

THE SYMBOLISM OF BAPTISM (Part One) **“Introduction to Symbolism”**

Romans 6:3-5: *“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.”*

Colossians 2:12: *“Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”*

I Peter 3:21: *“There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*

Acts 22:16: *“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”*

INTRODUCTION:

This is the first in a series of messages on the topic of “The Symbolism of Baptism.” Its title is “An Introduction to Symbolism.” The aim of the series will be to show whether baptism is a symbol of a deeper reality, namely salvation, or whether it is the actual reality of salvation itself, namely sacramental grace. The aim of this first message is to examine the meaning, nature, and function of symbolism as a means in which the invisible Creator uses to communicate with His visible creatures.

In this world of ours, spirit and matter are joined together in a mysterious union; the invisible is intertwined with the visible. The unseen concepts and images of the mind are connected with the physical actions of the body. While I can see an animal, I cannot see a concept or an idea. In order to enable us to communicate with each other, and with God Himself, God has given us words, signs (like sign language), and symbols. These are all means of expressing truth in order to be understood. Symbolism is the practice of communicating through symbols.

I. SYMBOLISM DEFINED

It is imperative at the outset that we understand the definition and nature of symbols and symbolism. What then is a symbol? “A symbol is something that points to and represents something beyond the symbol itself.” In so doing, it establishes a relationship between itself and

the thing which it is representing. It is a visible manifestation of an invisible reality. For example, we say that “he has the courage of a lion.” Courage is an invisible concept or idea; a lion is a visible object expressing strength and courage. Thus we ascribe the invisible concepts of strength and courage to the person through the use of a visible image. The symbol always points to a reality beyond itself. The lion is the symbol, the reality is residing in the man’s courage. It is like a man’s shadow conveying his body’s substance. The shadow represents an image of the person, but is not the person himself. Nevertheless the shadow bears a representation to the substance.

In order for a symbol to be effective, a person must be able to understand and participate in the reality that the symbol represents. For example, if I am traveling on an ocean liner and we pass a ship flying the flag of a foreign country, for me the flag is only a sign or emblem of that country. But suppose I have been held captive as a prisoner of war in a foreign land for two years. Suddenly I am rescued, and see the flag of the United States of America of which I am a citizen. My heart begins to pound inside of me for what that flag represents to me. The flag is no longer a mere emblem or sign; it is a symbol of all that which gives me freedom and security. My whole being is moved with the reality to which the flag points. I must understand the symbol in order to connect it with the reality. Thus the flag represents the values which my country means to me. