enjoying the use of the tools, or even seeing the end product of the completed barn, as wonderful as each of those steps can be. The purpose is to use the barn you built, to house animals in it, or store other items in it, to benefit from having the barn, by putting it to good use.

Over the course of this module, or course, we've been studying the principles of Scripture interpretation. In the process, we've considered the materials—the Bible itself. And we've been assembling tools for rightly dividing the Word. We've been learning the principles of how to interpret Scripture. We've seen how this brings us to an accurate understanding of what the Bible teaches and means, all of which is essential and enjoyable. But before we conclude this module, we should also consider how we can use the fruit of our labors, especially as teachers and preachers of the Word, for those men who are called by God to that task. Having said that, ordinary Christians can also derive profit from this instruction, by using the ideas in this lecture to better communicate what they've gleaned from their study of Scripture, and what they say to other believers in their private fellowship and discussions. So it is relevant for both proclaiming it publicly in preaching, and in explaining it privately in conversation. But our primary focus will be on the preaching of gospel ministers. We can only preach the Word after, and only after we have studied the Word.

So to summarize, the previous lectures supplied us with tools, and how to use the tools for interpreting Scripture. In this final lesson, we will forge an important link between exegesis and Exposition—between accurately interpreting the Bible, and faithfully proclaiming the Bible. Now, to be clear, this is not—not at all—intended to cover the whole topic of preaching. We hope, the Lord willing, that the John Knox Institute will provide a whole module, maybe more, on preaching

in the future. The scope of this one lecture is far more modest and limited. We only seek to introduce the basics of how we are to move from the interpretation of a passage to communicating the message of that passage.

So first of all, the purpose of Scripture—God gave us his Word with a purpose. He reveals truth to us, chiefly regarding who he is and what duties he requires of us. He shows us his glory in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, and he presses upon us all the implications that flow from that knowledge. And so, we should be concerned about the effect of the Word upon our souls and the souls of others. We want all men to respond appropriately to the Bible, to move from hearing, to understanding, to actually doing. Remember the language of James 1, verse 21 to 25, which says that we are to “receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” He says, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in the glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed.” Very similar to what you read at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7—the man who builds his house upon the rock contrasted with the man who builds his house upon the sand. The end goal includes the use of Scripture. Remember where we began in this module. Think back to 2 Timothy 3, verses 16 and 17: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” To that end, Paul writes a couple verses later, in chapter 4, verse 2, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

Well, if you put together these very steps, we see that the Bible teaches us to read the Scriptures—the Bible says explicitly to search the Scriptures, it says to study the Scriptures, to rightly divide the Scriptures, so that men who are called by God might faithfully teach and preach the Scriptures. And the result should be that hearers respond with faith and love in obedience to the Scriptures, bringing forth fruit to the glory of God. So to be clear, we aim at edification. The word “edification” is the idea of spiritually building up our souls, or the souls of our hearers. So how do we achieve edification by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, especially in preaching? Well, there are several components that are indispensable. We begin, as we’ve learned in this course, with exegesis. We begin with interpreting Scripture, understanding exactly what it says, how it is to be interpreted. That leads from exegesis to comprehension. It leads us to understanding the meaning of the Bible. And then that is followed by Exposition. So we can only explain what the Bible says after we have understood it accurately. But this ultimately results in edification, and both ourselves and others profiting from what we understand from Scripture, and all that we’ve heard in terms of the explaining of what we understand. The Bible teaches us that the interpretation, exegesis, of Scripture is not an end in itself. Rightly understanding the Bible is God’s appointed means to the end of edification, through the use of the truths we learn. The Bible conveys the saving and sanctifying knowledge of the truth. First Timothy 6, verse 3 speaks of “the doctrine which is according to godliness.” And Titus 1:1 says, “And the acknowledging of the truth, which is after godliness.” This is why Jesus prays, in John 17, verse 17, “Sanctify them by thy truth: thy word is truth.” And so we’re getting an idea of the importance of the use of Scripture, and how we move from our reading and interpretation to our exposition and explaining of it, which eventually leads, as we’ll see, to the application of it.

Well secondly then, we need to consider the *Exposition of Scripture*. So since we’ve learned a

little in this module about exegesis and comprehending the meaning of a Bible passage, we need to especially focus now on how to connect that to the next component, the *Exposition of Scripture*. Preaching is God's primary New Testament ordinance for the advance of his kingdom and the salvation and sanctification of souls. You think of how the Lord Jesus Christ makes this clear, when he sends disciples into all the world to teach them all the things that he's commanded them. You think of the book of Acts, which, chapter after chapter, speaks about the preaching of the apostles. We see their examples in their epistles as well. Remember the words of Acts 8, for example, in verse 4, it says, "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." And verse 25, "And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, return to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many village of the Samaritans." Preaching was at the center of the New Testament church, and it remains the center of the church today. So our focus here is especially on preaching. We could choose, for illustration purposes, any text of Scripture, but in what follows, I will use Ephesians 2, verse 1 to 3 as an example.

