

LESSON 4 Figurative Language in Interpretation

This lesson is the second of two lessons on interpretation. You have learned that figurative language explains one thing in terms of another. This calls for some special skill in interpretation! Lesson 4 will help you understand some of the major ways figurative language is used in Scripture.

This lesson will give you an interesting overview of figurative language as it is used in *parables*, *prophecy*, *types* and *symbols*, and *poetry* in the Bible. These four categories represent a large part of biblical writings. It is too valuable a part to neglect. You need have no fear in your study of such parts of the Bible if you learn to understand the uniqueness of each category.

lesson outline

Parables

Definition

Purpose

Facts to Remember

Understanding Parables

Prophecy

Definition

Problems

Types and Symbols

Definition

Features of Types

Uses of Types

Symbols

Poetry

Where Found

Features of Hebrew Poetry

lesson objectives

When you finish this lesson you should be able to:

1. Identify four important things to consider in understanding parables.
2. Name the two kinds of prophecy.
3. Explain why prophecy that foretells future events is the hardest kind of prophecy to understand.
4. Explain the use of types and symbols in the Bible.
5. State three characteristic features of types.
6. Describe three kinds of parallelism in Hebrew poetry and identify examples in Scripture.

learning activities

1. Read the opening section, outline, and objectives.
2. Learn the meanings of key words that are new to you.

3. Study the lesson development and answer the study questions in the usual manner.
4. Take the self-test at the end of the lesson. Check your answers carefully. Review those items answered incorrectly.
5. Carefully review Unit 1 (Lessons 2-4), then complete the unit student report for Unit 1 and send it to your GU instructor.

key words

allegory	parallelism
analogy	prophecy
dogmatic	symbol
parable	type

lesson development

PARABLES

Objective 1. *Identify four important things to consider in understanding parables.*

Definition

A parable is a short story drawn from nature or common-life situations. It illustrates a moral or religious lesson. Parables were used by teachers in ancient times. Jesus used parables in much of His teaching. In the Master's teaching the parable reached its highest level of perfection. Most of the parables of Scripture are to be found in the Gospels. There is no set length; they can be short or long.

Purpose

Jesus used parables for two reasons: (1) to teach His disciples and others who listened and were responsive to Him (for these people, the parable illuminated the truth), (2) to veil the truth from those who were not responsive to Him. The disciples asked Jesus about this. In Matthew 13:10 they asked Him, "Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?"

Application

1 Read Matthew 13:11-17. Find the answers to the following questions.

a To whom has the knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven been given?

.....

b In verse 13, what does Jesus give as the reason for His use of parables in talking to the people?

.....

.....



Facts to Remember

First, parables always illustrate by means of an *earthly process* or happening. Losing a coin, letting light shine in the dark, a farmer with his seed, rich men, poor men, building a house: all are themes familiar to most people. If they do *have ears to hear*, understanding is not far away! Second, the parable always contains a *spiritual lesson* that it is intended to teach. Third, there is always an *analogy* between the spiritual lesson and the earthly, or common, illustration. *Analogy* is “resemblance, in some particulars, between things otherwise unlike.” Fourth, both the illustration and the lesson must be *correctly interpreted*.

There will be just one central truth in each parable. Actors, elements, and actions will need identification, but they will be real-life presentations rather than the difficult, abstract presentations that are usually found in an allegory.

Application

2 From the list at the right, choose the word or phrase that completes each sentence.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ... a Parables illustrate by means of
..... happening. | 1) truth
2) an earthly
3) allegory
4) analogy
5) a spiritual lesson |
| ... b Parables always have
..... to teach. | |
| ... c Each parable will teach one
central | |
| ... d There is always an
..... between the
earthly and the spiritual. | |
-

Understanding Parables

Let us consider four things in our approach to the understanding of parables. First, *parables in the gospels relate to Christ and His Kingdom*. The first question you should ask yourself when studying them is, “How does this parable relate to Christ?” Remember the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13? When Jesus interpreted this parable He said that He, the Son of Man, was the man who sowed the good seed (v. 37). Ask yourself questions like the following: “Is there a character in the parable that represents Christ?” “Is there teaching in the parable about Christ or His mission in the world?” “How does the parable relate to the Kingdom?”

