

# TO INFINITY AND BEYOND.

## Signs, Signals, and Significance

In April 1827, British poet Felicia Hemans published a poem in Blackwood's Magazine entitled, "The Homes of England." A popular song of the Victorian Age, it offers "a highly sentimental, idealized view of English home life from the stately to the humble," according to the author and literary historian, Peter Keating. Quoting Sir Walter Scott's Marmion, she hoped to point out that anyone who dared not to fight for such land is a coward.

*Disagreeing with Hemans' overly pious assessment of their native isle, Rudyard Kipling, with "passionate moral concern, composed "The Glory of the Garden" to expose the dangers of complacent patriotism. Hoping to bring out what she has overlooked, the first stanza refers to England as a garden. But then she warns readers in its final line, that they will find England's true glory in "more than meets the eye."*

*Invoking numerous images, Kipling proceeds to uncover multiple reasons why a patriotic and national passion must replace religious faith. Based on Genesis 2:8, 9, 15, he contends that kneeling to work rather than to pray - will preserve England. Devotion and dedication to tilling England's garden are more effective than blindly expecting God to save the queen or protect their country.*

*Assuming God will do it all makes idle hands. Still, if everyone takes their stewardship seriously, then "the glory of the garden will never pass away." Bible writers packed their books with figures of speech and symbols to get the most out of human language.*

*As Kipling looked beyond the obvious to see the people's real responsibility, so we must look beyond the literal to detect when the Spirit inspired the Bible writers. He wanted them to use more profound means of getting God's points across. Figures of speech differ from symbols and require different approaches to understand them.*

## Figures of Speech

*While **figures of speech** always represent **themselves**, **symbols** never do. Like signs, they always point beyond themselves to someone or something **on a higher level**. Instead of directing attention to something else, figures stretch the meaning of words until you can't take them literally any longer. That's what makes them so hard to understand. **For example**, Psalm 98:8 says:*

- **Let the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains sing for joy together.**

- Rivers don't have actual hands to clap, do they?
- Mountains can't actually sing, can they?

Yet, the Psalmist still says these things because the Lord is so **wonderful** the whole creation should *make a joyful noise* [express its happiness] to Him (98:4). From this point of view:

- When river waves **crash** into each other or **slap** against their banks, the writer sees them "**clapping**" their hands--**applauding** their Creator.
- When mountain flowers **glisten** with sunlight, winds **whistle** through trees, or birds **warble with delight**, he hears them "**singing**" for joy--**cheerfully expressing** gratitude to their Creator.

Bible study is, more or less, putting verses, people, places, and things side-by-side to discover what is the same or different about them.

What we find helps us:

- To make sense of figures and symbols.
- To learn from scripture based on what things have in common or contrast.
- To see how the Spirit built bridges between items and verses.

Here are the main ones that appear in the Bible.

### Similes

- Compare two people, places, or things that barely resemble each other. That's why the writer has to use the words "like" or "**stiff as a board**."
  - To interpret a *simile*:
    - ➔ See what the words "like" or "as" compare: a bed with a "board."
    - ➔ Find out more about them: a board is a stiff piece of wood, and a bed is a piece of furniture on which people rest or sleep.
    - ➔ Ask:
      - ★ What do they have in common: there is usually one central point of resemblance: you can lie down on them.
      - ★ What does the comparison do: describe the bed by comparing it to a stiff board.
      - ★ Explain what it means in your own words: it means the bed is very hard.

### Similitudes

- Compare things to show what usually happens.
  - For example: "**No one pours new wine into old skins. Otherwise, the skins will burst, the wine will spill, and ruin the skins.**"
    - To interpret a *similitude*:
      - ➔ See what the writer compares: old wineskins and new wine.
      - ➔ Find out more about them: old wineskins usually are too brittle to contain fizzy new wine. Forced to do so, they will split and leak their contents.
      - ➔ Look at the verbs: "**pours**," "**will burst**," "**will spill**," and "(will) **ruin**."
        - ★ The verb that expresses ongoing action ("**pours**") describes what diehards keep trying to do.
        - ★ The future ("**will**") verbs describe the inevitable results.