So first of all, we begin with a passage of Scripture. So a ministry must first select the portion he will preach. He will want to ensure that his chosen text contains one complete and coherent thought. Now, that can be a large portion with an overarching thought and theme, or a small portion with a more particular and narrow point. But it is best not to divide out a portion from a disconnected thought that ignores the transitions in the flow of the text. So, we're using as our example Ephesians 2, verse 1 to 3. But you know, one could select verses 1 to 10, which is a larger portion and choose that to preach on. And in doing so, the minister would see that in verses 1 to 10, we're learning about how God saves sinners—that's the point. And so he begins by speaking about a person's previous state of sin, what their condition was. Then he moves on to God's provision of Christ, and how he comes to deliver his people from their sin. And then, thirdly, he goes on to explain how faith is a means of receiving Christ and all that he's done. And then, lastly, and fourthly, he speaks about the works that flow as fruit from this saving conversion. Well, that would be appropriate, covering the basic theme of how God saves sinners under these four points. But you can also narrow the scope and choose just verse 1 to preach on, "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." And here we see that the point is speaking of man's deadness in sin, and God's quickening to life in regeneration. And so one would preach on what it means to be born again, of what is entailed in the deadness of man's sin, and how it is that God is the one who comes to work in their soul, and the fruit is quickening them unto life, the work of regeneration. All of that could be expounded. But for our purposes, I've selected verses 1 to 3, which primarily deals with, From what is the believer saved? And we're told there are three things from which the believer is saved. Well, we'll consider that more in a moment. But you'll notice how verses 1 to 3 hold together, and they come immediately prior to the words that follow in verse 4, which say, "But God." And then, there's this additional thought about the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ, in delivering them from sin. And so, first of all, we're talking about the selection of a portion of Scripture to preach.

Secondly, we now begin to employ the *principles of interpretation* that we've learned. So in Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 1 to 3, we look at the *textual context*. We go back to chapter 1, and we remember that Paul opens by giving us the broad scope of salvation. He looks all the way back into the past, and sees God's electing grace in choosing sinners. And then he goes the other direction, and looks all the way into eternity in the future, the inheritance that will be the believer's on the last day. And he covers many things in between. So this gives us the scope. And then he goes on to tell the Ephesians about how he's praying for them. And latterly in the chapter, he begins to speak

about who Christ is and what is to be known of him. And you'll note, in considering the *context*, some of that language actually carries over into chapter 2. And then, again considering the *context*, you look at what follows verses 1 to 3, in verses 4 and following, a description of what Christ has done in purchasing the salvation of his people, and how faith receives that and the fruit that flows from it, and so on. Or you zoom out, and you look at the whole book, and really, it can be divided into two parts. Chapters 1 to 3 give us the doctrine of the gospel, and chapters 4 to 6 give us the *application* of those truths to the church corporately, and to the individual believer particularly. And then we can also look at the *historic context*, the setting of Paul's writings, where he was in his ministry, and the background for Ephesus. What was Ephesus? What do we read in the book of Acts about Ephesus being the place where the temple of Diana was, and all sorts of other things. This fleshes out our understanding. And then if that's not enough, we come back to verses 1 to 3, and we begin to apply the principle of *comparing Scripture with Scripture*. The truths that we learn in verses 1 to 3, where do we find those truths elsewhere in the Bible? And what light does that shed on verses 1 to 3 and our understanding of it? You see what's happening—we're gathering insight into the right interpretation of the text. What does it mean? How are we to understanding it?

But then thirdly, we can narrow our scope, in considering verses 1 to 3. What do *the words* in these verses mean? And where do we find *the words* used elsewhere? What do we learn from the syntax, the way in which the words are related to each other? There's all sorts of details here. So in terms of the syntax, we recognize he's describing something in the past. This is what the believer was, when they were lost, when they were unconverted. Which means, this is what every unbeliever is, outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that helps us. We learn from our study of *the words* that Paul is describing something that God did, not that they did for themselves, but "You hath he"—that is, Christ—"quickened." It's something that the Lord does. And we think about these words. You know, the word "quickened," to be brought to life, to be enlivened. The significance of the word "dead"—"dead in trespasses and sins." How is the unbeliever dead?—spiritually dead, right? It's speaking about the soul. It's not speaking about their body. They're not physically dead. And what does that spiritual death include? The inability to see the truth, hear the truth, respond to the truth—all sorts of things that we could unpack there. It speaks about the "prince of the power of the air"—who's that? Well, that's the devil. And what's the significance of that, of being under his reign? It speaks about "the lusts of the flesh." What are those lusts? What does that mean? and how does that apply? It's speaking about indwelling sin within the believer, which corresponds to the enticements and temptation in the world. It speaks about being under the wrath of God. What is the wrath of God? How does that reflect his justice, his righteousness, his holiness, his just indignation against sin? There are all sorts of things we could explore there. The point is, at this stage, you're actually doing meditation. You're meditating, you're soaking in the text. You're looking at it from different angles. You're asking the question, What is the point and purpose of verses 1 to 3? What is it saying? Why is Paul saying it at this point and in this way?

