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200 - Introduction To Biblical Symbolism

Hi! Thanks for watching and welcome to my second series of lessons on understanding the Bible. In the last series I focused on more practical and concrete aspects of Bible study. Building on the foundation of content we need to understand how some things are conveyed in the scriptures. This forms a critical link between the Old and New Testaments and provides ample evidence that God is the author of the Bible. In this series we'll explore the subject of biblical symbolism.

The Bible is one of the most misinterpreted and misunderstood books in the world. Part of that's due to errors in doctrine that began to emerge toward the end of the first century. As early as the second century human ideas were creeping into the church. Christians allowed these to replace inspired doctrine and eventually the church transformed into a body that no longer resembled that of the first century. Over time the church became involved in spiritual, personal, civil and governmental affairs dominating every facet of Western life for centuries. Mysticism, superstition, elements of Judaism and even paganism influenced the church. The scriptures were kept from those who weren't part of the clergy ushering in a period of darkness and control in which multitudes of false doctrines and practices could be expounded and enforced. As time went on a break from this control began with the work of Martin Luther who objected to the practices of the church and called for reform. Others soon followed ushering in the great Protestant Reformation but the meaning of the scriptures was still being lost in the onslaught of doctrines, ideas and theologies that did more to confuse than clarify.

Over time the Bible was presented and seen as a mysterious and obscure collection of sacred writings demanding special talents, training or divine guidance to understand. The common person was led to believe they weren't able to understand the scriptures and so priests or other ordained representatives of the truth were called on to explain them. That belief is still ingrained in the minds of many who think they could never comprehend the Bible and its mysteries. Symbols, types, figures and prophetic language took on a new life filled with intrigue and layers of obscurity paving the way for even more misunderstanding. But why is that important?

Consider this. If a teacher has been educated with information that is incorrect they'll never be able to teach a subject accurately. They might refine their understanding of what they've been taught but unless they go back to the source and make a correction of what they know - accuracy can never be the result.

Now let's say that another teacher doesn't agree with what they've been taught but instead comes up with an alternate perspective. Other educators they associate with will either agree or reject the new ideas but once more, accuracy will never be the result. Let's take that a step further. Suppose that this same teacher has ideas that have challenged the status quo of the educational system. Their ideas are refuted and attacked. The teacher is told that unless they change their mind they'll lose their license and be unable to teach.

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Other teachers may decide to join forces with the one under attack and rally to their cause. In an extreme case they leave the educational mainstream and form their own school. Their arguments in defense of their positions become more refined and because others follow them, the ideas become institutionalized. Until someone else disagrees with them, and repeats the same process. But in all of this, no one ever goes back to the source to see what it says and question what they're teaching.

Now suppose that these teachers are church leaders. Looking at it this way we can see how the Reformation began and denominations grew. This continued for centuries until a few people stopped and decided that they had to go back to the source. When they did, they had the realization of how wrong they had all been for a very long time. So, what does that have to do with Biblical symbolism?

Keep the analogy of the teachers in mind. If someone has an idea about something in the Bible that is figurative or not literal, but they really don't understand the scriptures as well as they should, how accurate can their interpretation be? Logically it won't be. Realistically it will never be correct because the beginning knowledge base was incomplete or incorrect and the perspective will be off as well and so the meaning of such things will also be incorrect. Changing perspectives and erroneous doctrines led to interpretation of elements found in the scriptures that supported the ideas of the author. This creates a cycle of misunderstanding supported by misinterpretation which is then used to support more misunderstanding. Many of the great religious debates over time have been between theologians who argued in favor of what they personally believed and not what the Bible teaches.

How that affects the understanding of symbolism in the Bible should be fairly obvious. If we assign a meaning to something that isn't supported in scripture we'll have to defend our opinion which may not be in harmony with the scriptures. Our defense might sound reasonable and a lot of people will accept it but we've obscured the real meaning of the Bible. These ideas have been held in place historically by

1. Restricting access to the scriptures
2. Leading people to believe they can't understand the Bible
3. Penalizing people for not accepting ideas put forth
4. Promoting the idea that high ranking church officers have the ability to change doctrine
5. Criticizing anyone who rejects certain ideas and wants to rely on the Bible only
6. Convincing people that the Bible is dark, mysterious and not understandable
7. Promoting / allowing fear & superstition to flourish in a scripturally deficated environment
8. Threatening, intimidating or misleading people when they express a desire to break with the accepted traditions of a religious group

As various religious bodies developed they created their own doctrines and ways of

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interpreting things. Much of this isn't consistent with what the Bible teaches and the influence of error is strong. Religious traditions, family ties and lifelong associations can be blocks to taking a different perspective when someone suggests that we put that away and just take what the Bible says. One of the ways we can understand the doctrine of the Bible is to see how God has conveyed the message, concealing it over time and then revealing it in the pages of the New Testament.

We need to come to terms with the nature of Biblical symbolism. We need to understand what it is, how it appears and how it should be understood and applied. In this series I'll take a look at topics that address these areas and then we'll explore specific figures and what they mean. In the next lesson I'll start by defining **The Nature Of Biblical Symbolism** and its specific characteristics.