

Lecture 4: Four First Principles: Clarity, Accommodation, Progressive Revelation, Cross-Reference

Dr. James Rosscup · The Master's Seminary · 90 minutes

The course now opens its toolbox of general principles, the keys that work anywhere in Scripture. Dr. Rosscup begins with four: the Bible is clear because God is the best of communicators; God rightly accommodates his truth to human speech, while liberal accommodation indicts it; revelation unfolds progressively without ever being corrected; and Scripture interprets Scripture. Listen for how each principle is tested on real passages, from the mustard seed to born of water and the Spirit.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Clarity: the fog is ours, not God's

Some give up on the Bible as too hard, but God is the best communicator of all and is not trying to mystify anyone. If we are in a fog, we imposed it ourselves through sin, neglect, laziness, or hostility. The principles of interpretation are keys that open doors, and as context, word study, and cross-reference are used, the treasury inside God's house keeps yielding: the word is a lamp to the feet, and the Spirit gives the believer the ability to appraise it.

02

Five evidences that Scripture is clear

First, Scripture declares that men will understand, making wise the simple. Second, much of Scripture is clear immediately on reading, though passages like Hebrews 6 remain genuinely hard. Third, God promises to guide, directing paths by clearing the obstacles from them. Fourth, whole doctrines come into clarity when correlated: one God, the Trinity, the deity of Son and Spirit, inspiration, man's sinfulness, salvation by grace through blood. Fifth, even problem passages become clear on proper, prayerful study.

03

Knowing where to tap

Every realm of life is unclear to the uninitiated: baking a cake, repairing an engine, a child's game an eight year old grandson must explain to grandpa. Rosscup tells of the repairman whose itemized bill read one dollar for fixing the problem and ninety nine for knowing where to tap. The principles of this course are the knowing where to tap, and he adds the story of a young John MacArthur told by his dean that he had missed the whole point of the passage, who resolved in humility that it would never happen again.

04

The wrong kind of accommodation

Liberal theologians have long claimed the Bible's writers accommodated themselves to the errors of their day: that sacrifice is a slaughterhouse religion God never really wanted, that Adam was invented to meet a psychological need, that miracles need not be taken seriously, that Jesus erred or played along when he called the mustard seed smallest of seeds. The answer to the last is simple honesty about context: he spoke of the garden seeds of that day and place, and the whole objection melts. This kind of accommodation indicts Scripture and stirs unbelief, correcting God's word from a throne of intellect.

05

The right kind of accommodation

God has wisely accommodated his revelation to human forms of speech so that man can understand, associating truth with things already familiar. The sower and the soils open the heart's response to the word; I am the door builds on the sheepfold already described in the context; the pure milk of the word nourishes growth as milk nourishes a body; the overcomer made a pillar in God's temple stands immovable forever. This accommodation does not falsify; it illuminates, and it reaches its grandest form in the Old Testament types that picture greater realities to come.

06

Accommodations we invent

The interpreter can also fog the picture himself. One commentator read Jacob wearing Esau's garments as a picture of the believer robed in Christ's righteousness, turning an act of lies and deceit into an emblem of righteousness, a falsification out of his own brain. Well meant is not the same as true: man's word had been imposed on God's.

07

The branches put forth no effort?

A second invented accommodation reads John 15 as teaching a Christian life of no effort, since a natural branch simply rests in the vine. Cross-reference dissolves it: the Scriptures ring with walking, fighting the good fight, and Paul's own testimony that he labored more abundantly than all, yet not he but the grace of God with him. The true point of the vine is union and communion, the close contact through which Christ's sufficiency bears fruit in active, dependent servants.

08

Progressive revelation is not evolution

Progressive revelation must be distinguished from the naturalistic scheme that says religion evolved from many gods to one, read back into Genesis by later priests and carved into documentary theories. God could reveal truth in any age on the spot, and earlier records, genealogies carefully kept, even a log from the ark, could pass down under his providence. What the principle does mean is that God reveals himself gradually, with continuity, building light upon light, each generation accountable to be faithful with the light it has.

