

# Parables And Prophecy

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Everyone loves and remembers the parables of Jesus. The scenes He paints are so vivid and lifelike that they are deeply embedded in the Bible-reading public's common store of reference. If someone mentions the Good Samaritan, the Pearl of Great Price or Lazarus and the Rich Man, nearly everyone knows what he is talking about.

No one denies that Jesus' parables, especially, contain insights of wisdom and practical Christian living that are universally applicable to us. Who would argue against Christ's admonition to grow spiritually through His gifts in the Parable of the Talents? Who could miss the illustration of God the Father's love for even His wayward children in the Parable of the Prodigal Son? What a void we would have in our spiritual understanding without the pointed instruction on faith and prayer in the Parable of the Importunate Widow!

What is more controversial, however, is the link between parables and prophecy. Like the Psalms, parables often have the dual roles of instructing and prophesying, although one may be more apparent. Members of God's church often take this fact for granted, whereas someone outside might balk at the thought. For instance, most of us have no trouble seeing the prophetic implications of the Parable of the Ten Virgins in relation to the church's spiritual malaise over the last few decades. The Baptist or Methodist down the block, however, thinks we have simply read our history into the parable.

Are we correct in seeing prophecy in parables—or are we fooling ourselves?

## What Are Parables?

Before we continue we must ask, "What is a parable?" Common theological reference books give us the basic facts:

- » A picturesque figure of language in which an analogy refers to a similar but different reality. (*The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 567)
- » A form of teaching which presents the listener with interesting illustrations from which can be drawn moral and religious truths. (*The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 877)
- » Stories . . . told to provide a vision of life, especially life in God's kingdom. Parable means a putting alongside for purposes of comparison and new understanding. Parables utilize pictures such as metaphors or similes and frequently extend them into a brief story to make a point or disclosure. (*The Holman Bible Dictionary*, p. 1071)
- » A metaphor or simile often extended to a short narrative; in biblical contexts almost always formulated to reveal and illustrate the kingdom of God. (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, p. 655-656)

*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* has the most comprehensive definition and explanation:

Lit. denotes a placing beside. . . . It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison. . . . It is generally used of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson. It is the lesson that is of value; the hearer must catch the analogy if he is to be instructed. . . . Such a narrative or saying, dealing with earthly things with a spiritual meaning, is distinct from a fable, which attributes to things what does not belong to them in nature. . . . Two dangers are to be avoided in seeking to interpret the parables in Scripture, that of ignoring the important features, and that of trying to make all the details mean something. (p. 840)

Jesus makes it plain that parables cannot be fully understood unless the meaning is revealed (Matthew 13:10-17). He gave parables to hide the true meaning. Because the people of this world have closed their eyes and ears to God's instruction, He speaks to them in mysteries that cannot be solved without His Holy Spirit. "But blessed are your eyes . . . and your ears" because we have the Holy Spirit (verse 16; see I Corinthians 2:6-16)!

We need one other element to understand parables properly: the rest of the Bible! Herbert W. Armstrong often compared the Bible to a giant jigsaw puzzle, and when we fit all the pieces together in their proper order, the plan of God and His way of life become so plain! Combining the Holy Spirit and the revelation of the Bible, the mysteries disappear.

However, God does not make it easy for us. He has jumbled the pieces of the puzzle. Isaiah writes:

"Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, "This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest," and, "This is the refreshing"; yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little," that they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught. (Isaiah 28:9-13)

This is very similar to Jesus' explanation of parables. God says He scatters understanding on any given subject throughout the Bible, and our job is to put it all together and see the amazing truth that results. Therefore, parables cannot be interpreted alone; they rely on the revelation of the rest of Scripture.

## **Parables and the Future**

We have seen that a parable is a story drawn from human experience that has a higher spiritual meaning. This is its principal purpose, just as a psalm is primarily intended to praise God. This does not exclude its use for other ends. God creates most things with multiple functions, and the various parts of His Word are not exceptions.

The Parable of the Fig Tree is a good example. It both teaches a universal principle and prophesies of the coming Kingdom of God:

And He spoke to them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you, likewise, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near." (Luke 21:29-31; see Matthew 24:32-33)

As further proof of this parable's prophetic nature, Jesus gives it in the midst of the Olivet Prophecy! He has just listed several signs of His second coming, and He presents this parable to key us in on their time element. Notice He says, "when they are already budding," meaning that the events that signal His return will be happening—in motion—before we realize how close we are to the end!

The argument could be made that this parable does not contain any real prophetic material, only a principle for interpreting earlier prophecies. It is difficult, however, to brush aside the parables of Matthew 24 and 25: the parables of the Faithful and Evil Servants, the Ten Virgins, the Talents, and the Sheep and the Goats. Each of these has a future outlook, specifically the return of Christ (Matthew 24:50; 25:10, 19, 31).

Because of its abundance of well-known symbols, the Parable of the Ten Virgins is perhaps the easiest to understand in a prophetic light. The Bridegroom, of course, is Christ. Virgins are often symbols of churches or individual Christians, most likely the latter in this case. Lamps are vessels that contain oil, a common symbol of God's Spirit, thus they represent our minds, which, when filled with the Holy Spirit, provide illumination for the path to the Kingdom of God (I Corinthians 2:10-16). The wedding refers to the marriage of the Lamb to the church (Revelation 19:7).

