

GOD'S IMAGERY

Interpreting Scripture's Symbols,
Parables, and Word Pictures

Joel C. Seifert

BIBLE
Discovery
series

Northwestern Publishing House
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Cover illustrations: Lars Justinen; GoodSalt, Inc.

Art Director: Karen Knutson

Designer: Pamela Dunn

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

All rights reserved. This publication may not be copied, photocopied, reproduced, translated, or converted to any electronic or machine-readable form in whole or in part, except for brief quotations, without prior written approval from the publisher.

Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284

www.nph.net

© 2013 by Northwestern Publishing House

Published 2013

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-8100-2506-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
PART I: SYMBOLS	7
ONE	
The Lord Makes Himself Known	9
TWO	
Sacrifices: Symbols of Sin and Salvation	18
THREE	
The Spring Festivals of the Old Testament, Symbols of Christ's First Coming	26
FOUR	
The Fall Festivals of the Old Testament, The Fulfillment of Christ's Work	36
FIVE	
The Symbolism of Numbers	44
SIX	
Symbols of the Savior	51
SEVEN	
The People of the Lord	58
EIGHT	
Apocalyptic Imagery	65
PART II: PARABLES	79
NINE	
Introduction to Parables	81
TEN	
What Happens When the Gospel Is Preached?	83

ELEVEN
Life in the Upside-Down Kingdom 90

TWELVE
Working Hard in the Kingdom of Grace 97

THIRTEEN
Surprising Advice From an All-Knowing God 106

PART III: WORD PICTURES 113

FOURTEEN
Death, Birth, and Life 115

FIFTEEN
The Bread and Water of Life 121

SIXTEEN
From Slaves to Sons Through Circumcision 126

SEVENTEEN
Ransomed and Redeemed 131

EIGHTEEN
Types of Christ 137

SCRIPTURE INDEX 144

INTRODUCTION

A ring of gold. A sparkling diamond. A boyfriend on bended knee. Before the young man even says a word, his future wife knows exactly what he's trying to communicate. Sometimes the most simple of symbols communicate more quickly and effectively than the spoken word.

A sower scattering seeds that fall on different kinds of soil. A light shining in a dark place. An innocent lamb shedding its blood. A rainbow-encircled throne. Throughout Scripture, God uses a variety of different symbols and pictures to quickly and effectively communicate the truths of his Word. Those symbols are powerful and memorable. Even though the majority of us don't live in an agrarian society, we know and love the picture of Jesus as our Good Shepherd. The parables of Christ are so clear and memorable that even non-Christians talk about a "prodigal son."

Sometimes God speaks in a simple, straightforward manner: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). But sometimes God uses figurative language. Since many of the pictures he uses come from the everyday life of people living in Israel two thousand or more years ago, those pictures can be challenging for modern readers. We also face challenges from incorrect or misleading interpretations that over the years have been attached to key symbols.

There are many types of illustrations that the inspired authors use throughout Scripture. For the sake of this book, those types of speech are divided into three general categories. While these aren't hard-and-fast categories, these groupings give organization and direction to our study:

Symbols: objects or pictures used in Scripture to call key truths to mind

Parables: extended comparisons, primarily used by Christ to help us understand and apply heavenly truths

Word Pictures: words or phrases that are commonly used in Scripture, which, unlike symbols, can be understood largely by means of the natural meanings of the words themselves (This will become more clear as we progress through the book.)

Our study will be guided by the knowledge that God wants to communicate with us through his Word. Since this is true, each chapter begins with a portion of Scripture that uses illustrative speech. We will use these sections to lead into our discussions on different biblical symbols, parables, and word pictures.

Allow a disclaimer before we begin: This book is *not* intended to be a glossary that explains every symbol, parable, and word picture found in the Scriptures. Instead, the goals of this book are (1) to give the reader a basic understanding of the different ways our Lord communicates through pictures, (2) to provide explanations to the most common and important symbols, and (3) to give the reader greater appreciation for the message of God's grace that is repeated in beautiful words and pictures throughout God's Word.¹

The apostle John wrote, "These [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). God's purpose in giving us the Bible is to lead us to know and trust in Jesus as our Savior. Our study of God's symbolic language will not lead us into secret knowledge or information that isn't found elsewhere in Scripture. Instead, it will lead us to an ever-greater appreciation for the grace God gives us in Christ and to marvel at the love of our mighty God who wants to share his message with us.

¹If the reader is looking for a summary of the basic rules for reading and understanding Scripture, consider *Bible Basics*, another book in this series from Northwestern Publishing House that both provides an overview of Scripture and explains the key principles of scriptural interpretation. For a more in-depth treatment of symbolism, consider David Kuske's *Biblical Interpretation*, available from Northwestern Publishing House.

PART I

SYMBOLS

The Purpose of Symbols

If people with no knowledge of the Bible walked into one of our churches, what would they see on the altar wall of the sanctuary? Perhaps only a short horizontal piece of wood bisected by a longer vertical piece of wood. Christians, however, see a representation of the cross on which Jesus died for the sins of the world. Additionally, Christians see a reminder of the burdens our Savior tells us to expect in this life (when he calls each Christian to “take up his cross and follow” him [Matthew 16:24]). If the cross is empty, it might also call to mind Jesus’ resurrection. Such important and complex thoughts revealed in two overlapping pieces of wood!

That’s the power and purpose of symbols. Once learned, they call to mind complex or important information very quickly and simply. They are, in a sense, communicating in *shorthand*—substituting pictures for longer or more complex thoughts. That is also what makes understanding symbols challenging at times: the meanings of symbols *need to be learned*. The meanings are not necessarily apparent from the symbols themselves. In our previous example, unless you were taught what Jesus did on the cross, that symbol would be meaningless to you.

Divine Shorthand

If God wants people to understand the Bible, why would he use symbolism—especially if it can be confusing for some people? As stated previously, a symbol can convey an incredible amount of information very quickly once you’ve learned the symbol’s meaning. When God refers to the church as his “bride” or Paul speaks about “the cross of Christ,” God is calling to mind deep truths with just a few words. It’s a very efficient and helpful way to communicate. We could call it *divine shorthand*.

Because symbolism uses pictures, symbols are very memorable. Instead of simply explaining that the coming Savior would die to pay for the sins of the world, God often pictured Jesus as a pure and innocent lamb led silently to the slaughter. Such beautiful language speaks to our minds *and* our hearts.

Decoding Biblical Symbols

How do you determine the meaning of a biblical symbol? Generally, we rely on *context*. Often the meaning of the symbol will be supplied by the immediate context in which it is found. At other times the meaning is provided in another book of the Bible. In fact, much New Testament symbolism would be nearly impossible to understand completely if one wasn't familiar with how those symbols were used in the Old Testament.

The cultural context is also important. For example, many of us no longer live in a pastoral, agrarian society, so the symbolic use of *shepherd* might not be immediately obvious to us. Some basic information about how shepherding was done in Bible times helps us understand the meaning of this symbol.

This section of our study will discuss some of the most common symbols God uses to communicate truths about our relationship with him and about the work and coming of Christ. It will also treat the symbolic use of numbers in the Bible and the unique character of *apocalyptic symbolism*, especially as seen in the book of Revelation.

Genesis 15:17-21—*When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces [of sacrificed animals]. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."*

How do you picture God? As a kindly old grandfather with a long, snow white beard? a mischievous prankster who hides out of sight? a divine watchmaker who created this world and set it in