COGMA

Church of God Mission Academy

STUDY GUIDE 19

The Language *of* the Bible

STUDY GUIDE 1 OF 4:

Parables and Symbolism

An overview of recognising and interpreting biblical figurative language.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

Content

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION: GOD COMMUNICATES TRUTH IN DIFFERENT WAYS

THE BIBLE USES DIFFERENT FORMS OF LANGUAGE

WORDS, ORIGINAL LANGUAGES AND MEANING

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

PARABLES: REVEALING SPIRITUAL TRUTH

WHY JESUS USED PARABLES

THE SEVEN PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13

HOW TO STUDY A PARABLE

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER: A WORKED EXAMPLE

SYMBOLISM: PICTURES THAT REVEAL SPIRITUAL TRUTH

CONCLUSION: HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS

Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

Contact and Links

Website: cogma.com.au

Email: admin@cogma.org.au

Radio COGMA: radiocogma.com

YouTube: youtube.com/@COGMAChannel

Facebook: facebook.com/profile.php?id=61585399471540

SEARCH THIS STUDY GUIDE

Windows: Ctrl + F | Mac: Cmd + F | Phone or tablet: use Search in your PDF reader.

PREFACE

BACK TO CONTENTS

The Bible communicates truth in many different ways. Some verses record literal events, while others use parables, symbols, comparisons, dreams, visions and other forms of language to communicate spiritual truth.

Understanding these different forms is important because the way a verse is written affects the way it should be understood. A literal statement should not be turned into a symbol without Scriptural reason, while symbolic language should not automatically be interpreted as a literal event.

This Study Guide begins the module The Language of the Bible. Its purpose is to help us recognise some of the principal ways Scripture communicates truth and develop a careful approach to understanding them.

We will begin with parables and symbolism. Jesus frequently used familiar things such as seed, soil, sheep, doors, vines and harvests to communicate spiritual truth. The natural picture was understandable, but the truth being revealed often reached far beyond the picture itself.

As we study these forms of language, we must continue applying the principles already established concerning context, individual words, the speaker, the audience, the timeframe and the harmony of Scripture. These principles remain important when deciding whether a verse should be understood literally, symbolically or through another form of biblical language.

The born-again believer also has the Spirit of Christ dwelling within. The Holy Spirit does not replace careful study, but guides the believer into truth as we prayerfully search the Word of God. Careful study and dependence upon the Spirit of Christ therefore belong together.

This Study Guide will introduce the principal forms of biblical language and examine why Jesus used parables. We will then use the Parable of the Sower as a practical example of how a parable can be studied carefully.

The purpose is to help us understand more accurately what God has written and receive the spiritual truth He has revealed through His Word. As we learn to recognise the language being used, we become better prepared to understand Scripture in its proper context.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must the form of biblical language be recognised before a verse is interpreted?

Personal Reflection

When have you read a familiar biblical picture too quickly without checking its context?

Action Step

Choose a familiar Bible picture you have interpreted quickly. Check its context, correct any unsupported assumption, and explain how you will approach it differently.

INTRODUCTION: GOD COMMUNICATES TRUTH IN DIFFERENT WAYS

BACK TO CONTENTS

The Bible is the Word of God, but it does not communicate every truth in exactly the same way. Some verses record historical events, while others contain commandments, prophecy, poetry, parables, symbols, dreams, visions, comparisons and other forms of language.

Recognising these differences is an important part of understanding Scripture correctly. We must pay attention not only to what the Bible says, but also to the way the truth is being communicated.

Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 2:15**:

> *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

To rightly divide the Word of truth, we must carefully consider the language Scripture uses. Different forms of biblical language communicate truth in different ways.

For example, when the Bible records that Jesus travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem, we understand that as an actual historical event. There is no Scriptural reason to turn that journey into a hidden symbol.

However, when Jesus said that He is *"the door,"* we do not imagine that He became a physical door made of wood. Jesus was using a familiar picture to communicate spiritual truth.

The same principle applies throughout Scripture. We must recognise the form of language being used before deciding how the verse should be understood.

The Bible may use:

- Literal statements;
- Historical accounts;
- Similes;
- Metaphors;
- Parables;
- Symbols;
- Dreams;
- Visions;
- Types and antitypes.

Each form communicates truth, but each must be understood according to the way Scripture uses it. Recognising these differences helps protect us from forcing a verse to mean something it was never intended to say.

This is especially important when studying prophetic and symbolic verses. If symbolic language is treated as literal, the meaning can be distorted.

At the same time, we must not turn clear historical events or plain statements into symbols simply because we are looking for a deeper meaning. We must allow Scripture to determine how Scripture should be understood.

The principles already established in earlier Study Guides remain important. We must consider the context, the individual words being used, the speaker, the audience, the timeframe and the harmony of the verse with the rest of the Bible.

These principles help us recognise what kind of language is being used and how it should be understood. They also help protect us from interpretations based upon imagination, tradition or personal opinion.

The Holy Spirit is also essential to spiritual understanding. The born-again believer has received the Spirit of Christ, and He guides His people into truth.

This does not remove our responsibility to study carefully. The Spirit of Christ works through the Word and helps us understand the truth God has revealed. Careful study and dependence upon the Spirit therefore belong together.

In this first Study Guide of The Language of the Bible, we will begin by considering some of the principal forms of biblical language. We will then concentrate particularly upon parables and symbolism.

We will examine why Jesus used parables and consider the seven parables recorded in Matthew chapter 13. We will also develop a practical method for studying parables carefully.

The Parable of the Sower will provide a worked example showing how context, words, symbols and Scriptural harmony work together. This will help establish a careful approach that can also be applied when studying other parables.

Finally, we will introduce the important subject of symbolism and consider how familiar pictures can communicate spiritual truth. This will prepare us for further study of the language God has used throughout His Word.

As we continue, one principle must remain central. We do not decide what the Bible means according to imagination, tradition or personal opinion. We search the Scriptures and allow the Word of God to establish its own meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do careful study of the Word and dependence on the Spirit of Christ belong together?

Personal Reflection

Have you relied on imagination, tradition or a preferred meaning instead of what the verse says?

Action Step

Take one belief you have accepted from tradition or personal preference. Test it against the Bible and identify any change needed in your understanding.

THE BIBLE USES DIFFERENT FORMS OF LANGUAGE

BACK TO CONTENTS

God communicates truth throughout the Bible in many different ways. Sometimes He speaks through straightforward statements and historical records. At other times He uses comparisons, pictures, parables, symbols, dreams, visions and types to communicate spiritual truth.

Recognising the form of language being used is important because it helps us understand what the verse is actually saying. We should not treat every statement in exactly the same way.

Literal Language

Literal language communicates its meaning directly. When Scripture records that Jesus travelled to a particular place, spoke to a particular person or performed a particular action, we normally understand the account as describing an actual event.

John wrote in **John 4:3-4**:

> *"He left Judaea, and departed again into Galilee. And he must needs go through Samaria."*

There is no need to search for a hidden symbolic meaning in the fact that Jesus travelled through Samaria. The verse is describing something that actually happened.

Historical verses should therefore be received as history unless the context or another Scripture gives us a reason to understand them differently. We should not create symbolic meanings where Scripture gives us no reason to do so.

Figurative Language

The Bible also uses figurative language. Figurative language uses a picture, comparison or familiar object to communicate another truth.

Jesus frequently taught in this way. He used things people already understood naturally to communicate spiritual truth.

Jesus said in **John 10:9**:

> *"I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."*

Jesus was not saying that He was a physical door. The picture of a door communicates the truth that entrance into salvation is through Him.

