

## Biblical Symbolism (Part Four)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

*Forerunner*, "Bible Study," August 2025

Previously, we explored symbols like vines, houses, temples, sheep, and a family that the Bible uses to describe the church. These metaphors should help us understand how God views us and how we should view ourselves as members of His church. We can better grasp the reality of being co-heirs with Christ (Galatians 3:29; 4:7) if we can make proper comparisons between what we have experienced on earth and what we will experience in the Kingdom of God. We will continue to explore these and other earthly images of heavenly reality.

1. Does God use physical, Old Testament examples as symbols for New Testament spiritual understanding? I Timothy 3:15; I Peter 4:17.

**Comment:** A house is familiar to everyone, and the apostles Paul and Peter use the metaphor of a house to describe the church, a place Christ has built for Himself to dwell. In Isaiah 5, God uses the imagery of a vineyard and a vine to stand for the houses of Israel and Judah (verse 7). He then speaks of houses becoming “desolate” and “without inhabitant” because of sin, specifically greed (verses 8-9). From this comparison, among many others, we can understand from Old Testament examples what Christ, the same God, expects of a spiritual house He dwells in—along with how He reacts if the house is not built according to His code or standard.

2. Can a similar comparison be made using God’s Temple as a symbol? I Corinthians 3:17; Ephesians 2:19-22.

**Comment:** Paul makes it plain that the church and its members are the Temple of God in which He dwells. Thus, when Habakkuk says, “the LORD is in His holy temple” (Habakkuk 2:20), we can understand the prophecy applying not only to the physical Temple

but in a greater way to His dwelling in the church, His spiritual Temple. This knowledge should spur the elect to keep their relationship with Him pure, realizing how Christ reacted when greedy men made the physical Temple “a den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13)!

**3.** Is the Tabernacle in the wilderness compared to individual Christians? II Corinthians 5:1-6; II Peter 1:13-14; Hebrews 9:11.

**Comment:** Paul and Peter write about our transitory “tent” or “temporary dwelling” on this earth, the former speaking of his longing for the permanent, “more perfect” Tabernacle of God’s Kingdom. Though God eventually destroyed even the stone Temples because of sin, the mobile Tabernacle, made of more flimsy materials, gives us an even greater sense of our transitory life and mortality. Conversely, if our lives do not reflect Christ’s presence in us, no matter how solidly and permanently we think we have built, our house will be torn down just as Solomon’s and Herod’s Temples were (see I Corinthians 3:12-15). So, Christ admonishes us not to build on sand, but on the Rock, Himself (Matthew 7:24-27).

**4.** Is the human body also a type of the church? I Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:12; 5:30-32; Colossians 1:18; 3:15.

**Comment:** A person’s body is the most intimate of objects in his or her world. We are far more familiar with its workings and coordination than with any other organism. Through our ability to use its various parts to perform a multitude of complex tasks, we learn how closely we must work with God and fellow man to accomplish God’s purposes. I Corinthians 12 teaches how to interact with the rest of Christ’s Body in unity and to support those within it who hurt physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

**5.** The Bible contains many references to trees. Do they have significance and prophetic meaning to the church? Song of Songs 2:3; 4:12-14; 7:7-8; Jude 12.

**Comment:** The Song of Songs is replete with imagery of Jesus Christ and His Bride. The Bride describes Him in glowing terms as a fruitful tree, and He describes His Bride, the church, similarly. In stark and terrifying contrast, Jude describes false teachers as “late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead [candidates for the second death in the Lake of Fire], pulled up by the roots.”

6. Does the Bible use tree imagery as a measure of righteousness in God’s people? Psalm 1:1-3; 92:12-14; Proverbs 11:30; Isaiah 61:3; Matthew 7:17-20; Luke 3:9; Romans 11:16-24.

**Comment:** God frequently instructs us to judge by the fruits. Those familiar with agriculture quickly perceive many nuances contained within this symbol. An individual who approaches a tree to enjoy its ripe, sweet, juicy produce will be intensely disappointed if he finds it bare of fruit. A strong, healthy, productive tree provides a majestic picture of a Christian growing in righteousness.

7. Do trees also figure into various prophecies that will be fulfilled in the end time? Zechariah 4:1-3, 11-14; 11:1-3; Revelation 11:3-4.

**Comment:** We do not know with precision how these prophecies will play out. But knowing the symbolic meaning of trees, we can speculate with greater discernment about them. The Two Witnesses, the two olive trees of Zechariah 4 and Revelation 11, will play a critical role in supplying the seven end-time churches with “oil” and bear witness to the truth on the world stage before Christ returns. In Isaiah 41:19, God pictures the return of Israel to the Promised Land as planting seven trees in the wilderness, perhaps grafting them into remnants of the seven churches. And in the New Heavens and New Earth, the Tree of Life will bear fruit, and its leaves will be instrumental in the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2).

Understanding a few biblical symbols can open a world of understanding!