09

What the progression allows

The progression allows advanced truth early, as monogamy stood in Genesis 2 as the original blueprint Jesus reaffirmed against divorce. It allows truths to remain, as nine of the ten commandments are carried into the New Testament. And it allows movement from the embryonic to the matured: prophecies given, then fulfilled in the birth, cross, and resurrection; the sacrificial system gathered up into the one offering. Galatians calls the old covenant elemental and preparatory; Hebrews opens with God's fuller speech in a Son; Peter shows the prophets searching what their own Spirit-given words meant.

10

Daniel's son of man, filled out in Revelation

Prophecy shows the progression at work. Daniel sees one like a son of man come on the clouds to the Ancient of Days and receive a kingdom over all peoples. Revelation takes up the same figure, describing him in blazing detail in its first chapter and crowning him with gold in its fourteenth as he treads the winepress of the wrath of God. Later revelation does not correct Daniel; it expands him, agreeing and filling in the picture.

11

Incomplete is not incorrect

If the New Testament fills out the Old, was the Old defective? No: partial, foundational, preparatory, even temporary, but never false. Arithmetic is not corrected by algebra; the type is like a soldier's photograph of his wife, precious and true, but no rival to the embrace when he gets home. So Leviticus 11 drilled Israel for centuries in distinction, until on a Joppa housetop God lowered the sheet three times and taught Peter that the lesson was about people: in Christ the dividing customs fade, not because they were wrong, but because what they pointed to had come, and God is no respecter of persons.

12

Scripture interprets Scripture: born of water

The fourth principle is cross-reference. John 3:5, born of water and the Spirit, carries competing views: baptismal regeneration, the water of the word, and others. Rosscup argues the natural background for Nicodemus was not Ephesians, which did not yet exist, but Ezekiel 36, which a teacher of Israel knew: the Spirit at work, newness of life, and cleansing water, the same three features John 3 presents. Psalm 119 adds its witness that the word cleanses the young man's way. The most natural, defensible connection wins.

13

Ransack the passage before you travel

Cross-reference carries a trap: leaving the passage too early, snatching a connection before the original text has been milked, ransacked, every stone turned. Study the first passage deeply, then the second just as deeply in its own context, then join them. And keep the authorities in order: Hendriksen, Bruce, Morris, and O'Brien are riches, but they are not the authority; the word is, the same word to which those men themselves submitted. God has made it possible, through context, word study, and grammar, for the interpreter to be his own man.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Ephesians 5 · Psalm 19 · Proverbs 3 · Psalm 119 · 1 Corinthians 2 · Hebrews 6 · Matthew 13 · John 10 · 1 Peter 2 · Genesis 27 · John 15 · 1 Corinthians 15 · Genesis 2 · Matthew 19 · Hebrews 1 · 1 Peter 1 · Daniel 7 · Revelation 1 · Revelation 14 · Leviticus 11 · Acts 10 · John 3 · Ezekiel 36

KEY TERMS

The clarity of Scripture

God's word can be understood because God is the best of communicators; any fog is imposed by the reader through sin, neglect, or laziness, not by the text.

Accommodation, wrong kind

The liberal claim that Bible writers went along with the errors of their day, from sacrifices to miracles to Adam; a system that indicts Scripture and stirs unbelief.

Accommodation, right kind

God wisely fitting his revelation to human forms of speech, teaching unknown truth through familiar things: sowers, doors, milk, pillars.

Progressive revelation

God's gradual, continuous unfolding of truth from Genesis to Revelation, giving each generation light it is accountable to obey.

Completion, not correction

Later revelation fills out earlier revelation without falsifying it; the Old Testament is partial and preparatory, never incorrect.

Type

An Old Testament person, thing, or institution, fully historical in its own day, designed by God also to picture a greater coming reality.

Cross-reference

Scripture interpreting Scripture: letting a genuinely parallel passage, studied in its own context, throw light on the passage in hand.