In the same way, Jesus said in **Matthew 5:13**:

> *"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."*

The disciples were not literally salt. Jesus used the qualities of salt to communicate truth concerning the influence and responsibility of His people.

These examples establish an important principle: Figurative language uses a natural picture to communicate a real truth. The picture is not the truth itself, but the means by which the truth is communicated.

Comparisons Help Us Understand

Some figures of speech openly compare one thing with another. Recognising the kind of comparison being used can help us understand how the language is working.

A simile commonly uses words such as like or as. For example, a person may be described as being like a tree or as a sheep.

A metaphor makes the comparison more directly. Jesus did not say that He was like a door. He said, *"I am the door."*

The context makes clear that the statement is figurative rather than literal. Jesus was using the familiar picture of a door to communicate a spiritual truth concerning Himself.

The Bible uses many familiar pictures from ordinary life, including:

- Seed;
- Soil;
- Trees;
- Sheep;
- Shepherds;
- Vines;
- Branches;
- Bread;
- Water;
- Light;
- Darkness;
- Harvests;
- Buildings.

These familiar things help communicate spiritual truth in a way that can be understood and remembered. However, we must still allow Scripture and context to establish what the particular picture means.

Symbols Can Reveal Character

Symbols may also be used to reveal the character of a person or thing. A familiar picture can communicate something about what is hidden beneath the outward appearance.

Jesus warned in **Matthew 7:15**:

> *"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."*

Jesus used two contrasting animals to communicate His warning. The sheep suggests harmlessness and gentleness, while the wolf suggests danger and destruction.

The false prophet may appear harmless outwardly, but Jesus warns that the true character is very different. The animals themselves are not the subject of the warning because they are pictures communicating spiritual character.

This is one reason symbolic language can be so powerful. A familiar picture may communicate in a few words what would otherwise require a much longer explanation.

The Form of Language Must Be Recognised

Problems arise when we fail to recognise the kind of language being used. If figurative language is forced into a literal interpretation, the intended meaning can be lost.

However, the opposite mistake is also possible. We should not make every historical event, object or number into a symbol simply because we are searching for a deeper meaning.

The Bible must govern the interpretation. When Scripture identifies a symbol, explains a parable or connects one event with another spiritual truth, we have a Scriptural foundation for that interpretation.

Where Scripture does not establish such a connection, we should be careful not to invent one. Imagination must never become the authority for interpreting the Word of God.

This principle will become increasingly important as we study parables, symbolism, dreams, visions, types and antitypes. Each of these forms has its own characteristics, but the same controlling rule remains: Allow the Bible to establish the meaning.

Careful study therefore requires us to ask what kind of language we are reading before deciding how that language should be interpreted. When we recognise the form correctly, we are better prepared to understand the truth God has communicated through His Word.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should a literal event remain literal unless the Bible gives reason to read it otherwise?

Personal Reflection

Where are you tempted to make a historical detail symbolic or a clear figure literal?

Action Step

Revisit a historical account you may have treated symbolically. Check its setting and correct any explanation you cannot establish from the Bible.

WORDS, ORIGINAL LANGUAGES AND MEANING

BACK TO CONTENTS

The Bible has been translated into many languages, but the Old and New Testaments were originally written mainly in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Understanding this helps us recognise why careful attention to individual words can sometimes be important when studying Scripture.

The majority of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Portions of books such as Daniel and Ezra were written in Aramaic, while the New Testament was written primarily in Koine Greek, the common Greek language used throughout much of the Roman world.

We do not need to become scholars in these languages before we can understand the Bible. God has preserved His Word so that ordinary people can read, study and understand its message. However, there are times when examining the original word behind an English translation can help clarify the meaning of a verse.

One English Word Can Represent Different Original Words

An important example is the English word *"world."* In the King James Version, the word world can represent different Greek words.

Two that are particularly important are:

- KOSMOS: Commonly referring to the created world or the ordered world;
- AION: Referring to an age or period of time.

This difference can affect how a verse is understood. The English word may remain the same while the original words communicate different thoughts.

The writer of Hebrews wrote in **Hebrews 9:26**:

> *"For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."*

The King James Version uses the English word *"world"* twice in this verse, but the same Greek word is not used in both places. The first refers to the KOSMOS, while the second refers to an AION, an age.

Jesus did not appear at the end of the physical earth to put away sin. He appeared at the conclusion of an age and offered Himself as the sacrifice for sin.

This shows why examining an important word can sometimes prevent us from reaching an incorrect conclusion. A distinction that is not immediately visible in English may become clearer when the original words are examined.

Word Meaning Must Remain Within Context

Although original-language tools can be useful, the meaning of a verse cannot be established by looking at a Greek or Hebrew word in isolation. Context must continue to govern our understanding.

A word may have several possible meanings, and the surrounding verse helps determine which meaning applies. We should never simply select the definition that best supports an interpretation we already want to prove.

When examining an important word, we should continue asking:

- What is the subject being discussed?
- Who is speaking?
- Who is being addressed?
- What is the historical and covenant setting?
- How is the same word used elsewhere?
- Does the proposed meaning agree with the surrounding verse?
- Does it harmonise with the rest of Scripture?

A dictionary, concordance or language tool can assist us in answering these questions. However, no study tool should replace careful reading of the verse itself.

Translations Are Study Tools

Different Bible translations may sometimes help us see how a word or phrase has been understood. However, in COGMA Study Guides, the King James Version remains our Scripture text.

Other translations may occasionally be consulted as study aids, but they do not replace the need to examine the KJV carefully and compare Scripture with Scripture. Our teaching should remain established from the Word rather than from a preferred wording in another translation.

The same principle applies to concordances, dictionaries and other study resources. These tools can help us investigate a word and understand how it is being used, but the Bible remains the final authority.

Study tools serve the Word. The Word does not become subject to the study tool.

Every Word Should Be Handled Carefully

Jesus demonstrated the importance of paying careful attention to the words of Scripture. He did not treat God's Word carelessly, and neither should we.

Careful study does not mean searching for a hidden meaning behind every word. It means respecting what God has written enough to examine a word more closely when the context requires it.

Sometimes the English wording is clear, and no additional investigation is necessary. At other times, understanding the original word may reveal an important distinction that is not immediately visible in English.

The purpose is not to impress others with Hebrew or Greek terminology. The purpose is to understand the Word of God accurately.

As we continue studying parables and symbolism, this principle will become increasingly important. A single word may help identify the meaning of a picture, establish the timeframe of a verse or show the difference between a literal and spiritual interpretation.

Words therefore deserve careful attention, but they must never be separated from the verse in which God has placed them. Words matter, but they must always be understood within their context and in harmony with the whole Word of God.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can the Greek words KOSMOS and AION not be treated as though they always mean the same thing?

Personal Reflection

Have you selected a definition because it suited an interpretation without testing the verse?

Action Step

Examine a Greek word used in this teaching. If your preferred meaning does not fit the verse, explain what you must change and why.

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

BACK TO CONTENTS

Before we can correctly interpret a verse of Scripture, we must recognise whether the language is being used literally or figuratively. The Bible contains both, and confusion can arise when one is mistaken for the other.

Literal language describes a person, event, object or action according to its ordinary meaning. Figurative language uses one thing to represent, compare with or illustrate another truth. Both communicate truth, but they do so in different ways.

The important question is not whether we prefer a literal or figurative interpretation. The question is: What kind of language is the Bible using in this verse?

Literal Language

Much of the Bible records actual people, places and events. Abraham lived, Moses led Israel out of Egypt, David became king, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and Paul travelled throughout the Roman world preaching the Gospel.

Luke wrote in **Luke 2:4-5**:

> *"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child."*

This is historical narrative. Nazareth, Judaea and Bethlehem are actual places, while Joseph and Mary are actual people.

We should not search for symbolic meanings in these details unless Scripture itself gives us a reason to do so. Literal interpretation begins by allowing words to have their normal meaning.

The same principle applies to the creation account in Genesis. COGMA understands the six days of creation as literal, consecutive days and the creation itself as taking place within one literal week, approximately 6,000 years ago. This provides an important contrast with verses such as Revelation, where the language itself shows that symbols and visions are being used.

Similes

A simile compares one thing with another, commonly using words such as like or as. The comparison uses something familiar to help explain another truth.

David wrote concerning the righteous man in **Psalm 1:3**:

> *"And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."*

The righteous person is not literally a tree. The tree provides a picture of stability, nourishment and fruitfulness.

The word *"like"* makes the comparison clear. The natural picture helps us understand the truth being communicated.

Metaphors

A metaphor also makes a comparison, but does so more directly. Rather than saying something is like another thing, the language speaks as though one thing is another.

Jesus said in **John 6:35**:

> *"And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."*

Jesus is not literal bread. Bread sustains natural life, and Jesus used that familiar picture to reveal that He is the source of spiritual life.

Jesus also said in **John 10:9**:

> *"I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."*

Again, Jesus was not describing His physical form. The metaphor communicates that entrance into salvation is through Him.

The context helps us recognise that these statements are figurative. We should therefore seek the truth communicated through the picture rather than forcing the picture into a literal interpretation.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do the words like and as differ from the direct picture used in a metaphor?

Personal Reflection

When Jesus says He is the Door or the Bread of Life, have you stopped at the natural picture instead of trusting the spiritual truth He reveals?

Action Step

Read Jesus' statements about the Door and Bread of Life. Consider where you have stopped at the picture and explain how its truth should direct you towards Him.

Parables

A parable uses a familiar story or situation to communicate spiritual truth. Jesus frequently used subjects such as farming, fishing, servants, weddings, vineyards and household activities because His hearers understood these things naturally.

Jesus said in **Matthew 13:3**:

> *"And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;"*

The sower, seed and soil form the natural picture. Jesus later explained that these elements communicate spiritual truths.

The natural story therefore provides the picture, while the spiritual meaning is the truth being taught. Because parables are one of the principal subjects of this Study Guide, we will examine them in greater detail shortly.

Symbolism

A symbol is something that represents or communicates another truth. The symbol provides a visible or familiar picture through which another meaning is expressed.

Jesus used symbolic language when He warned about false prophets in **Matthew 7:15**:

> *"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."*

The sheep and wolves communicate different characters. Outwardly, the false prophet may appear harmless, while inwardly the person is dangerous and destructive.

The animals are not the subject of the warning. They communicate the character of the people Jesus was describing.

Symbolism is especially important in prophetic books such as Daniel and Revelation. However, the meaning of a symbol must be established from Scripture rather than from imagination.

Dreams and Visions

God also communicated through dreams and visions. These forms may contain literal elements, symbolic elements or a combination of both.

A dream occurs while a person is asleep, while a vision may involve images or scenes revealed while the person is awake. Joseph, Daniel, Peter and John all received revelations through dreams or visions.

The images within a dream or vision should not automatically be interpreted literally. We must examine the context and any explanation Scripture provides before deciding what those images communicate.

Dreams and visions will be considered more fully later in this module. At this stage, the important principle is simply to recognise them as forms through which God communicated truth.

Types and Antitypes

The Bible also contains types and antitypes. These must be handled carefully because they involve real things that also communicate a greater spiritual truth.

A type is a real person, event, object or institution that God uses to point towards a greater spiritual reality. The reality to which the type points is called the antitype.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 10:11**:

> *"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."*

The events were real. They actually happened, but they also carried spiritual instruction for those who came later.

Typology must therefore be distinguished from unrestricted symbolism. We do not decide that something is a type simply because we can imagine a comparison.

Scripture must provide the connection. This protects us from creating interpretations that the Bible itself does not establish.

Recognising the Form

When reading the Bible, we should learn to recognise the form of language being used. Before interpreting a verse, we should consider whether we are dealing with:

- Literal history;
- A simile;
- A metaphor;
- A parable;
- Symbolism;
- A dream;
- A vision;
- A type and antitype.

The same verse may sometimes contain more than one form of language. This makes careful attention to context even more important.

The Bible must determine how its language is understood. We should never force symbolic language into literalism, but neither should we turn clear historical truth into symbolism without Scriptural support.

Correct interpretation begins by recognising the form of language God has chosen. We then allow the context, the words being used and the harmony of Scripture to establish the meaning.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What evidence in a verse helps you decide whether its language is literal or figurative?

Personal Reflection

Where has a search for a deeper meaning distracted you from a verse's plain sense?

Action Step

Choose a difficult verse you may have interpreted too quickly. Recheck its language and context, and correct any conclusion that the Bible does not support.

PARABLES: REVEALING SPIRITUAL TRUTH

BACK TO CONTENTS

Parables are one of the most familiar forms of language used in the Bible. Jesus used them extensively throughout His earthly ministry, but parables were not unique to the New Testament. They are also found in the Old Testament, where men such as Nathan, Balaam and Ezekiel used stories and comparisons to communicate important truths.

In their simplest form, parables are stories or comparisons that contain a deeper meaning. The hearer is presented with something familiar from everyday life, but the purpose is to communicate a spiritual truth that reaches beyond the natural story.

The Greek word PARABOLE carries the thought of placing one thing beside another for comparison. In a parable, the natural picture is placed alongside a spiritual truth so that one

helps reveal the other. The literal story therefore becomes a word vehicle that carries the deeper message.

The Natural Story Carries a Spiritual Message

Jesus frequently used ordinary things that His hearers would immediately recognise. He drew upon familiar experiences so that the natural picture could communicate a spiritual message.

He spoke about:

- Sowers and seed;
- Wheat and tares;
- Fishermen and nets;
- Vineyards;
- Servants;
- Weddings;
- Treasure;
- Sheep;
- Household responsibilities.

The natural setting made the story understandable, but the purpose was not simply to teach about farming, fishing or household life. Jesus used these familiar things to communicate truth concerning the Kingdom of God, salvation, spiritual growth, judgement and the work of God among His people.

We must therefore look beyond the surface of a parable without ignoring the story itself. The natural story provides the picture, while the spiritual truth is what the picture is intended to reveal.

An Old Testament Example

A powerful example is found in the account of Nathan confronting David after David had taken Bathsheba and arranged the death of her husband Uriah. Nathan did not begin by directly accusing David, but told him a story about two men.

One man was rich and possessed many flocks and herds. The other was poor and owned only one little ewe lamb, which was precious to him.

When the rich man needed to prepare food for a traveller, he refused to take one of his own many animals. Instead, he took the poor man's only lamb.

David became angry when he heard the story and immediately recognised the injustice of what the rich man had done. He could clearly see the wrong when it was presented through the actions of someone else.

Nathan then said in **2 Samuel 12:7**:

> *"And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;"*

The story had brought David face to face with his own conduct. He recognised the selfishness and injustice in another man's actions before recognising the same spirit in himself.

Nathan's parable shows how effectively a simple story can reveal truth. The characters were easy to understand, the situation was memorable, and the spiritual message reached directly to David's heart.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did Nathan's story bring David to recognise his own injustice?

Personal Reflection

What response rises in you when a story exposes a fault you first saw in someone else?