The kingdoms of this world rise and fall. About many of them, you can say they “have been,” meaning they have come and are already finished. The Kingdom of God *has already come* for those who are born again. It is continuing, for people continue to be born again. *It will come* in its fullest sense at the Coming of the Lord. When you study a parable then, the important questions to answer first are, “How does this relate to Christ?” and “How does this relate to the Kingdom?”

Application

3 Read Luke 15:1-7. This is the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

a How does this parable relate to Christ?

.....

b How does this relate to the Kingdom?

.....



Second, *parables must be considered in the light of the place and time from which they come*. The ideal way to do this, of course, is to study books about Bible customs and culture. It adds some understanding to the *Parable of the Lost Coin*, for example, to know that women of those days in that place had very limited resources. They wore their personal wealth on their persons in some form of jewelry. It represented security against troubles that might come in the future. A woman would be much more anxious and worried about losing such a coin than a modern woman who might have simply lost one of several coins that had no such crucial importance to her. So, learn all you can from books. Whether or not you have other books to consult, read as much and as often as you can in the Bible itself. For example, you will find a lot of information in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Leviticus that will help you understand the New Testament customs, feasts, Sabbaths, and other aspects of Bible life.

Third, *look for Jesus' own explanation of the parable*. Frequently, His explanation follows the parable, either immediately or within a few verses. For example, Jesus explains the *Parable of the Lost Sheep* in Luke 15:7. His explanation follows the words, "In the same way. . ." as does His explanation of the *Lost Coin* in 15:10. Jesus waited until He was alone with His disciples to explain the *Parable of the*

Sower (see Luke 8:4-9). In this case the verse before the parable (Luke 8:4) helps us to understand Jesus' explanation of it.

Application

4 Read Luke 15:2-3 again. What circumstance led to the parables about lost things?

.....

.....

Fourth, *compare the teachings you seem to see in the parable with the full context of the Scripture*: the chapter in which the parable is found, the book, and any Old Testament association that would be helpful in understanding it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called “Synoptic Gospels” because they deal with similar material in the Lord’s life on earth. But, they give their accounts from different viewpoints. Compare the accounts of a parable if more than one gospel writer mentions it. Sometimes you can find more detail in one account than in another. You will be able to find *doctrine* in parables, but you must compare it with other Scripture for confirmation.

PROPHECY

Objective 2. *Name the two kinds of prophecy.*

Objective 3. *Explain why prophecy that foretells future events is the hardest kind of prophecy to understand.*

Definition

Prophecy can be defined as the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose. Sometimes prophets of the Bible “foretold” events that were to happen in the future, and sometimes they “forth-told” or proclaimed God’s truth for the present. Somehow, people are often more curious about knowing the future than about knowing God’s will for their own time. But both types of declarations made by the prophets were important.

Problems

Can prophetic portions always be literally interpreted as are the great teaching passages of the Bible? Can you understand Isaiah in the same way you understand the *Sermon On The Mount* (Matthew 5–7)? No, Isaiah will be harder to interpret. You might expect the answer to be “Yes,” since the general rule for Bible interpretation is to use the *literal* or ordinary meaning of words. Passages which declare God’s truth as a “telling forth” of His will for man now can be interpreted through the basic principles you have learned. But prophecy that *foretells* future events is more difficult. More figurative language is used, so more study must be done to understand each symbolic word. (The next section of the lesson tells more about this.) More reading must be done to discover the time, the place, and the circumstances of the prophetic message.

Of course when a prophecy has been fulfilled and its interpretation is in the Bible itself, understanding is easy. One example of this is in Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:25-33). Peter quoted a prophetic psalm (Psalm 16:8-11) and showed, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, how it had found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. You will find another example in the following.

Application

5 Read Acts 8:26-36. Read Isaiah 53:7-8 also. Answer the following questions.

a In Acts 8:27-28, who was reading in the book of Isaiah?

.....
.....

b In Acts 8:34, what did the Ethiopian want to know?

.....
.....

c In Acts 8:35, Philip explained this prophecy to him under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Who did Philip identify as the subject of the prophecy?

.....
.....



But what of prophecies that are not interpreted for us in Scripture? There are many of them. They are the most difficult to interpret, and people have many different opinions about them. There may be several reasons for this, but we will explore only three:

(1) The prophets often saw visions which revealed future events to them. That is, they were given mental pictures of these events. They wrote down what they saw, but it is hard to explain what you have seen to another person. Think about how you would explain to a blind person what a dog looks like. You could give a true explanation, but his mental picture might turn out to be quite different from what you were seeing. So it is with prophetic visions. The book of Revelation is an example of this. The vision came to John. He wrote it down. But it is hard for us to imagine an accurate picture of the things he saw. We can get the general message: the Lord is working out an awesome program on the earth, the wicked will meet their doom, the righteous will inherit the Kingdom, Jesus will

be All in All (King of Kings and Lord of Lords). But there is much difference of opinion about the details of the book of Revelation.

(2) The sheer mass of prophetic material in Scripture would require years of specialized study to master. In addition to the last seventeen books of the Old Testament (which are prophetic books), there is prophecy in the Psalms, in Revelation, and scattered throughout most of the other books as well.

(3) The time element in prophecy is not usually clear. The sequence of events may be given, but the time of fulfillment and the time span between events are usually veiled. Some prophecies were for the near future; some were for the distant future. These two classes of prophecy were sometimes joined in a way that makes them seem the same when they are not. The following is an example of such a passage. We can be sure of its interpretation because Jesus interpreted it Himself.

When Jesus read the Scripture in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), He read from Isaiah 61:1-2. When He had finished what He wanted to read, He folded up the scroll, handed it to the attendant, and sat down. His words to the people were, "This passage of Scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read" (v. 21). But Jesus had not read all of the passage. He had stopped in the middle of a sentence. The part He left out spoke of judgment, of the Lord defeating the enemies of His people. The first part was fulfilled as they listened. The last half of the last sentence has not yet been fulfilled. No human being reading Isaiah 61:2 would have been able to guess that the fulfillment of what it was prophesying would be divided by the time gap between Jesus' first and second comings! So it is wise not to be dogmatic about prophecy. There are too many things we do not know.

Application

- 6** Circle the letter before each of the correct completions. Prophecy that foretells future events is the hardest kind of prophecy to understand because
- a) it is usually an allegory.
 - b) it has more figurative language than other prophecy.
 - c) it often came to the prophet in a vision that is difficult to communicate.
 - d) there is not much prophecy in the Bible to compare with it.
 - e) the time element is usually veiled in foretelling future events.
- 7** Read 1 Peter 1:10-11. Note verse 11. Whose spirit was in the prophets, enlightening them?
-
-

This verse gives the correct perspective to prophecy. Jesus is the center of it all. In the very last chapter of the book of Revelation (22:6-10), Jesus is shown to be the person behind all prophecy. Therefore, all prophecy must be seen as the Spirit of Jesus giving us (His children) “hints” and “clues” along the way, helping us understand that we are in an on-going program that will have a conclusion and a glorious future beyond this life. In spite of the difficulties surrounding interpretation of prophecy, it remains a source of encouragement and faith to the believer. You are in the forward-moving program of Jesus Christ. All prophecy must be understood in that light.

TYPES AND SYMBOLS

Objective 4. *Explain the use of types and symbols in the Bible.*

Objective 5. *State three characteristic features of types.*

Definition

In the Bible a type is a person or thing in the Old Testament which is believed to foreshadow another person or thing in the New Testament. A symbol is something that simply stands

for something else and pictures it in some way, often without the consideration of time found in a type. But a symbol is sometimes connected with time, and a type is sometimes called a symbol.