*Jesus used this similitude to teach that the Good News and Judaism are incompatible. Too rigid to adjust to righteousness by faith, any attempt to make the self-righteous Jewish system swallow up that sparkling truth will only destroy itself.*

### Metaphors

- Compare people, places, or things that are so much alike—you can call one by the other's name.
  - For example, Henry was a human vacuum cleaner at dinner tonight.
    - To interpret a *metaphor*:
      - ➔ See what the writer compares: Henry and a vacuum cleaner.
      - ➔ Find out more about them. *There are usually several points of resemblance: Both of them consume: Henry food, the vacuum dirt.*
      - ➔ What does the metaphor do: *describes Henry's eating habits by comparing him to a vacuum cleaner.*
      - ➔ Explain what it means in your own words: *It means Henry sucked up food from the table like a vacuum cleaner sucks up dirt from a carpet. He ate a lot.*

### Analogies

- Are different. Instead of comparing people, places, or things, they compare word meanings, joining both parts with the word "as" that literally means: "in the same way."
  - For example, Happy is to smile as [or, in the same way] sad is to (what).
    - To interpret an *analogy*:
      - ➔ Look over the two parts: *The first part, Happy is to smile sets the tone for the second part: sad is to (what).*
      - ➔ Analyze what the first part says: *we smile when we are happy.*
      - ➔ Ask: how does the second part copy this: *if we smile when we are happy, what do we do when we are sad? We frown.*
      - ➔ Explain what it means in your own words: *So, happy is to smile as (or, in the same way) sad is to frown.*

*Most analogies in the Bible do not require a solution, but the steps we have shown here will still help you to see the parallel and make the match.*

### Parables and Allegories

- From time to time, Bible writers stretched similes and metaphors into stories to gain the most advantage from their explanatory power.
  - For example:
    - A Parable starts out as a simile, a comparison of two things that barely mirror each other. To make the resemblance easier to see, the writer builds up the simile into a story. He hopes to drive home the one way the two things are alike, not to add details that teach lessons of their own.
    - Take the man who dug up the kingdom (like a treasure)
      - ➔ Though he reburied it, this does not mean that we should ever hide the kingdom from others after we learn about it.
      - ➔ His actions merely accent the value he placed on the kingdom. He only put it underground to buy time until he could cash in everything he had to own it (Matthew 13:44).

## **Parables**

- Use past tense verbs to show a particular example or a specific occurrence—usually beginning with the words, “There was.” Since the Pharisees judged people by their covers, Jesus used the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man to show them a particular example of how inaccurate this approach can be.
  - To interpret a parable, like this one in Lk. 16:20-31, ask:
    - Who or what does Jesus compare? Two men
    - What details bring out the one central point of resemblance? **Comparisons** show:
      - ➔ **Differences:** How do the rich man and Lazarus contrast?
        - Alive: one is rich, the other poor
        - Dead: they switch roles
      - ➔ **Similarities:** What do they have in common?
        - Both received their final reward -- after death.
    - Explain what the parable means in your own words
      - ➔ Don't judge people by the way they appear in this life. God shows what we really are when He has the last word—after we die (Rev. 2:10).

## **Allegories**

- Starts out as a metaphor, a comparison of two people, places, or things that are so much alike, you can call one by the other's name.
  - To make this easier to see, the writer builds up the metaphor into a story, adding details that each bring out another way the two items are alike.
    - So, in John 15:1-8, Jesus lists various traits that He shares with a vine, to support His claim that He is the “True One.”
  - Allegories use more than one verb, in various tenses, usually to emphasize something that will never end.
    - Since the Jews still considered themselves God's people, or the LORD'S vine, Jesus uses an allegory. He shows them in every verse that they have permanently forfeited their ancient privileges and that He has forever replaced them.
  - To interpret an allegory, like this one in Jn. 15:2-8, ask:
    - Who or what does Jesus compare: *Himself and a vine*
    - What details bring out the central points of resemblance? (Similarities/Contrasts)
      - ➔ Fruitful branches (His productive followers) get pruned (sheared of unnecessary traits, behaviors, and habits). Gardeners cut off dead, overgrown branches or the stems from an ordinary vine.
      - ➔ His branches (or followers) get fruit from Him just like branches on an ordinary vine.
      - ➔ His branches (or followers) can't do anything without Him like those on an ordinary vine.
    - What does the original metaphor suggest:
      - ➔ Calling Himself the True Vine, Jesus suggests there is a counterfeit (Israel, the former vine of the Lord in Isaiah 5; Jeremiah 2, 6)
    - Explain the allegory in your own words:
      - ➔ Jesus went to the cross to complete Israel's stalled mission, replacing the nation as the Lord's Vine. Whoever wants to come under the Gardener (His Father)'s care from now on must unite with Him instead of national Israel.