

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

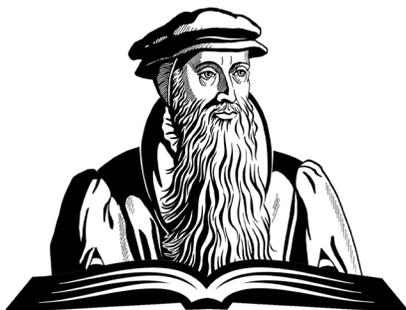
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 1:*

### **INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES**

*Lecture 9*

### **INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE**



**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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### *Module 1 ~ Lecture 9*

*Introduction:*

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# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 9*

# INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

You have no doubt had the experience of holding a conversation with someone, perhaps a friend or family member, and in the course of that conversation realizing that they misunderstood something that you were saying to them. They may have mixed up your words, or they may have even heard them correctly. But in either case, they misinterpreted what you were seeking to communicate. These instances of miscommunication cause many problems in daily life, but the same is true of written material. A written document must be interpreted properly in order to be understood correctly. As we've seen in previous lectures, the Bible is far more important than any other book in the world, so interpreting it is a far more solemn task—one that requires careful diligence in rightly dividing the Word of truth, as we see in 2 Timothy 2:15. One of the first questions that we ask, when reading a passage of Scripture, is, "What does this passage mean?" It is essential that believers understand accurately what the Bible teaches. Well, where do we learn how to approach the interpretation of Scripture? The answer is from the Bible itself. The sacred Scripture is its own interpreter. In order to avoid erroneous misinterpretations, we must interpret Scripture with Scripture. We continue in this first module on systematic theology covering the doctrine of first principles, with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered the preservation and translation of the Scriptures. In this lecture, we turn our attention to the fundamental principles of how to interpret Scripture. This will serve as an introduction, since a fuller treatment of this large subject would require us to devote a whole module or course to its consideration. As in other lectures, we will look at the biblical teaching on interpretation of Scripture scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So let's begin by opening our Bibles and considering it scripturally. In 2 Peter 1:20, we read, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." In the preceding verses, Peter makes reference to his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration—see that in verses 17 and 18. And you'll remember from what you read in the Gospels of what that entailed. Peter, James, and John were taken up into the mount, and the Lord Jesus Christ was transfigured in front of them. Moses and Elijah were there, they heard a voice from heaven, and so on. Well, everyone would consider that event remarkable, perhaps one of the highest privileges that you could possibly have, to have seen these things and heard these things. But Peter says something different. He compares that experience to having the Scriptures and concludes that, "We have a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed," in verse 19. In other words, he's saying, Though I had experiences and saw wonderful things on the Mount of Transfiguration, we can have even greater confidence in the Scriptures than those sorts of remarkable experiences.

But men are not given liberty to interpret those Scriptures as they see fit, according to their own notions. As the following verse, verse 20, says, the Bible was given by the Holy Spirit. So it must be interpreted according to what the Spirit Himself reveals throughout the whole Bible, not according to our own personal ideas. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 2:13, “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.” We learn, therefore, that the Bible itself tells us how we are to interpret the Bible. Now this flows from everything we have already learned about the Scriptures—it is inspired and therefore must be consistent and coherent within itself, because God cannot contradict Himself. The Lord has provided a beautiful, harmonious, perfectly-connected revelation within the pages of Holy Scripture. And so in this passage in 2 Peter, we see that the Bible itself provides us with the ability to interpret itself.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the interpretation of Scripture. And as we have done in previous lectures, we will expound some of the detailed categories that the Bible provides for us. So we begin, as we have in most of our lectures, with the Westminster Confession of Faith, because here we have a nice summary of what the Scripture teaches. Westminster Confession, chapter 1, paragraph 9, 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.” This is a very helpful summary. We have an infallible rule, that is, an infallible standard of judgment in interpreting Scripture. Since the Bible alone is infallible, it alone can be the infallible rule. Every passage of Scripture is to be seen in light of Scripture as a whole. And where one part is less clear, we use other parts that are more clear to help us understand those more difficult passages. So our standard is not tradition, it’s not new revelations of the Spirit, nor is it our own minds. It is the Word itself, comparing Scripture with Scripture. No text in the word of God, therefore, can be interpreted in any way that would conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture. So there’s kind of a summary of the basic point or emphasis in interpretation.