Well, the fruit of this includes deriving the doctrine that is taught in the text, taught from the text, which, as I noted earlier, is this, it's describing from what the believer is saved. It's describing the condition of the natural man. In other words, it's talking to us about the bad news of man's sinful and lost state. And more specifically, we see that this doctrine is unfolded in three ways. It tells us that the natural man is dead, in verse 1; that the natural man is disobedient, in verse 2; and that the natural man is under damnation, in verse 3. This was the condition of the believer before they were saved, the condition of all men: dead, disobedient, and damned, if left to themselves.

Well then, fourthly, how do we *preach Christ*? We heard in the last lecture about the importance

of interpreting these passages in light of Christ. How do we *preach Christ*? Verses 1 to 3 seem to place the emphasis on the bad news of man's sin. But it is as a background of the believer's deliverance. Notice in verse 1, "You hath he *quicken*ed." So it's providing a background for deliverance. And it's tied to verse 5, which speaks of the believer being "quickened together with Christ." Well now things begin to emerge and we become clear. Okay, how is it that we *preach Christ* from verses 1 to 3? We begin to see, from the text itself, that indeed he's there, and we can develop that. We said that the natural man is dead, and disobedient, and damned, and we can come back to the passage, and we can show how Christ died for those who are dead in sins. He died as a substitute in the place of those who were spiritually dead, in order that they might live, in order that they might be quickened in him. He's the provision that matches this bad news, the good news that comes in the face of bad news. Secondly, he is the one who obeyed for the disobedient. He is the one who came and fulfilled all of the demands of God's law, and who has a record of perfect righteousness in our nature, which is credited to the account of those who come to him by faith. His obedience, and death, and conformity to the law is what answers the disobedience of the sinner. Thirdly, we have wrath, damnation. The Lord Jesus Christ is the one who comes to suffer wrath for the children of damnation, his believing people. He stands in their stead. The wrath of God is poured out upon him in their place for the penalty and punishment of sin, in order that they might be forgiven.

I'm just touching the surface here, but you can see how a passage which at first you might think, Well, this is just describing the bad news about the unbeliever's lost state. How am I supposed to *preach Christ* here? But you can get a sense in what I'm saying of how easy it is to *preach Christ* in this passage, and that can be further developed.

Well, using exegesis to open up and derive lines of thought aids the *Exposition* of the text. And so you take this natural condition, from which men are saved, you flesh out the three points of deadness, disobedience and damnation, drawing all of your studies together to explain and reinforce from elsewhere to illustrate the text, and exegesis is brought into *exposition*. You're interpreting it—interpreting the meaning, in order to unpack the truths that it contains.

But this is still not the end of our work, in drawing connections between interpretation of Scripture and the preaching of Scripture. But it is only after we have reached this point that we turn to the *application* of the text to the individual's soul. And so, thirdly, we'll consider the application of Scripture. We began with the question, What does it say? We moved to the question, What does it mean? We went on to see, How do I explain it? And finally, What does it mean for me and others? What are the implications that are to be applied to my life? So how do we move from *exposition* to *application* of the text?

Well first of all, the *applications* must be derived from the truths taught in the passage, rising out of the text itself, not unrelated or just picked randomly and then put into the sermon. People need to be able to look at their Bibles and see that the *applications* come naturally out of what they see there in the Bible. And so that means, as a minister, you need to be asking questions of the text. What does it reveal about God, yes? What does it reveal about Christ? What does it reveal about ourselves? What does it reveal about sin? What does it reveal about our duties and calls to obedience? What other responses? What does it reveal about our hidden motives? Go back now to Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 3. I'm going to leave you to actually ask those questions from those verses and see what it is that you uncover.