COMPREHENSION CHECK: FOURTEEN QUESTIONS

1. If a reader finds the Bible hopelessly foggy, where does the lecture locate the fog?

- A. In the ancient languages
- B. In the reader, through sin, neglect, or laziness
- C. In poor translations
- D. In the difficulty of God's style

2. Which of these is one of the five evidences of Scripture's clarity?

- A. Every passage is equally easy
- B. Councils have settled all questions
- C. God promises to guide, making the path smooth by clearing obstacles
- D. Commentaries agree everywhere

3. What did the repairman's itemized bill teach about interpretation?

- A. Experts overcharge
- B. Fixing is easy once you know where to tap; the principles are the knowing
- C. Machines and texts are alike simple
- D. Never pay for advice

4. How does the lecture answer the claim that Jesus erred about the mustard seed?

- A. Jesus was speaking poetically
- B. The manuscripts are corrupt
- C. He spoke of the garden seeds of his hearers' day and place, and the objection melts
- D. Mustard seeds have changed since

5. What makes God's accommodation the right kind?
- A. It hides hard truths
 - B. It fits truth to familiar things so man can understand, illuminating rather than falsifying
 - C. It removes figures of speech
 - D. It simplifies doctrine away
6. Why is reading Jacob in Esau's garments as the robe of Christ's righteousness a falsification?
- A. Jacob never wore the garments
 - B. Esau was the believer in the story
 - C. It turns an act of lies and deceit into a picture of righteousness, imposing man's word on God's
 - D. Garments never carry meaning
7. What is the true point of the vine and branches, against the no-effort reading?
- A. Effortless passivity
 - B. Union and communion with Christ, whose sufficiency bears fruit through active, dependent servants
 - C. Branches earn the sap
 - D. Fruit is optional
8. How does progressive revelation differ from an evolutionary view of religion?
- A. It does not differ
 - B. It says truth developed from polytheism
 - C. God reveals truth gradually by his own design in any age, rather than man groping upward naturally
 - D. It denies early revelation
9. What example shows advanced truth given early in the process?
- A. The food laws of Leviticus
 - B. Monogamy as the blueprint of Genesis 2, reaffirmed by Jesus
 - C. The tabernacle furniture
 - D. The kingship of Saul
10. How does Revelation handle Daniel's vision of the son of man?
- A. It corrects Daniel's errors
 - B. It ignores Daniel
 - C. It expands and fills in the same figure, agreeing while giving greater detail
 - D. It reassigns the vision to an angel
11. What did the sheet lowered at Joppa teach Peter?
- A. New dietary rules for the church
 - B. That Leviticus had been wrong
 - C. That the centuries of distinction had served their purpose, and God is no respecter of persons
 - D. That visions outrank Scripture
12. Why does Rosscup take Ezekiel 36 as the background of born of water and the Spirit?
- A. Ephesians quotes Ezekiel
 - B. Nicodemus knew Ezekiel, and it shares the same three features: the Spirit, new life, and cleansing water
 - C. Ezekiel mentions Nicodemus
 - D. The rabbis required it

13. What trap accompanies the cross-reference principle?

- A. Using a concordance
- B. Studying the original languages
- C. Leaving the passage too early and snatching a connection before ransacking the text in hand
- D. Reading the whole book

14. What place do great commentators hold in the interpreter's study?

- A. Final authority on disputed texts
- B. Riches and helps, but never the authority, which is the word they themselves submit to
- C. Obstacles to personal discovery
- D. Substitutes for observation

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 B · 4 C · 5 B · 6 C · 7 B · 8 C · 9 B · 10 C · 11 C · 12 B · 13 C · 14 B

TALK IT OVER

1. The fog is ours, not God's. Which part of Scripture have you quietly given up on as too hard, and which of this lecture's keys, context, word study, cross-reference, prayer, would you actually try on it first?

2. Completion, not correction: how would you use the photograph analogy, or the arithmetic analogy, to explain to a skeptical friend why the Old Testament's sacrifices were never a false religion?

3. Rosscup honors Hendriksen and Bruce and still says goodbye to them when the text demands it. Where is the line in your own study between healthy respect for teachers and letting them become your authority?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

The psalmist's confidence in Psalm 119:105: God's word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. The God who speaks intends to be understood.

GO FURTHER

The lecture's own trail: keep working the Ephesians 5:18 observations this course assigns, follow the John 3:5 study into Ezekiel 36 and Psalm 119 with your own Bible open, and when you consult the great commentators, Hendriksen, F. F. Bruce, Leon Morris, Peter O'Brien, receive their riches while keeping Scripture itself the only authority at the table.

Lecture by Dr. James Rosscup, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/hermeneutics-4