Action Step

Read Nathan's confrontation of David. Examine where you have been quick to judge another but slow to recognise your own conduct, and respond honestly.

Parables Can Reveal What Is Not Immediately Seen

Parables often contain truth that is not obvious from the natural story alone. The hearer must recognise that the familiar picture is communicating something beyond itself.

Matthew wrote in **Matthew 13:35**:

> *"That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world."*

Matthew connects the parables of Jesus with the words of the Psalmist. The use of parables was therefore connected with revealing things that had not previously been clearly understood.

The Psalmist wrote in **Psalm 78:2-3**:

> *"I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us."*

The expression *"dark sayings"* does not mean that the truth is evil or dangerous. It speaks of things that are not immediately understood and must be brought to light.

This helps us understand why a parable cannot always be interpreted simply at the level of its natural story. The story may be easy to understand naturally while the spiritual truth requires further explanation and careful study.

The Bible Must Explain the Parable

Because parables communicate spiritual truth through natural pictures, there is a danger of allowing imagination to determine what every detail means. We must resist that approach.

Where Jesus explains a parable, His explanation governs our understanding. We do not need to invent meanings for the symbols when Jesus Himself has already identified them.

Where the meaning is not directly stated, we must examine the context and compare Scripture with Scripture. The same study principles already established continue to apply.

We should ask:

- What is the main subject?

- Who is speaking?
- Who is listening?
- What elements in the story are important?
- Does Jesus explain any of those elements?
- How are the same pictures used elsewhere in Scripture?
- Does the interpretation agree with the whole Word of God?

These questions help keep the interpretation within the boundaries established by Scripture. A possible meaning should not be accepted simply because it sounds interesting or appears to fit the natural picture.

A parable is not an invitation to invent hidden meanings. It is an invitation to search carefully for the spiritual truth God has placed within the story.

As we continue, we will see that Jesus did not use parables simply to make His teaching more interesting. He used them deliberately to communicate spiritual truth and to reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom of God to those who were prepared to hear and understand.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must the Bible's explanation govern the meaning assigned to a parable?

Personal Reflection

Have you attached a meaning to a detail of a parable that Jesus did not establish?

Action Step

Revisit a parable whose details you may have interpreted freely. Remove any unsupported meaning and explain how you will give greater authority to Jesus' words.

WHY JESUS USED PARABLES

BACK TO CONTENTS

Jesus did not use parables simply because stories were interesting or easy to remember. His parables had a spiritual purpose. Through familiar pictures, He revealed truths concerning the Kingdom of God while also exposing the spiritual condition of those who heard Him.

The disciples themselves asked Jesus why He taught the people in this way. His answer helps us understand why parables became such an important part of His teaching.

Matthew recorded in **Matthew 13:10-17**:

> *"And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them."*

Jesus makes an important distinction. The same words could be heard by many people, yet not everyone understood the spiritual truth being communicated.

The difference was not simply the ability to understand the natural story. The crowds could understand that a farmer sowed seed, fishermen used nets and people searched for valuable treasure. What they did not necessarily understand was the spiritual reality represented by those familiar pictures.

Jesus said to His disciples, *"It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."* The word mysteries does not mean that God intended His truth to remain permanently unknowable.

It refers to spiritual truth that must be revealed and understood. Jesus was making known truths concerning the Kingdom of God through the language of parables.

Spiritual Life Is Necessary for Spiritual Understanding

This principle agrees with what Jesus taught Nicodemus concerning the new birth. Spiritual things require spiritual life if they are to be properly understood.

Jesus said in **John 3:3**:

> *"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Jesus was not speaking simply about seeing something with natural eyes. The Kingdom of God is spiritual, and spiritual life is necessary to understand its reality.

The person who is born again receives new life from God, and Jesus Christ comes to dwell within by His Spirit. Spiritual understanding therefore does not depend upon natural intelligence alone.

Paul expressed the same principle in **1 Corinthians 2:14**:

> *"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."*

The natural mind may read the words of a parable and understand the outward story while still missing the spiritual truth being revealed. Knowing the details of the natural picture is not the same as understanding the spiritual message.

The born-again believer has the Spirit of Christ within, who teaches and guides through the written Word. However, this does not mean that careful Bible study is unnecessary.

The Holy Spirit does not replace the Word of God or remove our responsibility to study. The Spirit of Christ works through the written Word, helping the believer understand truth as Scripture is prayerfully and carefully examined.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why is spiritual life needed to receive the truth Jesus communicates in parables?

Personal Reflection

Are you approaching Jesus' stories simply as puzzles, or as truth to receive and obey?

Action Step

Study one parable prayerfully. Identify what its truth reveals about your own willingness to hear Jesus, then name the response that truth requires.

The Condition of the Heart Matters

Jesus also explained why some people heard without understanding. He said, *"this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed."*

The problem was not simply that they lacked information. Their hearts had become unreceptive to the truth being placed before them.

This gives us an important warning. A person can hear Scripture repeatedly and still fail to receive what God is saying when the heart is resistant to truth.

The disciple should therefore approach God's Word with humility and a willingness to be taught. We must also remain willing to be corrected and changed when the Word exposes something within us.

Understanding Scripture is not simply an intellectual exercise. The condition of the heart matters because truth must be received as well as heard.

Parables Reveal and Expose

Parables perform two important functions. They reveal spiritual truth to those who have ears to hear, but they also expose whether a person is willing to look beyond the outward story and receive what Jesus is teaching.

For this reason, Jesus repeatedly used words such as *"Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."* The issue is more than possessing natural ears because Jesus is calling for spiritual attention and understanding.

A person may hear every word of the natural story and still miss its message. Another person hears the same parable, searches for the truth Jesus is communicating and receives spiritual understanding.

The parable therefore brings the hearer to a point of response. Will we remain with the natural picture, or will we seek to understand the spiritual truth Jesus is revealing through it?

As we study His parables, our purpose must therefore be greater than discovering what the different objects in a story represent. We want to hear, understand and receive the truth Jesus is communicating.

The parable is the picture. The spiritual truth revealed through that picture is the message we must hear, understand and receive.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can a parable reveal truth while also exposing the hearer's heart?

Personal Reflection

Which response to Jesus' words in this section most closely describes the way you have been listening?

Action Step

Return to a familiar parable. Examine your attitude towards its teaching and identify what you need to receive, correct or practise in response to Christ.

THE SEVEN PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13

BACK TO CONTENTS

Matthew chapter 13 contains a remarkable group of seven parables spoken by Jesus. These parables should not be treated simply as unrelated stories. Together they form an organised body of teaching concerning the Kingdom of God and the course of the Gospel Day.

The seven parables are:

1. The Parable of the Sower;
2. The Parable of the Tares;
3. The Parable of the Mustard Seed;
4. The Parable of the Leaven;
5. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure;
6. The Parable of the Pearl;
7. The Parable of the Net.

Each parable contains its own message, but together they present a broader picture. Their order and relationship help us see the development of the teaching Jesus was giving concerning His Kingdom.

The Significance of Seven

The number seven occupies an important place throughout Scripture and is frequently associated with completeness. This pattern can be seen from the beginning of the Bible.

Moses wrote in **Genesis 2:1-2**:

> *"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made."*

The work of creation was complete on the seventh day. The number seven therefore appears from the beginning in connection with a completed work.

This pattern appears repeatedly throughout Scripture. Israel was instructed to observe the seventh day, seven priests carried seven trumpets around Jericho, and Revelation repeatedly uses groups of seven, including seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets and seven vials.

