

# Bite Size Bible Study

## Figurative Language #203

By Pastor Lee

### Dealing with Figurative Language

We deal with figurative language every day in our own language and culture. But when a figure of speech occurs in a different language and culture and is then translated into our language, much, if not all, of the authors meaning may be lost. This is what happens in many sections of our English translations of the Bible.

Often, we read a section and don't recognize the figurative language and find that the meaning is obscure or nonsensical.

Basically, figurative language is any language that is not to be interpreted literally. It's any language that we should not take at face value. When we bump into one of these, we need to have the tools to recognize them and then interpret them.

Sometimes we wish that every statement in the Bible were literal (it says what it means), this might be easier, but it could also make it a boring textbook. It would lack some of the beauty, power, and impressionism that is present in figurative language.

Figures of speech are important because a serious reader must slow down and ponder what the author is referring to. Learning how to recognize and interpret figurative language will help us discern the Bible more accurately.

### Types of Figurative Language

Let's look at several types of figurative language found in our Bibles. This is not a complete list. For a more complete list and definition of each I refer you to "How to study the Bible" by Samuel G. Dawson pp. 253-276.

#### Parable

The word parable comes from two Greek words. *Para* means alongside, and *bole* meaning to throw. Thus, *para bole* means to throw something alongside for comparison.

Comparing two things is the basic idea of a parable, and simply illustrates an abstract truth that the speaker is attempting to get across. A parable teaches just one point. Parables provide a powerful teaching tool that Jesus often used.

#### Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that is used when someone talks about something and says; "It's as cold as such and such," or "It's like so and so," or "I'm as poor as a church mouse." That's a simile. Saying "as" or "like" alerts us to the figure of speech called simile.

#### Metaphor

A metaphor is where one thing is said to be another. The word *meta* means beyond, and the word *pherein* means to

carry on; that is, to carry some meaning beyond the literal.

We read in Psalm 84:11; *For the Lord God is a sun and shield.* Here God is compared to the sun, to display the quality of brightness. Sun is also the source of life on earth. God is also compared to a shield. This describes God as a fierce protector and will protect his children from any harm.

#### Allegory

An allegory is similar to a parable. A parable is a comparison, and most of the time, it presents only one point. However, an allegory is a cluster of comparisons.

The good example of an allegory is in Galatians 4:21-30 where Paul speaks of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, and said, *"Now these things contain an allegory."* Paul was addressing Christians who were going back under the Law of Moses and gave this allegory to show why they ought not to do this.

This allegory compares two cities, two mountains, two children, flesh and Spirit, bondage and freedom, Jews and Christians, and the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. Thus, we see how an allegory is a cluster of comparisons.

#### Proverb

A proverb is a short pithy saying; a concise saying that in a few short words represents a lot of words and a lot of wisdom.

In 2 Peter. 2.22, Peter talked about certain false teachers who, as Christians, had turned around and started denying even the master who bought them. Peter said it's like the true proverb, *"The dog returns to his own vomit," and "The sow, after washing, returns to her wallowing in the mire."* Peter's few words illustrated that these false teachers were going to end up worse than when they started out. These short proverbs provide for a lot of wisdom, with not a lot of words.

#### Irony or Sarcasm

Irony is an expression that is the opposite of what is commonly thought, sometimes even a type of ridicule or sarcasm. A good example is in 1 Kings. 18.27, where Elijah chided the prophets of Baal after challenging them to a miracle-working contest, and they couldn't perform. *At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely, he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."*

Did Elijah really think that maybe their god was busy? Not at all. Did he really think their god was deep in thought? No, he didn't believe Baal was really up there. What was he doing? As a matter of fact, it wasn't even light

sarcasm. It was ridicule! Elijah didn't literally mean a word he said to those prophets.

### **Personification**

Personification is quite often used as means to attribute personal characteristics to something that's non-human.

In Numbers 16.31-32, Korah said that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were taking too much authority upon themselves to lead the nation when he led a rebellion against them. Then God intervened and the "*earth opened up its mouth and swallowed Korah and his followers.*" Of course, that's not literally true, although the ground did open up and swallow them. The earth literally does not have a mouth any more than it has ears. Moses simply attributed personal characteristics to an inanimate object; that is, to the earth.

### **Parallelism**

While Parallelism is not technically a figure of speech it is closely related and will open up literally thousands of verses and help us to correctly interpret them.

Many lines in the Bible would be hard to interpret on just a first reading if we didn't understand parallelism. Fortunately, the Bible gives us a lot of help in interpreting this figure of speech.

Parallelism is a form of Hebrew poetry. The Hebrews didn't care if their poetry rhymed in sound, as they preferred for it to rhyme in thought. This is called Hebrew parallelism; that is, two lines or more rhyme in thought rather than in sound. One can often use the line that's clearly understood to interpret the one that's harder to understand. Thus, parallelism is two or more lines that are placed beside each other to show resemblance or relationship.

A well-known parallelism appears in Psalm 51:2: "*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*"

Many of the proverbs of Solomon also follow this form, for example, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:18).

Many verses in the Bible become clearer when we apply the understanding of Figurative Language to them. Not only is our understanding enhanced but the scripture becomes more beautiful.

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