

Biblical Symbolism

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What are symbols? Why does God use them? What can we learn?

The book of Revelation provides a myriad of mysteries involving symbols. There are a lampstand, a woman, sun, moon and stars, a great dragon, a beast rising from the sea, locusts, trumpets, seven thunders and many others besides.

What are symbols? A symbol stands for or suggests something else. They are visual or conceptual representations of that which is unseen.

Perhaps the most familiar symbol to many of us is our nation's flag. Another modern use of symbols appears under a different term—logo—but the principle and usage are the same. All of us instantly recognize a team, company, school or church logo. When one sees the familiar logo, one's thoughts transfer easily to the reality: the team, company, school or church itself.

In much the same way the religious symbol points beyond itself to a reality. A symbol's chief value resides in its ability to clarify the reality. In a single word, person, object, place, title, time, action or name, symbols explain what might be a complex concept. One simple image conveys the essence of the reality.

Without symbols, religion—even God's religion—would lack the impact it possesses. Jesus deliberately chose the symbols of water, bread, wine, light, blood, vines and shepherds to convey His meaning. Our understanding of what may otherwise be a very difficult concept is greatly enhanced by an everyday object used as a symbol.

In Hebrews 9:9, at the end of several verses describing the Tabernacle and its furniture, the author says, "It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience. . . ." Under the Old Covenant each article in the Tabernacle was used in rituals those performing them may never have understood. But now, the symbols of those rituals and articles give us understanding of humanity's relationship with God under both Covenants. They clarify our privilege and responsibility to such a startling degree that it should fill us with wonder and thanksgiving.

In I Corinthians 11:24-25 Paul states concerning the Passover symbols:

and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

How much more meaningful the Passover service becomes by holding the bread and wine in one's hand and then in eating them consciously making them a part of our bodies! What would the Passover service be like without them? It is almost unimaginable.

One author said that through symbols, "God takes His Son to pieces." Through them He brings within the range of our comprehension specific details of Christ's work and character. Thus we find in men like Moses, Joseph and David, and in animals like the lion and lamb, characteristics that were completely expressed in Jesus Christ.

When working with biblical symbolism, one must follow two cardinal rules. First, understand that several different symbols may represent the same reality in the Bible. For instance, the church is symbolized as a woman, a building in which Christians are living stones, a human body of which Christ is the Head, and a family of which Christians are brothers. Be sure to check the context in which a symbol appears and do not try to force a symbol where it does not fit.

Secondly, allow the Bible to interpret its own symbols. In Revelation 1:20, within the context of John's vision, Christ explains the meaning of the seven stars and the seven lampstands: "The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches." The meanings of other symbols may be harder to locate, but usually the Bible explains itself to those who study it diligently.

Even so, sometimes a symbol is shrouded in mystery and difficult to understand. Perhaps we fail to understand the symbol because we are unfamiliar with the reality. Imagine the apostle John's struggle with symbols that represent twentieth-century warfare! Likewise, we struggle with the symbolism of sheep with whose characteristics we in turn are unfamiliar.

In the end we must learn to see symbols as pictures drawn by the hand of God through which He teaches us things that might otherwise be all but incomprehensible. It behooves us not to take them lightly. In studying symbols, take the time to research the characteristics of the symbol to deepen and clarify your understanding of God, Christ and Their purpose.