We should be careful not to build doctrine upon numbers alone. However, when Scripture repeatedly uses a number in a consistent way, the pattern should not simply be ignored.

The seven parables of Matthew chapter 13 can therefore be considered together as a complete body of teaching. This does not remove the need to study each parable carefully, but it helps us recognise that the group belongs together.

The Parables Belong Together

The order of these parables is also important. Jesus begins with the Sower, where the Word is sown and received in different ways.

He then speaks of the wheat and tares, showing the development of good and evil alongside one another. The mustard seed and the leaven continue the picture of development.

The hidden treasure and the pearl then draw attention to the value of what belongs to God. Finally, the net brings the series towards separation and conclusion.

This does not mean that every detail of every parable should be forced into a predetermined pattern. Each parable must first be studied carefully within its own context and according to the explanation Scripture provides.

However, when the seven parables are considered together, a broader progression becomes visible. The natural stories are different, but together they contribute to a larger body of Kingdom teaching.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should the seven parables of Matthew 13 be read together in their shared setting?

Personal Reflection

Have you isolated a parable from the chapter and missed what its neighbours contribute?

Action Step

Read Matthew 13 together rather than isolating a single parable. Reconsider one earlier assumption and explain how the wider chapter changes your understanding.

The Gospel Day

These seven parables help us understand the Gospel Day. Jesus began revealing these truths during His earthly ministry, but the Gospel Day itself began in A.D. 31 at Pentecost, when Jesus Christ returned as the Holy Spirit, and it continues to the end of time.

COGMA understands the Gospel Day through seven prophetic periods, and the seven parables of Matthew chapter 13 correspond to those seven periods. At the same time, the spiritual conditions illustrated in the parables are not confined only to one period, because similar conditions can also be recognised more broadly throughout the Gospel Day.

Jesus was revealing spiritual truths concerning the course and operation of His Kingdom.

He was not simply describing farming, fishing and household life. These natural pictures communicate truth concerning the reception of His Word, the development of spiritual conditions and the outcome of the Gospel message.

The Parable of the Sower provides the beginning of this picture because it focuses upon the sowing of the Word. The seed is scattered, but the response differs according to the condition into which it falls.

From there, the remaining parables develop other aspects of the Kingdom. Each adds another part to the broader teaching Jesus was communicating.

Matthew chapter 13 is therefore especially important when studying The Language of the Bible. It demonstrates how several natural stories can work together to communicate a much larger spiritual message.

The Setting Is Important

The setting in which Jesus gave these parables should also be noticed. Context includes not only the words that are spoken, but also the circumstances in which the teaching takes place.

Matthew wrote in **Matthew 13:1-2**:

> *"The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore."*

Jesus sat while He taught the people. In Scripture, sitting can be associated with a position of authority, particularly in teaching or judgement.

Moses provides an example in **Exodus 18:13**:

> *"And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses sat to judge the people: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening."*

Jesus was not giving casual observations to the crowd. He was teaching with authority, and the people were hearing doctrine concerning the Kingdom of God.

Mark described the same occasion in **Mark 4:2**:

> *"And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine,"*

Notice the words *"in his doctrine."* The parables contain doctrine and must therefore be studied with the same seriousness as the direct statements of Jesus.

Their form is different, but their truth is not less important. The natural picture carries teaching that must be understood spiritually.

We Will Begin With the Sower

It is not necessary in this Study Guide to explain all seven parables in detail. The purpose here is to learn how parabolic language should be approached and interpreted.

The Parable of the Sower provides an ideal worked example because Jesus Himself explains many of its principal elements. We are therefore able to compare the natural story directly with the spiritual explanation He provides.

By studying the Sower carefully, we can learn how to:

- Examine the setting;
- Identify the principal elements;
- Consider important words;
- Allow Jesus to explain His own symbols;
- Compare Scripture with Scripture;
- Recognise the spiritual truth carried by the natural story.

These principles provide a careful method for approaching parabolic language. Once they are understood, they can be applied carefully when studying other parables.

The seven parables of Matthew chapter 13 therefore provide both a complete body of Kingdom teaching and an important lesson in how Jesus used natural pictures to reveal spiritual truth. As we begin with the Sower, we will allow Jesus and the surrounding Scriptures to establish the meaning of the picture.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What makes the Sower a sound starting point for studying the parables in Matthew 13?

Personal Reflection

When you read Jesus' explanation of the Sower, which response to His Word challenges your own heart most directly?

Action Step

Compare the Sower with Jesus' explanation. Identify which kind of response to the Word challenges you, and describe how you will respond more faithfully.

HOW TO STUDY A PARABLE

BACK TO CONTENTS

Parables should be studied carefully and methodically. Because a natural story is being used to communicate spiritual truth, we must avoid two opposite errors. We should not stop at the outward story and miss the spiritual message, but neither should we assign meanings to every detail according to imagination.

The Parable of the Sower provides an excellent example because Jesus Himself explains many of its principal elements. This parable therefore provides a clear method that can also be applied when studying other parables.

1. Read the Whole Parable

Begin by reading the complete parable rather than isolating one phrase or verse. We need to understand the whole story before attempting to interpret its individual parts.

Ask:

- What is happening in the story?
- What is the main subject?
- Where does the story begin and end?
- What appears to be the central message?

Reading the whole parable helps prevent us from building an interpretation upon one detail while ignoring the rest of the story. The individual parts must be understood within the complete picture.

2. Examine the Context and Setting

A parable belongs within a larger setting. We should therefore consider what happened immediately before and after it, as well as the circumstances in which Jesus gave the teaching.

Ask:

- Who is speaking?
- Who is listening?
- Where is the teaching taking place?
- What question or event led to the parable?
- Is Jesus speaking to the multitude, His disciples, religious leaders or another group?

The setting can provide important information about the purpose of the teaching. A parable should never be removed from its context and interpreted as though it stands alone.

3. Identify the Principal Elements

Next, identify the important people, objects and actions within the parable. These form the natural picture through which the spiritual truth is communicated.

In the Parable of the Sower, the principal elements include:

- The sower;
- The seed;
- The wayside;
- The stony ground;
- The thorns;
- The good ground;
- The resulting fruit.

These elements are clearly important to the development of the story. However, we should not assume that every small detail must have a separate spiritual meaning.

We must allow Scripture to establish which elements are significant. The purpose is to understand the message of the parable, not to create meanings for details that Jesus never intended to carry them.

4. Let Jesus Explain What He Explains

Whenever Jesus gives the interpretation of a parable, His explanation must govern our understanding. His interpretation provides the clearest possible foundation for understanding the symbols within the story.

After giving the Parable of the Sower, Jesus said in **Matthew 13:18**:

> *"Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower."*

Jesus then explained the meaning of the different kinds of ground and what happened to the Word in each case. The spiritual meaning does not need to be invented because Jesus Himself provides the explanation.

This is extremely important when studying parables. The clearest interpretation of a parable is the interpretation given by Jesus Christ Himself.

Where Jesus explains an element, His explanation settles its meaning. Our interpretation must begin with what He has already established.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why should Jesus' own explanation control the meaning of what He explains in a parable?

Personal Reflection

Have you given equal certainty to an imagined detail and to a meaning Jesus states directly?

Action Step

Select one parable and distinguish what Jesus directly explains from what you have assumed. Correct an unsupported explanation before sharing it with anyone.

5. Examine Important Words

Individual words can sometimes carry important meaning. Careful study may include examining words, using concordances and consulting the original Hebrew or Greek where clarification is needed.

This does not mean that every word must be subjected to a lengthy language study. We examine individual words when doing so helps clarify what the verse is saying.

A concordance may help us discover:

- Where the same word appears elsewhere;
- The Hebrew or Greek word behind the English translation;
- Whether the word has more than one possible meaning;
- How Scripture itself uses the word.

These tools can assist careful study, but they do not replace the context or the harmony of Scripture. The meaning of an individual word must still agree with the verse in which God has placed it.

6. Search for Mate Scriptures

A symbol or picture used in one verse may be explained or clarified elsewhere in the Bible. Scripture should therefore be compared with Scripture.

If a parable speaks of seed, harvest, sheep, vines, light or another familiar biblical picture, we should search for other verses using the same language. Those verses may help us understand how the picture is being used.

This does not mean that a symbol must have exactly the same meaning every time it appears. Context still determines how the picture functions in a particular verse.

However, mate Scriptures can often confirm or clarify an interpretation. The Bible should be allowed to interpret the Bible.

7. Consider the Timeframe

Some parables contain prophetic teaching. We should therefore consider when the events or spiritual conditions being described belong.

Ask whether Jesus was speaking about circumstances already present or describing something that would develop later. We should also consider whether the teaching concerns the Old Covenant, the Gospel Day or the final outcome of the Gospel message.

Timeframe can be essential to understanding what Jesus intended. A correct symbol placed into the wrong timeframe can still produce an incorrect interpretation.

The same principles already established concerning audience, covenant setting and historical context therefore remain important. Parabolic language does not remove the need to establish when the teaching applies.

8. Compare the Interpretation With Scriptural Harmony

Before accepting an interpretation, test it against the rest of God's Word. No interpretation of a parable should require us to contradict clear Scriptural teaching elsewhere.

If our understanding produces conflict with established biblical truth, the interpretation needs to be reconsidered. The problem is not with Scripture, but with the way we have understood the picture.

This protects us from building doctrine upon an imaginative explanation of one detail. A correct interpretation must remain in harmony with the whole Word of God.

9. Depend Upon the Spirit of Christ

Careful study is necessary, but spiritual understanding is not produced by study tools alone. The born-again believer has the Spirit of Christ dwelling within, and spiritual truth must be understood through the life He has given.

As we prayerfully examine the written Word, the Holy Spirit teaches, guides and helps us understand the truth God has revealed. The Spirit of Christ does not lead us away from Scripture, but works through the Word.

A careful approach therefore combines a structured method of study with dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Context, symbolic elements, word studies, translations and concordances can all be useful, but they must remain servants of the Word rather than authorities over it.

The method can therefore be remembered simply: Read the whole parable. Establish the context. Identify the important elements. Let Jesus explain what He explains. Examine important words. Search for mate Scriptures. Establish the timeframe. Test the interpretation against the harmony of Scripture.

Throughout every step, remain dependent upon the Spirit of Christ. Careful study and spiritual understanding belong together.

We will now apply these principles to the Parable of the Sower. By following the method step by step, we can see how the natural picture and the spiritual explanation work together.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do context, comparison with the Bible and dependence on the Spirit work together when studying a parable?

Personal Reflection

Which of those steps do you most often neglect when a familiar interpretation seems persuasive?

Action Step

Apply the Bible-study steps to one parable. Identify the step you have tended to neglect and explain how using it will change your study habits.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER: A WORKED EXAMPLE

BACK TO CONTENTS

The Parable of the Sower provides an excellent opportunity to apply the principles we have just considered. Jesus gives the natural story and then explains its principal spiritual meaning. This allows us to see clearly how parabolic language works.

Matthew recorded the parable in **Matthew 13:3-9**:

> *"And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."*

Jesus later explained the parable in **Matthew 13:18-23**:

> *"Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."*

Jesus has already identified the principal spiritual elements for us. We therefore begin with His explanation rather than inventing our own.

The Sower

Jesus begins, *"Behold, a sower went forth to sow."* The word *"Behold"* calls attention to what follows and tells the hearer that something important should be considered carefully.

Although the King James Version says *"a sower,"* Jesus later refers to *"the parable of the sower."* The teaching centres upon the source from which the Word proceeds.

Mark gives the central meaning plainly in **Mark 4:14**:

> *"The sower soweth the word."*

The Word may be proclaimed through human servants, but its true source is Jesus Christ. Truth does not originate in the preacher, teacher or minister because Jesus Christ is the One who reveals truth and gives life through His Word by His Spirit.

The servant therefore sows faithfully, but Christ remains the source. The attention must remain upon the Word being sown rather than upon the person through whom it is proclaimed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

In the Sower, what do the sower and seed represent according to Jesus' explanation?

Personal Reflection

What assumption about the seed or the sower changed when you compared the story with Jesus' words?

Action Step

Compare the Sower's natural pictures with Jesus' explanations. Then examine whether you have valued a preacher or teaching method above the Word being sown.

The Seed

Jesus identifies the seed as *"the word of the kingdom."* The natural seed provides a simple picture through which we can understand what happens when the Word reaches different hearts.

A seed contains life and, when received into suitable ground, produces fruit. In the same way, the Word of God carries truth that produces spiritual fruit when it is properly received into the heart.

The seed itself does not change as it falls upon the different kinds of ground. The difference is found in the condition of the ground and the response to what has been sown.

This is one of the central lessons of the parable. The same Word is heard, but people respond to it differently.

The Ground

The seed is not being sown into literal soil in the spiritual meaning of the parable. Jesus says that what is sown is received into the heart.

The four kinds of ground therefore describe different responses to the Word:

- The wayside;
- The stony places;
- The thorns;
- The good ground.

The Gospel is offered to all, but the response is not the same in every heart. The question is what happens when the Word is heard and how that Word is received.

The Wayside

Jesus said in **Matthew 13:4**:

> *"And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:"*

He then explained in **Matthew 13:19**:

> *"When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side."*

The picture is of seed falling upon hard ground where it remains exposed and is quickly taken away. The seed has reached the ground, but it has not become established within it.

The Word has been heard, but it has not been received with proper regard. Because it remains upon the surface, it becomes vulnerable to influences that remove or replace it.

The picture of the fowls points to the wicked who seek to devour the seed of the Word. In this teaching, the warning is especially directed towards false religious leaders who may handle or proclaim Scripture while rejecting its true instruction.

God's Word may therefore be heard, yet false religion can remove or replace the true seed with tradition, human reasoning or religious error.

David wrote in **Psalm 50:16-17**:

> *"But unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth? Seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee."*

These verses show that it is possible for people to use religious language and even speak from Scripture while rejecting the instruction of God's Word. The outward use of Scripture does not necessarily mean that the Word has been received into the heart.

The wayside therefore warns us that hearing is not enough. The Word must be received, understood and regarded as truth.

The Stony Places

Jesus described the second ground in **Matthew 13:5-6**:

> *"Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away."*

Jesus explained in **Matthew 13:20-21**:

> *"But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended."*

The initial response appears promising. The Word is heard and received with joy, but there is no depth and no root.

The Bible uses the picture of a stony heart when speaking about the need for inward spiritual change. God promised to remove the stony heart and give a new heart and spirit.

God said in **Ezekiel 36:25-26**:

> *"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh."*

The problem in the parable is not simply enthusiasm that later weakens. Jesus says plainly that there is *"no root."*

Jesus identified Himself as the root in **Revelation 22:16**:

> *"I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star."*

Paul also wrote in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

A person may respond emotionally to preaching, enjoy Christian teaching or appreciate the benefits associated with religion without actually being born again. An outward response is not the same as receiving the life of Jesus Christ within.

The test comes when the Word brings persecution, sacrifice or opposition. Where there is no root in Christ, the temporary response does not endure.