Types are really God's "object lessons." He introduced them in the Old Testament as a form of prophecy of things that would be realized in actuality in the New Testament. Most of the Old Testament types are seen in the tabernacle and wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. Some of the main types of the Old Testament are explained in the book of Hebrews. In Chapters 9 and 10 the writer of Hebrews explains many of the arrangements in the tabernacle and then says, "The Holy Spirit clearly teaches from all these arrangements that the way into the Most Holy Place has not yet been opened as long as the outer Tent still stands. This is a symbol which points to the present time" (Hebrews 9:8-9). He then continues to show that Christ is the *perfect sacrifice* of which the animal sacrifices were a type.

Features of Types

There are three features of a biblical type that are characteristic: (1) *It must really resemble the thing it foreshadows.* For example, the animal sacrifice foreshadowed the shedding of the blood of the Lord Jesus. That was a "type" of the atoning death of Jesus Christ. (2) *The type must be indicated in Scripture either directly or indirectly.* Hebrews 3:7-4:11 is an example of a direct explanation of a type. The *rest* promised the people of God under Moses and Joshua was a type of the rest we are promised in Christ. In fact there can be found a whole series of types of *rest*. Disobedient Israelites could not enter the land of *rest* (3: 10-11), just as a person cannot enter into God's rest if his heart is evil and unbelieving. In Hebrews Chapters 8 and 9 there are examples of types that are *indirectly* indicated. The tabernacle of the Old Testament is shown to have significance but the writer of Hebrews does not spell out every possible relationship. Because of what he says, we believe there are some types to be seen in the furnishings

and arrangements of the tabernacle. (3) *Types cannot be forced into correspondence in every detail with what they foreshadow.* For example, a number of Old Testament men are designated as types of Christ. Moses is one of them, but neither he nor anyone else was like Christ in every way.

Application

- 8** Read Hebrews 3:1-6. Answer the following questions.
- a** What quality did Moses have that made him a type of Christ (3:2)?

- b** Explain two things in Hebrews 3:3-6 which show that Moses was not like Christ in every way.

- 9** Complete each of the following sentences.
- a** A person or thing in the Old Testament which foreshadows another in the New Testament is usually called a

- b** Something that often stands for something else without consideration of time is called a

- c** were really a form of prophecy, used by God as “object lessons” to teach about coming events in His program.
- 10** List briefly in your notebook three characteristic features of *types*.
-

Uses of Types

God has used a wide variety of subjects as “object lessons” or *types*. If you study this subject further, you will find *people* used as types. Places, such as the *Promised Land*, are sometimes used as types. Many *events* from creation to feasts and celebrations of ancient Israel were used as types.

Duties were used as types. These included high priestly duties typifying Jesus Christ the Great High Priest and the Levites' manner of carrying the ark of the covenant with such care, for to touch it with the hands meant death. This taught respect for God's holiness (2 Samuel 6:6-7). *Material objects* such as the tabernacle and its furnishings were types.

The books that have been chosen for this course are short books which you can study and learn principles to apply to any book in the Bible. As you gain skill in Bible study, you will probably be interested in applying methods you have learned to longer books. Old Testament books which are rich in types and symbolism are the books of Moses: Genesis through Deuteronomy.

The Passover Meal is designated as a *type* with true significance by the Lord Himself (Luke 22:14-16). Because of this designation we can expect to find several interesting types in the event of the Passover.

Application

11 Read the following Scriptures to find the meaning of a type in the Passover.

a Exodus 12:15. what material substance is commanded to be removed from the house and the food?

.....

b Matthew 16:5-12. What does the material substance (above) typify in this passage?

.....

c Who is using a material substance as a type in Matthew 16:5-12?

.....

12 Read the following Scriptures to find the meaning of another type in the Passover.

a Exodus 12:22. what material substance is commanded to be placed on the posts and beam of the door?