Jesus flatly states that this parable deals with conditions just before His second coming (verse 13). It does not take much interpretation, then, to understand what will happen—maybe has happened in part. All of God's people will go to sleep spiritually, but only half of them have enough spiritual strength to prepare for Christ's return. When He does return, our Savior shuts the door on the other half, proclaiming that He has no relationship with them (compare Revelation 3:7, 20). The warning to us is to draw close to God now because we do not know when Christ will come back.

Certainly, these parables are timeless in their lessons, but it is just as certain that they have their greatest impact in the times they foretell. Undoubtedly, the parables have prophetic implications!

## **Interpretation**

So how do we go about interpreting the parables? The same way we interpret the prophecies! Parables and prophecies are not much different. They hold three important elements in common. Both:

1. employ symbols to communicate a truth;
2. are inspired by the Holy Spirit;
3. speak of future events, particularly the Kingdom of God.

These common factors mean that the principles of their interpretation are similar, if not the same. We do not need to force a meaning on every symbol, for, if we catch the analogy, if we grasp the important features, all the symbols take on their proper meanings and proportions.

Peter supplies us with the foundational principle to biblical interpretation in II Peter 1:19-21:

We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

It is from verse 20 in particular that Herbert Armstrong and others derived the principle of the Bible interprets itself. This means that somewhere within the pages of Scripture, the timing, the location, the characters and the symbols employed in symbolic texts like parables and prophecies are explained or defined. It is our job to search them out.

When we add the following three vital verses to our understanding of this principle, however, we end up with a very significant corollary:

- » For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. (Malachi 3:6)
- » Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)
- » Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. (James 1:17)

Each of these verses proclaims God as constant, consistent, unchanging. It is this quality of God—that He is faithful to what He is—that allows us to trust Him. We can have confidence in God and His Word because He never changes! Could we rely upon a double-minded God (see James 1:6-8)? Could we have faith in a Being who constantly blew hot and cold? Never! With our God, though, we need not fear inconsistency.

Thus, if God is constant and His Word interprets itself, the corollary principle is that the Bible's interpretation of its symbols is consistent. This must be true! If the Bible gave us two contradictory interpretations of a symbol, how could we ever feel confident that we understood its meaning? This corollary underscores II Peter 1:19, where the apostle informs us that "the prophetic word [is] more sure" than even eyewitness accounts! We can have confidence in our understanding of the prophecies and parables if the symbols we interpret match what we understand in other areas of Scripture. Otherwise, we could never be sure!

This means that every symbol from Genesis to Revelation is consistent in its interpretation. If a rose means something in one part of the Bible, it will mean the same elsewhere, though the context may modify it slightly. If God is consistent, His Word—His revelation of Himself to us—must also therefore be consistent.

## **General and Specific**

This conclusion may raise some questions. How can that be? How can, for instance, a lion represent Satan in I Peter 5:8 and Jesus Christ in Revelation 5:5? Is that not contradictory? Not at all! Our understanding is correct, but the meaning we give to the symbol is wrong. We have defined it too narrowly.

A study of the symbol of the lion brings out several characteristics the Bible emphasizes: It represents strength, predatory ferocity, majesty and leadership. The lion is the symbol of a ruler, a king, and often a very fierce and powerful one. These are the general meanings of the symbol based

on a lion's traits. They help us to comprehend what God wants us to focus on in the context. Thus, a lion can represent both Satan and Jesus because they both have a lion's characteristics.

Now we can understand the specific meaning of the symbol in its context. I Peter 5:8 speaks of the Devil, focusing on a specific characteristic, his predatory ferocity. Revelation 5:5 mentions two other symbols, "the Root of David" (verse 5) and a Lamb (verse 6), to point to our Savior, Jesus Christ. The lion symbol, in tandem with "the tribe of Judah" and "the Root of David," directs us to reflect on Christ's kingly traits, specifically that He alone has the power and position to open the sealed scroll of God (verses 1-4).

At other times, the Bible's writers define their symbols directly. John in Revelation does this frequently. He defines the seven stars in Christ's right hand and the seven lampstands (1:20), incense (5:8), the innumerable multitude (7:14), the Two Witnesses (11:4), the dragon and his stars (12:9; 20:1), the 144,000 (14:1-5), the seven heads of the Beast (17:9-10), the ten horns (17:12), waters (17:15), the great whore (17:18), and fine linen (19:8), among others. Jesus, Joseph, Daniel and others also define symbols in context.

Other symbols become clear because of their frequent usage in one particular way. The preponderance of evidence makes understanding the symbol simple. For instance, God's Word uses an ox to represent strong, patient, enduring and uncomplaining service. Proverbs 14:4 says, "Where no oxen are, the trough is clean; but much increase comes by the strength of an ox." Paul twice quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain" (I Corinthians 9:9; I Timothy 5:18). Applied to the Levitical offerings (Leviticus 1:3; 3:1; 4:3, 14), then, the bullock represents Christ's patient work in our behalf.

The Bible is full of symbols that represent more important spiritual and sometimes physical ideas, traits or things. When assigning values to these symbols, we must be careful to distinguish between general and specific meanings. This will allow us to receive God's intended instruction and profit from our study.

These principles will certainly cause the prophetic implications of the parables to rise to the surface. Our minds have been opened to their full meaning by the receipt of God's Spirit, and with the mind of Christ (I Corinthians 2:16), we can know what He really intended His disciples to understand—for then, now and the future!