The Thorns

Jesus continued in **Matthew 13:7**:

> *"And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:"*

He explained in **Matthew 13:22**:

> *"He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful."*

Here the problem is different. The seed grows, but competing growth surrounds it and eventually chokes what had begun to develop.

Jesus identifies two particular dangers: *"the care of this world"* and *"the deceitfulness of riches."* These things begin to compete with the Word for the attention and affection of the heart.

Natural responsibilities are not wrong. The danger comes when earthly concerns become greater than spiritual priorities and begin to dominate the life.

Paul gave a clear warning in **1 Timothy 6:7-10**:

> *"For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."*

The danger is not simply possessing material things. The danger is allowing riches, ambitions, anxieties and earthly priorities to take possession of the heart.

Demas provides a sobering example. Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 4:10**:

> *"For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia."*

The thorny ground therefore warns us about competing affections. Spiritual fruitfulness can be choked when love for the things of this life begins to compete with devotion to Jesus Christ.

The Good Ground

Jesus finally said in **Matthew 13:8**:

> *"But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold."*

He explained in **Matthew 13:23**:

> *"But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."*

Luke adds an important detail in **Luke 8:15**:

> *"But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience."*

The good ground hears the Word and receives it. The Word is then kept and allowed to remain until fruit is produced.

The good ground therefore:

- Hears the Word;
- Receives it;
- Keeps it;
- Continues in it;
- Bears fruit.

The fruitfulness is not identical in every person. Jesus speaks of thirtyfold, sixtyfold and hundredfold. The amount may differ, but good ground produces fruit.

The emphasis is therefore not upon comparison with another believer. The important question is whether the Word is being received and producing spiritual fruit.

Fruitfulness also requires continuance. Luke says that they bring forth fruit *"with patience."* The good ground does not simply respond well at the beginning, but continues until fruit is produced.

Paul could say near the end of his life in **2 Timothy 4:6-7**:

> *"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:"*

The good ground does not simply begin well. It continues.

The Message of the Parable

The Parable of the Sower shows clearly how a natural picture carries spiritual truth. Jesus gives the picture and then explains the principal elements so that we do not need to depend upon imagination.

The Sower sows the Word. The seed is the Word of the Kingdom, while the ground represents the condition and response of the human heart.

The four kinds of ground reveal four very different responses:

- Some hear but do not truly regard the Word;
- Some receive it temporarily but have no root in Christ;
- Some allow earthly cares and riches to choke spiritual fruitfulness;
- Some receive, keep and continue in the Word until fruit is produced.

The same seed is sown in each case. The difference is not in the seed. The difference is in how the Word is received.

Jesus therefore ends the parable with the words, *"Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."* The question is not simply whether the Word reaches our natural ears.

The question is whether the Word is received into the heart, kept and allowed to produce fruit. Good ground receives the Word and brings forth the fruit of the life of Jesus Christ within.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do the different soils explain different responses to the same Word?

Personal Reflection

Which response to the Word calls for the clearest attention in your own life?

Action Step

Consider the four kinds of ground and honestly identify what may hinder your response to God's Word. Explain what you will change to receive it fruitfully.

SYMBOLISM: PICTURES THAT REVEAL SPIRITUAL TRUTH

BACK TO CONTENTS

Symbolism is another important form of biblical language. A symbol uses a person, object, creature, action or picture to communicate a truth beyond its immediate appearance.

Like a metaphor, symbolism creates a picture in the mind. However, biblical symbols can do more than make a comparison. They may reveal character, spiritual condition, relationship, authority or the nature of something being described.

This becomes especially important when studying prophetic books such as Daniel and Revelation. These books contain many pictures that cannot be understood correctly if every detail is treated as a literal physical description.

Symbols Must Not Always Be Read Literally

Some verses immediately show that the language cannot reasonably be understood as a literal physical description. The nature of the picture itself tells us that symbolic language is being used.

John wrote in **Revelation 12:1**:

> *"And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:"*

John is not describing an ordinary woman physically wearing the sun while standing upon the moon. The language presents a picture that must be understood symbolically.

The same principle applies to many other images in Revelation, including beasts, horns, dragons, horses, trumpets and other unusual scenes. These pictures communicate truths that must be understood through the symbolic language being used.

The first verse of Revelation itself helps us understand how the book communicates.

John wrote in **Revelation 1:1**:

> *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:"*

The word *"signified"* carries the thought of communicating through signs. Revelation therefore contains signs and symbols through which spiritual truths are communicated.

This does not mean that every difficult verse in the Bible should automatically be treated as symbolic. The context must determine the form of language being used.

Symbols Can Reveal Character

One of the clearest purposes of symbolism is to reveal character. A familiar picture may communicate something about a person that is not immediately visible outwardly.

Jesus said in **Matthew 7:15**:

> *"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."*

The contrast is immediately powerful. A sheep presents a picture of gentleness and harmlessness, while a wolf presents a very different picture of danger, destruction and predatory behaviour.

Jesus uses these animals to reveal the difference between outward appearance and inward character. The false prophet may appear harmless, religious and trustworthy while inwardly possessing the destructive character represented by the wolf.

The animals themselves are not the subject of the warning. They are symbols that help reveal the true character of the people Jesus is describing.

This shows why symbolism can communicate so effectively. A familiar picture may make a spiritual warning clear and memorable.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can the sheep and wolves in Jesus' warning reveal character beneath outward appearance?

Personal Reflection

Where might outward appearance make you slow to test a claim or a person's fruit by the Bible?

Action Step

Consider a teacher or claim you have trusted because it appeared convincing. Test it by the Bible and explain how this should change your discernment.

Symbols Can Reveal Spiritual Relationships

The Bible also uses symbolic pictures to explain spiritual relationships. Something familiar in the natural world can help us understand a relationship that is spiritual.

Jesus spoke of Himself as a vine and His people as branches.

Jesus said in **John 15:5**:

> *"I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."*

The picture of the vine and branches reveals dependence and shared life. A branch cannot produce life independently from the vine because its ability to live and bear fruit depends upon its connection with the source of life.

In the same way, spiritual life does not originate in the believer independently from Jesus Christ. He is the source of life, and the born-again believer lives through His indwelling life.

The symbol therefore helps us understand the spiritual relationship. The believer possesses the Person, and the life of that Person within produces spiritual fruit.

The Bible Must Define the Symbol

One of the greatest dangers when studying symbolism is allowing imagination to determine the meaning. A person may look at a symbol and decide what it means according to personal experience, culture, tradition or speculation.

That is not a safe method of interpretation. The Bible must be allowed to interpret its own symbols.

If Scripture gives the meaning directly, we should accept that meaning. Where Scripture does not explain the symbol immediately, we should search for other verses where the same or a related picture is used.

Moses wrote in **Deuteronomy 32:2**:

> *"My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass:"*

Here Scripture itself connects rain with doctrine and speech. The natural picture of rain is being used to communicate something concerning the Word being spoken.

When a similar picture appears elsewhere, this verse may help us understand its spiritual meaning. However, we must still examine the context before assuming that every reference to rain carries exactly the same symbolic meaning.

Scriptural comparison must work together with context. A mate Scripture can help establish meaning, but it should not be used to remove a symbol from the setting in which God has placed it.

Symbols Should Not Be Forced

Just as it is wrong to read clearly symbolic language as literal, it is also wrong to turn every person, object, colour, number or action in the Bible into a symbol. Scripture must give us a reason for treating something symbolically.

A river may simply be a river. A mountain may be an actual mountain, and an animal may simply be part of a historical account.