Secondly, in interpreting Scripture with Scripture, we’re faced with a question—the question of which texts or passages are given priority. What do I mean? Well, in other words, what is the method for deciding which passages shed light on other passages, instead of the reverse? The answer simply is this: we interpret the more obscure texts in light of the more clear ones. If this one principle is followed, it would prevent many of the errors that exist in the modern church.

But we need to spell this out in greater detail. How is this principle applied, interpreting the more obscure texts in light of the more clear ones? Let me give you several examples. The first instance would be to interpret the historical narratives in light of the didactic, or teaching-oriented, passages of Scripture. So the narratives include the Old Testament historical books; you think of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, many others as well, Nehemiah and Joshua, Judges, we could go on and on. And we also have in the New Testament the same thing, in parts of the four Gospels, as well as the book of Acts. The didactic books would include, for example, the Old Testament Law, parts of the prophets as well, and in the New Testament, the epistles would be an example. Well, the purpose of the didactic passages is to teach, to instruct, and to explain doctrine. This is not to mean that we put these two categories against each other, the narratives and the didactic. Rather, most of the time the doctrinal sections of Scripture clarify the stories, the historical narratives, and often the historical passages illustrate and flesh out the doctrinal sections, and so they work hand in glove, if you will—they work closely together. So for example, the Gospels report what Christ did and what Christ said, and then as you read the New Testament epistles—

they help interpret the significance of what was done and said, supplying us with doctrine and exhortation and application. And so the first example is interpreting historical narratives in light of the sometimes more clear, teaching-oriented passages, or didactic passages, of Scripture. The reason this is important is because someone might, in reading the historical narratives, see or hear or read of an event that takes place, and they could draw false conclusions from that. There may be an instance where it appears as if the Lord doesn't know something. So for example, Abraham on Mount Moriah—the Lord was going to see what Abraham would do. Well, we know from other passages of Scripture that the Lord is omniscient—that He knows everything infinitely, perfectly. He knows it before things take place. And so it's not as if the Lord had to learn something in that passage, in Genesis 22, but rather the Lord is stooping to speak to us in terms of the way that we think and see things, and in dealing with Abraham, to draw out his faith. Well, we could multiply examples, but hopefully you see the importance of this.

The next example would be to interpret the implicit passages in light of the explicit. So there's a difference between what is said, and what is left unsaid, but implied. So does John 3:16 imply that fallen men have a natural ability to believe the gospel in their own strength? Well, you look at that passage—the text explicitly states that believers will have eternal life. It does not explicitly say who will or will not believe, or what is needed to believe. But if you turn three chapters later, to John 6—look, for example, at verse 44 and verse 65—the Lord Jesus explains the limits of sinful man's ability to believe on his own. He needs a new heart, he needs the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and so on. So we have to interpret the implicit in light of the explicit.