.....
b Hebrews 11:28. What caused Moses to order that the material substance (above) be placed on the doors?

.....
c Hebrews 9:19-22. Compare this passage with Exodus 12:22. The sprinkled blood of the Passover seems to have been a type of what ceremony in the near future for the Israelites?

.....
d Compare Hebrews 9:12 with Exodus 12:22 and Hebrews 9:19-22. Both of these Old Testament uses of blood are types of what?

.....

Symbols

A symbol was defined for you at the beginning of this section as something that stands for something else and pictures it in some way. It is often different from a type in that it is not concerned with foreshadowing the thing it represents. It simply *stands for* it. You need to be careful both with symbols and types that the interpretation of them comes from Scripture itself. The danger is to let your imagination force comparisons that are not correct.

Symbols in Scripture sometimes have more than one meaning. For example, Jesus is called “The Lion from Judah’s tribe” (Revelation 5:5), but the symbol of a lion who goes about seeking to devour is used of the Devil (1 Peter 5:8). The aspect of the lion as a picture of the Lord Jesus is the strong, kingly nature of the animal. Jesus is pictured as the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world. The lamb is also a picture of

a new Christian. A fig tree and salt are symbols of the people of God. The harvest, a wedding, and wine were symbols of the end of the age. Symbols can be found in the New Testament as well as the Old.


Application

13 Read Matthew 26:26-29. The Lord's Supper uses symbolism familiar to every believer.

a What is the bread a symbol of?

b What is the cup a symbol of?

14 Read Matthew 9:35-38. Write in your notebook each symbol in this passage and what it stands for. (List them in the order that they are mentioned.)



POETRY

Objective 6. *Describe three kinds of parallelism in Hebrew poetry and identify examples in Scripture.*

Where Found

Poetry is scattered throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Exodus 15 gives us the beautiful songs of Moses and Miriam; Luke 1 gives us Mary's song of praise and Zechariah's prophecy which are in poetic form. As you study the Bible you will find a great deal of Hebrew poetry. In the book of Psalms, of course, you have the hymn book of Israel: lyric poetry meant to be sung.

Features of Hebrew Poetry

Hebrew poetry does not rhyme. The length of its lines is not important. The Hebrew poem is built around a *thought pattern*. The writer has great liberty in the structure of each line.

Hebrew poetry gets much of its style from parallelism. *Parallelism* gets its meaning from "parallel." In the sense used here, it refers to the relationship between every two lines or

verses in Hebrew poetry. There are three kinds of parallelism used in Hebrew poetry. I am going to give you the name and explanation of each kind. You are not expected to remember the technical names, but it would be well to note the kinds of parallelism used. When you come to them in Scripture you will, then, be aware that what is being said is not accidental but planned as part of the structure of the poem. The three kinds of parallelism are: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic.

Synonymous parallelism means that the second line of the poem REPEATS the TRUTH of the first line, in similar words. You will find an example of this in Psalm 24:1.

The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord;
The earth and all who live on it are his.

Antithetic parallelism means CONTRAST. The second line is contrasted with the first. Psalm 1:6 is an example.

The righteous are guided and protected by the Lord,
But the evil are on the way to their doom.

Synthetic parallelism BUILDS. The second line adds something to the first. This can be seen in Psalm 19:7.

The law of the Lord is perfect;
It gives new strength.

Application

15 Match the kind of parallelism (right) with the description of it (left).

- | | | |
|--------------|--|---------------|
| ... a | Builds by adding in second line new truth to first line. | 1) Antithetic |
| ... b | Contrasts thought in second line with thought in first line. | 2) Synonymous |
| ... c | Repeats in second line the truth in first line. | 3) Synthetic |

16 See if you can recognize the kinds of parallelism in these verses in the Psalms by matching one of the words (right) with each verse (left).

