

What Does the Word Say?
Session 44: Christological focus, understanding the Bible: Part VI
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles that we use to properly interpret the Bible. Last time we gave a number of examples for how to properly use the context of a verse, including its historical context. Dr. Spencer, what do you want to discuss today?

Dr. Spencer: We could go on giving many more examples about the use of context, but I want to keep moving forward. So, I'd like to take a look at a few key ideas that we need to keep in mind as we study the Bible.

Marc Roby: What ideas are these?

Dr. Spencer: The first one is that Jesus Christ is the focal point of the entire Bible. The Old Testament looks forward to Jesus Christ and the New Testament tells us about his birth, life, death, resurrection and then also tells us that he will come again to judge the living and the dead as we are told in Acts 10:42, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 2 Timothy 4:1. At that time the world as we know it will be destroyed and God will create a new heavens and a new earth. From that time on everyone will either live eternally in heaven or in hell.

Also, Jesus himself told us that the Old Testament testified about him. After his resurrection, he appeared to his disciples and we are told in Luke 24:44 that "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.'"¹

Marc Roby: And by listing Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, Jesus was referring to the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible, which is our Old Testament.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. In other words, he was saying that the entire Old Testament speaks about him. In addition, the New Testament is entirely about Jesus Christ and his church. So, whenever we read the Bible, any part of the Bible, we need to ask ourselves, "What is this saying about Jesus Christ?"

Marc Roby: In other words, there is a Christological focus to the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. In their excellent book *A Puritan Theology, Doctrine for Life*, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones demonstrate that the Puritans considered a Christological focus to be a major principle of biblical interpretation. They quote the famous Puritan John Owen, who wrote that "the revelation and doctrine of the person of Christ and his office, is the foundation whereon all other instructions of the prophets and apostles for the edification of the church are built".² We

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² Joel R. Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 31

must keep this Christological focus in mind as we read the Bible or we will not get a complete understanding of what God is teaching us in each section.

Marc Roby: How, in a practical sense, does our being aware of this Christological focus affect our Bible study?

Dr. Spencer: It affects our Bible study very deeply. When we say that the entire Old Testament points forward to Christ what we mean is that God controlled every event of human history during that time to reveal exactly what he wanted people to know. Not only is Jesus Christ the focus of the Bible, he is also the focus of all history. History is linear and God has a purpose in creation. The Bible is telling us real history, but that history is not a sequence of random events controlled by the whims of men. It isn't that God let things run on their own and then sent a prophet to speak once in a while. No, everything unfolded according to God's eternal plan, he providentially rules all of history.

Marc Roby: That probably sounds a bit fatalistic to some of our listeners. Do you mean that God determines every detail, or just the general scope or grand plan of history?

Dr. Spencer: I mean that God has sovereign control over every detail. But, if you think about it for a minute, how could he possibly control the grand scheme if he didn't have control over every detail? Remember the old proverb that for the want of a nail the shoe was lost; for the want of a shoe the horse was lost; for the want of a horse the battle was lost; and for the loss of the battle the war was lost? The reality is that if God is not able to control every detail, he could never guarantee anything with absolute certainty.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that some of our listeners might be objecting at this point. After all, we live in a world with physical laws and people at least appear to have some kind of free will – an ability to make real decisions. How on earth then can God control everything without doing away with free will and physical laws?

Dr. Spencer: We would be getting too far off topic to discuss that at length right now but let me make two quick comments. First, with regard to the inanimate creation, God does use the fixed laws that he put in place most of the time, but he is free to overrule them at any time. I don't think he does that very often at all, but he can. He also has the ability to perfectly predict exactly how everything is guided by those laws.

Marc Roby: Alright, you said you wanted to make two comments, what is the other one?

Dr. Spencer: The second one deals with living things, most specifically with human beings. Suffice it to say for now that there is no logical contradiction in saying that I make real decisions for which I can be justly held accountable and that, at the same time, God has foreordained exactly what will happen. God understands me perfectly and knows exactly what I will do in each and every situation, so he doesn't need to force me to do anything.

Let me use a very unflattering analogy, but one that I think at least illustrates that there is no logical contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I used to have a dog that loved to chase a tennis ball. If I grabbed a tennis ball I could lead that dog all over the place

without ever having to lay a hand on him. He was doing exactly what he wanted to do at that moment, and yet I was getting him to do exactly what I wanted him to do. There is no contradiction in saying that my dog was doing exactly what he wanted to do and that I was controlling the situation. You don't want to take this analogy very far at all of course, we are not puppets, and God never leads us into sin, although he does allow us to be tempted, but it at least shows that there is no necessary logical contradiction.

Suffice it to say that God is infinitely more knowledgeable, wise, and capable than we are, and he is able to ordain exactly what will happen without, in general, overriding the free will of any creature, although he has the right and ability to do that when he chooses.

Marc Roby: That example is unflattering – I happen to remember that dog you refer to! But, I think it does give at least a hint of an answer, and I can see that pursuing that subject right now would get us way off track.

Dr. Spencer: It definitely would. But I would like to quote from the Westminster Confession of Faith because it contains a brilliant, yet succinct statement that deals with this topic. In Chapter III, on God's eternal decree, Paragraph 1 the confession says that "God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Marc Roby: That is a great statement, although it certainly includes some very deep topics for further discussion.

Dr. Spencer: Further discussion at a different time. For now, I want to get back to hermeneutics.

Marc Roby: Very well, you were discussing how our being aware of the Christological focus of the Bible affects our study.

Dr. Spencer: And I made the point that God is completely in control of all history, so the events described in the Old Testament all fit into his eternal plan. He knew that he was going to send Jesus Christ into the world, to be born in the small Jewish town of Bethlehem to a virgin who was pledged to be married to a carpenter named Joseph. He knew everything about the life, death and resurrection of Christ and how he was going to use that to redeem a people for himself.