We should not create hidden meanings where Scripture gives us no reason to do so. Unrestricted symbolism can make the Bible appear to say almost anything the interpreter wants it to say.

Correct interpretation therefore requires restraint. We should ask:

- Is the verse clearly symbolic?

- Does the context indicate that a picture is being used?
- Does Scripture explain the symbol?
- Is the same or a related picture used elsewhere?
- Does the interpretation agree with the whole Word of God?

These questions help keep our interpretation under the authority of Scripture. They also protect us from confusing imagination with biblical interpretation.

Symbolism Helps Make Spiritual Truth Visible

Symbols are powerful because they make spiritual truth easier to picture and remember. Things that are familiar naturally can help communicate truths that cannot be seen with natural eyes.

A lamb communicates one kind of character, while a wolf communicates another. Light presents a very different picture from darkness.

A vine and branches communicate dependence and shared life. Seed communicates the potential for life and fruitfulness.

These pictures allow spiritual truths to be communicated through things that can be pictured and understood. This is one reason symbolic language appears so frequently in parables, prophecy, dreams and visions.

However, the symbol itself must never become more important than the truth it communicates. The purpose is not to become fascinated with images, numbers, beasts or prophetic pictures.

The purpose is to understand what God is revealing through them.

As we continue through The Language of the Bible, symbolism will become increasingly important. Later Study Guides will examine types, dreams and visions in greater detail.

For now, the essential principle is simple. When Scripture uses a symbol, do not stop at the picture and do not invent its meaning. Search the Word of God and allow Scripture to reveal the spiritual truth the picture was given to communicate.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why may a familiar visible picture communicate spiritual truth without becoming a licence for imagination?

Personal Reflection

Have you assigned a symbolic meaning because it sounded fitting rather than because the Bible supported it?

Action Step

Choose one symbol from this section. Check its meaning in the Bible, withdraw any assumption without support, and explain what the truth teaches you.

CONCLUSION: HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS

BACK TO CONTENTS

This Study Guide has introduced the principal ways the Bible communicates truth and has shown why recognising the form of language is important for correct interpretation. Some verses are literal and historical, while others use similes, metaphors, parables and symbols to communicate spiritual truth.

Later Study Guides in this module will develop types, dreams and visions in greater detail. The first responsibility of the Bible student is therefore to recognise what kind of language is being used before deciding how the verse should be understood.

A literal statement should not be turned into a symbol without Scriptural reason. At the same time, symbolic language should not be forced into a literal interpretation simply because the words describe something that can be pictured.

The Bible must govern the interpretation.

Words and Context Matter

We have also seen that individual words matter. Hebrew and Greek study tools can sometimes help clarify the meaning of a verse, particularly where an English word represents different original words.

However, no concordance, dictionary, translation or other study resource should become the authority over Scripture. Words must always be understood within their context and in harmony with the whole Word of God.

Study tools can help us investigate what has been written. The Bible remains the final authority.

Parables Carry Spiritual Truth

Parables demonstrate these principles especially well. Jesus used familiar stories and everyday pictures to communicate spiritual truths concerning the Kingdom of God.

The natural story is important because it provides the picture through which the truth is communicated. However, the natural story is not the final message because the spiritual truth carried by that story is what must be understood.

The Parable of the Sower showed clearly how this works. The same seed was sown upon four kinds of ground, but the results were very different.

Jesus Himself explained that the seed represents the Word and that the different kinds of ground reveal different responses to that Word. His explanation provides the foundation for understanding the parable.

Some hear without truly receiving the Word. Some respond temporarily but have no root in Christ, while others allow the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches to choke spiritual fruitfulness.

The good ground hears the Word, receives it, keeps it and continues until fruit is produced. The difference is not in the seed, but in how the Word is received.

The parable therefore teaches us more than how to interpret figurative language. It also confronts us personally with the question of how we receive the Word of God.

Symbols Must Be Established by Scripture

Symbolism works in a similar way. A visible or familiar picture may communicate character, relationship, spiritual condition or another truth that cannot be seen naturally.

Wolves and sheep communicate different characters. Vines and branches communicate dependence and shared life, while seed and soil communicate truths concerning the Word and the condition of the heart.

Light and darkness can also communicate spiritual truths through familiar contrasts. The picture helps us understand, but the picture itself must remain under the interpretation Scripture provides.

Symbols must therefore never be interpreted according to imagination. We should ask:

- What does the context show?
- Does Scripture explain the symbol?
- Where else is the same or a related picture used?
- Does the interpretation agree with the rest of the Bible?
- Does it preserve the truth already clearly established in God's Word?

These questions protect us from two opposite errors. They help us avoid careless literalism while also protecting us from uncontrolled symbolism.

Hear What the Spirit Says

The Holy Spirit is also essential in understanding spiritual truth. The born-again believer has the Spirit of Christ dwelling within, and He teaches through the written Word.

Careful study and spiritual dependence therefore belong together. We search the Scriptures diligently while depending upon Jesus Christ to give understanding through His Spirit.

The Spirit of Christ does not lead us away from the written Word or replace the need for careful study. He works through the truth God has revealed and helps the believer understand and receive it.

Jesus repeatedly said, *"Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."* Those words remind us that hearing involves more than receiving sound.

Spiritual hearing means receiving, understanding and responding to the truth Jesus Christ reveals. We do not study the language of the Bible simply to identify figures of speech or explain symbols correctly, but so that we may understand and receive the truth God has communicated.

As we continue through The Language of the Bible, the same foundation must remain before us. Recognise the language being used. Examine the context carefully. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Let the Bible establish its own meaning. Depend upon the Spirit of Christ within.

When these principles are followed faithfully, we are better prepared to understand the language God has chosen to communicate His truth. The purpose remains not only to

understand the words before us, but to hear and receive what God has revealed through His Word.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does it mean to hear what the Spirit says while letting the Bible establish its own meaning?

Personal Reflection

What habit of reading or responding to God's Word needs correction after this teaching?

Action Step

Identify one habit that has weakened your response to God's Word. Choose a regular time to read carefully and describe how you will act on what you learn.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

How should literal accounts, figures of speech, parables, and symbols be read differently? Explain why context and the Bible's own explanations must govern each meaning.

2. Understanding

Why does the difference between the Greek words KOSMOS and AION matter when reading the word world? Explain why context still governs a word study.

3. Personal Reflection

Nathan's story confronted David before he recognised his own conduct. Which part of that example challenges the way you respond when a biblical parable exposes something in your life?

4. Response to Truth

Jesus used parables both to reveal truth and to expose the hearer's response. How should that teaching change the way you hear and respond to the parables of Matthew 13?

5. Action Step

Choose one parable in Matthew 13 to examine this week. Which previous assumption will you test using its audience, context and Jesus' explanation, and how should this truth affect your response? State when you will begin.

6. Early Response

Have you begun examining that parable and testing the assumption you identified in Question 5? If so, describe what changed in your understanding or response. If not, explain what prevented you.

7. Ongoing Practice

What repeatable practice will help you distinguish literal events from figures of speech and keep the Bible's own explanation central when you study future parables or symbols?

8. Doctrinal Clarity

How do the seven parables of Matthew 13 belong together, and why must the Sower's seed and soils be understood from Jesus' explanation rather than from an invented meaning?

9. Living the Truth

Which response to the Word in the Parable of the Sower challenges your own life most directly? What will you change so that God's Word is received fruitfully?

10. Final Response

How will you listen to the truth taught through parables while testing the meaning of their natural pictures, words, and symbols against the Bible? Explain what you will do when a proposed meaning lacks biblical support.