Another instance would be to interpret earlier texts in light of later texts. The Bible opens with Genesis, all the way through the Old and New Testaments, ends with the Book of Revelation. As the Scriptures unfolded, God provided a fuller picture of all that He intended to do in the history of redemption, beginning in Genesis and progressing through the Scriptures. And so as He gave us more Scripture, He provided more revelation, and therefore more light, on what we need to know. And that later revelation often clarified what was stated earlier. So if you turn to Genesis 3:15, here you have this gospel promise, but it's like a little seed. You see something, you see it truly, but it's hard to understand, with just that verse, all that is intended. But that seed grew, and our understanding of what was intended increased as the Lord told us more, and we learn more and more about the seed of the woman, and who this Messiah would be, and all that He would accomplish and do; and then we, of course, see it all fulfilled in the New Testament in the Gospels, and we learn about the way in which God has brought salvation through His Son. Well, that message of salvation was there in the beginning, but we're able to understand it more clearly with what revelation followed it. So the New Testament helps us to understand more of the Old Testament, just as you cannot understand the New Testament without a solid grasp of the Old Testament. Both of these things are true. The New Testament draws on language, vocabulary, concepts, history that are in the Old Testament. And it wouldn't make much sense to you at times, it would be difficult, if you didn't have that Old Testament. But here in this point, I'm especially emphasizing that those Old Testament Scriptures can be seen and interpreted through the light of the New Testament.

This relationship of the Old and New Testament is so important that we will consider this in a separate lecture. We'll talk about how that relationship of Old and New Testament work as the complete revelation of God.

Next, we must interpret figurative texts in light of more literal texts. When Christ says that He is "the door," we're not to conclude that He is a wooden door that hangs on hinges. We know that He is the incarnate Son of God and that His human nature consists of a true body and a reasonable

soul. So we understand that Christ as “the door,” teaches us that it is by Him and through Him alone that we have access and acceptance before God. Many other passages teach us that, and so we’re interpreting the figurative in light of more literal passages elsewhere.

Lastly under this section, the Westminster Confession, in chapter 1, paragraph 6, also teaches that “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.” Now think about that for a second. Good and necessary consequences are just as binding as statements that are expressly taught in Scripture. Now true consequences only bring out the full meaning of the words of Scripture, as long as the conclusions that we are deducing are good and necessary. So in Matthew 22:31–32, Jesus illustrates this when He proves the doctrine of the resurrection to the Sadducees by an argument from good and necessary consequences derived from Scripture. Paul also illustrates this in another place, in Acts 17:2–3. And so we’re interested in what the Bible explicitly states—that’s important. But we also recognize an important place for good and necessary consequences that flow out of what is stated, so, things that we necessarily conclude from what is stated. And so that’s an important element or tool in our toolbox of knowing how to interpret Scripture.

Thirdly, we must turn to a polemical consideration of this matter of interpretation. We need to consider some of the arguments which undermine the proper interpretation of the Holy Scripture. First of all, there is an important difference between getting the true meaning out of the text, and reading our meaning into the text. These are two very different things: getting the true meaning out, versus reading our meaning into the text. The former, of course, is right, and the latter is wrong. We are not to bring our own subjective ideas to the Bible and then look for ways to make Scripture teach what we think. That would be putting our meaning into the Bible. James 1:19 says, “Let every man be swift to hear,” and then in verse 21, it says, “and receive”—“receive” the engrafted word “with meekness.” The believer comes to the Bible with a desire to hear what God says, to receive and believe what the Bible itself teaches. We are the ones that need to be instructed and taught. Hebrews 4:2 teaches that we must mix our hearing with faith. What we’re hearing we have to be receiving and believing. We must avoid interpreting the Bible according to our own desires, our own prejudices, perhaps our own history or tradition. We are to interpret the Bible as it is written, understanding what it actually says, and guarding against forcing our own views upon it. So that’s one error that we are to be alert to.

The second thing that we should consider is that every heresy, every false doctrine, seeks to support its position from Scripture. And this is no surprise, really, because Satan himself quoted Scripture in a false way in his temptation of Christ in the wilderness. You can read about that in Matthew 4:1–11. Likewise, false teachers will do the same. Paul makes this point in 2 Corinthians 11:13–14, where he says, “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.” So the tendency of false teachers is going to be to appeal to Scripture. The devil himself did it. Even those heretics who deny the deity and divine glory of the Lord Jesus Christ seek to prove their case wrongly from the Bible. And so the believer must be on guard. It is not enough that a teacher or preacher quote Scripture. The question is, are they rightly dividing the truth and interpreting the Bible accurately in their teaching? So we must be on guard on that front as well.