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| ... a Psalm 19:1 | 1) Builds |
| ... b Psalm 19:6 | 2) Contrasts |
| ... c Psalm 30:5 | 3) Repeats |

17 Hebrew poetry is featured by

- a)** a pattern of rhyme.
- b)** lines of even length.
- c)** a pattern of thought.

In Hebrew poetry feelings, thoughts, and emotions are uppermost. It is usually written in the first person “I” and deals with personal experience. The Hebrew author coupled concrete facts and real experiences with figurative language that would bring vivid pictures to the reader’s mind.

self-test

1 Match each question on biblical parables (left) with the oneword answer to it (right).

- | | | |
|--------------|--|--------------|
| ... a | What kind of illustration does a parable always use? | 1) One |
| ... b | How many major truths are found in each parable? | 2) Spiritual |
| | | 3) Earthly |
| ... c | What kind of lesson is a parable intended to teach? | 4) Three |

2 Declarations made by the prophets included

- a)** nothing but prediction of future events.
- b)** truth concerning future events and present needs.
- c)** truth concerning present needs only.
- d)** prediction of exact dates of many future events.

3 Which one of these statements is NOT true?

- a** A type is a person or thing in the Old Testament that foreshadows another person or thing in the New Testament.
- b** A type is always the same as a symbol.
- c** Often a symbol does not “foreshadow” anything but just “stands for” something else.
- d** Types were used by God as “object lessons” to illustrate truth about Jesus Christ and redemption through His blood.

4 Circle the letter before each TRUE statement.

- a** Hebrew poetry rhymes.
- b** Hebrew poetry has no set length to its lines.
- c** Hebrew poetry is structured around a thought pattern.
- d** Hebrew poets spoke especially to the feelings and emotions.

Before you continue your study with Lesson 5, be sure to complete your unit student report for Unit 1 and return the answer sheet to your GU instructor.

answers to the study questions

- 1 a** To the disciples of Jesus.
b That they look but do not see, and they listen but do not hear or understand.
- 10** Resemblance to what they foreshadow, indication in Scripture either directly or indirectly, and lack of correspondence in every detail with what they foreshadow.
- 2 a** 2) an earthly
b 5) a spiritual lesson
c 1) truth
d 4) analogy
- 11 a** Yeast (leaven)
b Teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (which is understood to be false teaching).
c Jesus
- 3 a** The person who has a hundred sheep represents Christ.
b Celebration over the lost sheep that was found represents joy in heaven over those who are added to the Kingdom.
- 12 a** Blood
b Faith
c The sprinkling of blood on the covenant tent and the things used in worship.
d The sacrifice and blood of Jesus who took His own blood into the Most Holy Place.
- 4** Grumbling of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law about Jesus' association with outcasts. (Wording may vary.)
- 13 a** The Lord's body.
b The Lord's blood.
- 5 a** An Ethiopian eunuch who was an important official.
b If Isaiah was talking about himself or someone else.
c Jesus.

- 14 a** Sheep without a shepherd: worried, helpless, people.
b Shepherd: leader.
c Harvest: people who need the gospel.
d Workers: people to proclaim the gospel.
e Owner of the harvest: God.
f Gather in harvest: work of bringing people to Jesus.
- 6 b)** it has more figurative language than other prophecy.
c) it often came to the prophet in a vision that is difficult to communicate.
e) the time element is usually veiled in foretelling future events.
- 15 a** 3) Synthetic
b 1) Antithetic
c 2) Synonymous
- 7** Christ's Spirit
- 16 a** 3) Repeats
b 1) Builds
c 2) Contrasts
- 8 a** Faithfulness to God.
b Moses is worthy of less honor than Christ, and he was only a servant while Christ is the Son.
- 17 c)** a pattern of thought.
- 9 a** type.
b symbol.
c Types.



UNIT TWO:

Study By Book— Habbakkuk

Lessons

- 5 Composition—Knowing the Parts
- 6 Synthesis—Putting the Parts Together
- 7 Application—Studying by the Book Method