But then secondly, your primary focus, of course, is on the Lord—serving, pleasing, glorifying him—that's your focus in preaching. But never lose sight of *your audience*. God's Word is

being brought to them. The prophets, Jesus, the apostles knew to whom they spoke. They knew their spiritual condition, their needs, their issues, their background. And they aimed their words accurately to suit those who listen. So you need to ask yourself, What are the different categories of hearers that are sitting in front of you? Are there unconverted people? What about them? Are they unconverted people that are ignorant—they just don't know much about the Bible? Or, are they careless? Are they those who do know, and they're being spiritually reckless? Are there unconverted people who are hardened and obstinate, resisting the truth? Or, are there unconverted people who see their need? Yes, maybe no. Are they seeking? Maybe there's some unconverted people that are seeking and striving to come to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Others may be struggling whether they have faith or not. And then you have believers, of course, and there'll be weak ones and strong ones. There'll be those who really need comfort from this passage, and others who need conviction of sin from this passage. Some may be drifting, others may be in hot pursuit of the Lord. Some may be under trials. Some may be facing strong temptations. There may be those who need wisdom and direction, others who need assurance, or who need the call to perseverance. I could go on and on. But how does this text speak to these categories of people? And how does preaching Christ from the text relate to these? Again, your homework is to take Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 3, and to think through it in light of what I am describing here.

But we can also ask, thirdly, further questions of the text, including the one that we're illustrating in Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 3. How does the text inform? How does it instruct? How does it change our minds? How does it change our way of thinking? This is a part of *application*. There are things in our thinking that have to be changed, that have to be conformed to the Word and will of God. What are they? What are those things? We can ask questions like, What motivations inside our souls does it address and influence. This is really helpful in preaching. What motivates people? What wrong things are motivating them? What are the good things in this passage that should be motivating us? I mean, you can think on terms of preaching to the unconverted—The Lord says that you're dead and disobedient, and that you're under damnation. This is a call to be motivated to flee to Christ, and to flee from the wrath that is to come. Or there may be the motivation of being drawn at the sight of the glory of Christ, and of his love and mercy in saving sinners, and so on. It may be that it imparts to the believer, as they reflect back on where they were and where they are, it causes their heart to swell with love and gratitude, and now they're motivated to serve the Lord, love him, walk in the path of obedience with greater fervency as a result of it. Much more could be said. How does the passage contain exhortations? Or how do other exhortations flow from this passage? Commands, beseeching the people, exhorting them, in their response to what the passage says. What warnings can be derived from the truths taught in this passage? We can explain this by illustrating it. We can supply examples from other places in Scripture, and history, and nature, all of these reinforcing the warnings that God has given.

In all of this, there are different types of application. You're getting a sense of that. There's *practical application*—so that would be applications that instruct people on things they should do. You know, we think in terms of marriage—how is the husband to lead his wife and love his wife? Well, here are *practical applications* of how to love your wife—how is the wife to submit to her husband? Here are applications from it. In terms of our relationships to one another in the church, we can derive *practical instruction*—how we use our mouths, and how we serve the Lord's people, and other such things. These are *practical applications*.

A second category, we could call experimental, or *experiential applications*. And here we're turning to questions of Christian experience—where the Christian finds themselves in their

experience, where they ought to be in their experience, and how it is that they can get there. We're dealing with things like sorrow for sin, or joy in the Lord Jesus Christ, and hope for what is to come, the inner exercises of faith, and repentance, and communion with God, and the condition of the soul, and prayer, and all sorts of things. We can make applications that address these.

Another category would be *evangelistic applications*, where we're preaching Christ and the gospel, and applying the text in a way that is calling sinners to respond with faith and repentance, to the open and free disclosures of Christ's gospel, and the presentation of Christ as a Savior to them.

So there are various types of applications. But the point is, you're beginning to put the pieces together, moving from what the text say, to what it means, how we explain and expound it, to then how we apply it. The tools we've learned contribute to this enterprise of Biblical preaching. As I noted at the beginning, much, much more needs to be said about the nature of preaching. My purpose here is to connect it with this particular course. So in this lecture, we've explored the connection between exegesis and *Exposition*. So we've sought to tie the lessons of the whole module to their use, moving from the study, and the interpretation of the Word, to the preaching of the Word. The subject of preaching includes far, far, far more than what we have touched on here. Our focus has been on this connection between what we've learned, and the transition to preaching.

Well, we've now come to the end of our course of lectures on the principles of Scripture interpretation. But this is only the beginning of your journey. We've explored an introduction, a basic introduction to the principles that guide our interpretation of the Bible, highlighting only a small selection of the dominant tools God provides. As stated at the outset of this course, the aim was to provide you with the building blocks for personal in-depth study. These lectures are a door, not the destination. So you must take up these tools to press on in your study of God's Word. There's far more to see and learn, and the prospects are exhilarating. May the Lord richly bless the time and energy you devote to your ongoing studies of Scripture. While I will not have the privilege of meeting most of you in this world, my prayer is that we will be brought together under the throne, to bask in the glory of the full revelation of God, no longer by faith through the Scriptures, but by sight. *The best is yet to come.*