Fourthly, we’ll consider this practically. In thinking about the interpretation of Scripture, we can highlight a few implications. First of all, ministers of the gospel must give careful attention to the accurate interpretation of Scripture in their preaching and teaching. In Nehemiah 8, we have

an account of the Levites—the Old Testament ministers, if you will; we have an account of them reading the Scriptures to the people. In the end of verse 7 and verse 8, it says that they caused them to “understand the law. . . . So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” You see what’s happening there. This is a good description of what it means to be a pastor. The Word of God is being read to the people, but then there’s this obligation to give the sense, in order to give the meaning, to help them understand what that Scripture means. You think, for example, in the book of Acts, you have Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch is traveling along, he’s reading from the prophecy of Isaiah out loud. And Philip approaches him and begins to ask him whether he understands, and he says, “How can I understand, if I don’t have a preacher? I’m not sure what this means.” And so Philip comes up and begins to explain to him how that prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in giving him the sense, and helping him to understand, accompanied by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he’s brought to believe that word. He’s converted and be baptized. Or you think of Acts 18:24–28, we’re told that Apollos, who had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and who was very fervent in spirit, still had to have the way of God expounded to him “more perfectly,” so that he would understand it more clearly, more fully, more accurately. And so this is essential for pastors, that they give themselves to careful study and interpreting the Scripture, in their instruction of the people of God.

Secondly, we also learn that it is essential to engage in a systematic habitual reading of the whole Bible. And this is true for every Christian. We need to be reading the whole Bible, which results in a more comprehensive knowledge of what it teaches. You think of Paul in Acts 20:27. He’s speaking to the Ephesian elders, and he says, Listen, I’ve been faithful to teach you the whole counsel, all of what the Bible says. And so if you only read your favorite parts of the Bible while neglecting other parts, it will cause spiritual malnutrition and inhibit your ability to properly interpret Scripture. Now this could lead to the foolish mistake of thinking that you’ve arrived at a new, innovative meaning of a passage, which, as I said, is foolish. Now, you need to be reading fully in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and in reading, to think and reflect and meditate upon what God is saying. And as you do so, you’ll discover that in reading one place of Scripture, other places—maybe several other places—in Scripture will come to mind that you’ve read elsewhere. And you’ll begin to put those pieces together to have a fuller understanding of the will of God that has been revealed to us.

Thirdly, the accurate interpretation of Scripture is essential for the believer’s growth in Christian maturity, by strengthening our spiritual discernment. This is spoken of in Hebrews 5:13–14, and the Bereans were notable for this. In Acts 17:11 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.” We need to be good Bereans. And parents are to assist their children in this; Deuteronomy 6:6–7 teaches us that. Even husbands are to assist their wives, as 1 Corinthians 14:35 says. We sing in Psalm 119:18, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.” This is the cry of the Christian: “Lord, give us the help of the Holy Spirit, that we might understand the Bible rightly and grow thereby in spiritual maturity.”

Fourthly, we must begin by asking, what does this passage mean? Not, what does this passage mean to me, or how does it apply to me? It is only after we understand the accurate meaning that we then go on to apply that passage and its application to our own life and circumstances. Faithful interpretation of Scripture will protect God’s people from the countless errors of those who twist the Scriptures, 2 Peter 3:15–16 says. The believer is not to be “tossed to and fro, and carried about

with every wind of doctrine,” as we read in Ephesians 4:14. Rather, they are to “prove all things” and “hold fast that which is good,” 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

In this lecture, we considered the interpretation of Scripture, noting that the only infallible rule of interpretation is Scripture itself. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. We mentioned in passing the importance of understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and in the next lecture we’ll consider that relationship, which affects our doctrine of Scripture. God gave us both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and believers desperately need the whole of the Bible to live as truly biblical Christians.