And in addition to revealing progressively more and more over time about this coming Messiah, he deliberately brought about certain events in the history of his people to serve as illustrations and precursors pointing to these later events.

Marc Roby: And we are told about many of these in the New Testament.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. For example, we are told in the book of Hebrews that the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was pointing forward to Jesus Christ as the ultimate sacrifice for sins. In Hebrews 10 the writer speaks about the Old Testament ceremonial law and says it was only a shadow of the true sacrifice, which is Christ. He points out that the sacrifices were repeated over and over again precisely because they were not effective; they did not truly cleanse

people from their sins. He writes in Verse 4 that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” And then, in Verse 10 he writes that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Marc Roby: The writer of Hebrews also tells us that Jesus is our permanent high priest.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. In the Old Testament times, the high priest was the religious leader of the Jewish people. He was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses and he would go into the holy of holies once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, to make atonement for the people. In Hebrews 7:23-26 we are told that “there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”

Marc Roby: And, unlike the high priests in the Old Testament, Jesus is also the sacrifice of atonement.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. In John 1:29 we are told that “John [the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” He was referring to the fact that the lamb was the most common sacrificial animal in the Jewish sacrificial system. In particular, it was a lamb that was to be sacrificed the night before God destroyed all the firstborn of Egypt. The blood from this lamb was then to be sprinkled on the door frames of the Jewish homes and God would pass over those homes when he destroyed all of the firstborn in the land. This is the origin of the Jewish Passover celebration.

We are told in a number of places in the New Testament that Jesus is the final sacrifice of atonement. For example, in Romans 3:25 we are told that “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” Then, in Hebrews 10 we see this final efficacious sacrifice of Jesus Christ contrasted with the continual sacrifices of the Old Testament. In Verses 11-12, 14 we read, “Day after day every priest [this is talking about the Old Testament priests] stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [which is speaking about Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ... because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

Marc Roby: That is a glorious promise for those who have placed their trust in Christ. And it is very clear how much the Old Testament presents us with a pattern for things that are revealed in the New Testament.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they do. The word we use to describe this typology. The Old Testament events, objects and people who in some way point to New Testament realities are called types, and the realities that they point to are called the antitypes. So, for example, the Old Testament lamb is a type of Christ in his role as our sacrifice, and the Old Testament high priest is a type of Christ in his role as our permanent high priest.

We must be careful here however. Typology must be distinguished from allegorizing. Allegorizing can be dangerous as we have noted before and can lead people into all sorts of fanciful interpretations.

Marc Roby: What would you say is the key difference?

Dr. Spencer: The key difference is that in typology we are not adding anything to the meaning of the text.³ Mickelsen, in his book *Interpreting the Bible*, does a good job of explaining what typology is. He writes that “In typology the interpreter finds a correspondence in one or more respects between a person, event, or thing in the Old Testament and a person, event, or thing closer to or contemporaneous with a New Testament writer. It is this *correspondence* that determines the meaning in the Old Testament narrative that is stressed by a later speaker or writer. The correspondence is present because God controls history, and this control of God over history is axiomatic with the New Testament writers. It is God who causes earlier individuals, groups, experiences, institutions, etc., to embody characteristics which later he will cause to reappear.”⁴

Mickelsen also goes on to contrast typology with allegorizing. He then quotes K.J. Woolcombe, writing that “Typology as a method of exegesis is ‘the search for linkages between events, persons or things *within the historical framework of revelation*, whereas allegorism is the search for secondary and hidden meaning underlying the primary and obvious meanings of a narrative.”

Marc Roby: So, the basic difference is between noticing certain similarities that are there as opposed to reading a bunch of hidden meaning into a passage.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And you can’t miss most of the clear typology in the Bible. The Jewish people were in slavery to the Egyptians for example, and were led out of that bondage, through Passover and the Exodus, into the Promised Land. And Christians are led out of their bondage to sin, through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, into new life in Christ. The Israelites in the Promised Land still had to contend with enemies who were there and had to trust in God’s promises to deliver them. And Christians still have to deal with indwelling sin and enemies in this world, trusting in God’s promises that we will ultimately be victorious. There is much more than we have covered, but I think that gives the basic idea. And this kind of typology is often used in recognizing the many ways in which the Old Testament speaks of Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: But there are also many direct prophecies about the coming of the Messiah.

Dr. Spencer: There certainly are, and we went over a few of them in Session 20 when we were discussing external evidence that corroborates the Bible.

Marc Roby: Have we finished with what you want to say about the Bible’s Christological focus and typology?

³ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pg. 252

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 237

Dr. Spencer: We have for now.

Marc Roby: Alright, you mentioned at the beginning that you wanted to look at a few key ideas, so what is the next one?

Dr. Spencer: The next idea is that of covenants. The Bible talks a great deal about covenants and by looking for them and thinking carefully about them we can significantly enhance our understanding of God's word.

Marc Roby: And a covenant is simply an agreement between two parties.

Dr. Spencer: It is, but it is not necessarily an agreement between equals and it isn't necessarily voluntary on both sides either. The Bible talks about a number of covenants; for example, God made a covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth by a flood, and the rainbow is the sign God gave us to remind us of that covenant. He also made a covenant with Abraham to make him the father of many nations. And he made a covenant with the people on Mt. Sinai, with Moses as their representative. There are others, but there are two major covenants that I want to discuss, usually called the Covenant of works and the Covenant of grace.

Marc Roby: I think we had better hold off discussing those until next time, because we are out of time for today. I'd like to encourage our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would appreciate hearing from you.