**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

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**LESSON 4 Part 1: FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE**

The Bible makes massive use of “figures” to describe God’s actions, religious language (“spiritual” images), and a great variety of ideas and activities.

Introduction:

1. Figures of speech are so common in our daily discourse that we seldom think of how such speech affects us.

“You are talking over my head.”

“I’d die for a cookie.”

“I am crucified with Christ.”

1. Figurative language sets forth ideas with vivid and emphatic forms of speech which are more easily remembered than direct brute facts, but also require interpretation.

“I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“Cookies are essential for my sense of well being.”

“Christ’s death secures my access to a life lived for God rather than self.”

3. Figurative language is built on comparisons drawn from the known of every day life. For example,

Nature (fox, sheep, mule, rock)

Family life

Daily life (agriculture, buildings)

Military (good solider)

Athletics

1. Figurative language is the language of life. It is essential to think about figurative language before one looks at the poetic aspects of the Bible.

5. Some of the Advantages to the Use of Figurative Language to Express Religious Truth.

* Figurative language can convey concepts with economy of speech.
* Figurative language forces the hearer to think because it utilizes analogical imagination to build bridges.
* Figurative language takes abstract ideas and aids their translation into conceptual concreteness.
* Figurative language gives vividness to speech.
* Figurative language captures our attention.
* Figurative language encourages retention.
* Figurative language cultivates emotion.

1. **Figurative Language is at the Core of Religious Speech.**

Consider the development of a key theological term, “Sin” as illustrated by Psalm 51

There is no better text to reflect on sin and forgiveness than Psalm 51 (David’s confession). **Note** that the Psalm places the forgiveness terms first in the clause (look at text).

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| **“sin”**  Miss the mark / Judges 20:16 | **“iniquity”**  Bend/twist / Prov 12:8, “perverse”, “warped” | **“transgressions”**  Rebellion / 2 Kgs 1:1, an inferior to a superior |
| **“cleanse me”**  Physical cleansing like dross from metal (Mal 3:3), from disease (2 Kgs 5:10) | **“wash me”**  Washing clothes / Exod 19:10, 14 | **“blot out”**  Wipe off, erase / Prov 30:20 |

Other Illustrations:

Gen “sin croaches at the door”

Gospels Jesus is the Lamb of God

Matt 3:16 “as a Dove” at baptism of Jesus

Matt 5:29; 18:9 Pluck out your eye; Cut off your hand

John 1 Jesus as Lamb of God (John 1-4 = “Year of obscurity”); John’s recognition of Jesus!

Rom 12:1-2 Living sacrifice !!

Gal 5:12 “go beyond circumcision”

Eph 5:18 Filled with the Spirit (The NT language of spirituality is also dominated by figures of Gal 2:10 Crucified with Christ speech.)

Rev 6:12 The Moon became “as” blood

After you grasp the use of figures of speech, you will see them on every page of Scripture.

NOW, **why is it so important to engage figures of speech?** Because **figures are not always self- evident in meaning and require interpretation.** While they may sometimes be “obvious,” they are NOT self-interpreting.

**II. Examples of Figurative Language in the Bible** (NOTE: Read these examples in a formal equivalent translation since a function/dynamic translation often “translates the figure” into its intended reference. For example “to walk” becomes “to live,” removing the metaphor.)

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| **FIGURE** | **DEFINITION** | **EXAMPLES** |
| Simile | A formal comparison between two objects utilizing “like” or “as” in the construct | Isa 55:10-11  Matt 3:16  Gal 3:6  Rev 6:12 |
| Metaphor | A direct assertion which substitutes an image for the person/thing compared | Eph 2:10; 5:18  John 10  Gal 1:10; 2:9 |
| Metonymy | Substituting a word to stand for another thing because of frequent use by association | Gal 2:9  Gal 6:12 |
| Synecdoche | Imaging the part for the whole or the whole for the part | Pro 1:16  Isa 2:22  Gal 3:1 |
| Euphemism | A milder expression substituted for a more harsh or offensive expression | Acts 1:25  Gal 5:12  1 Thess 4 |
| Hyperbole | The use of exaggeration for the sake of emphasis | Ps 6:6  Matt 5:29-30; 7:3-5  Mk 10:24b-25  Lk 14:26  Acts 17:6  1 Cor 13:1 |
| Litotes | A negative form utilized for a positive affirmation | Matt 6:13  Gal 4:17; 5:10 |
| Irony | The use of speech to denote the exact opposite of what the surface speech declares. “That exam was a piece of cake” (when you know it killed you!) | 1 Cor 4:8-13  Gal 4:18  Rev 3:14ff. |
| Pleonasm | The use of expanded speech which is often redundant | Job 42:5  Matt 2:10 |
| Oxymoron | Combines contradictory ideas for effect | Acts 2:24  Rom 12:1  Phil 3:19 |
| Paradox | A statement that seems to contradict itself but is still true | Mk 8:35 |
| Paronomasia | Play on words (usually sound alike) | Matt 8:22 |
| Onomatopoeia | Words created by sound (buzz, tick, belch) | Rom 1:14 |
| Rhetorical  Question | The use of a question that stimulates thought but does not expect an answer | Rom 8:31  Gal 3:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 21; 4::16 |
| Personification | Attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects | Ps 114:5-6  Matt 6:34  Lk 19:40 |
| Apostrophe | Addressing a person *in abstentia* | 2 Sam 18:33  Isa 14:3ff.  Ezek 28:11ff. |

**III. Expanded use of figures of speech create sub-genres**

A. Riddles (Jud 14:10-18)

B. Parables (extended similes)

C. Allegories (extended metaphors, Jn 15; Gal 4:21-31)

**IV. Salient principles for interpreting figurative language**

1. Do not neglect to recognize figurative versus literal references.
2. Discern the literal truth represented by the figure--Clearly define the points of correspondences between the literal referent and the imagery.
3. Focus on “the primary idea scored” rather than over working the details.

Unfaithful Steward (Lk 16)

Come as a thief (Rev 3:3; 16:15)

1. Try to state in concrete terms what the figure/s endeavors to convey (Psalm 51)
2. *Remember that no illustration is ever as good as that which it illustrates— figures have their limitations.*
3. Poetry and prophecy tend to use figurative language.

**V. Some classic examples of failure to account for figurative language**

A. Metaphors in relation to the Spirit:

“to be filled with the Spirit”? (Eph 5:18ff)

“walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16)

“led by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18)

“indwelt” by the Spirit

B. Jesus as the “Lamb of God.”

C. “If your eye offends you, pluck it out.” “If your hand offends you, cut if off.” (hyperbole)

D. Paul’s comment about the circumcision controversy in relation to the Galatians (5:12)…is it a hyperbole?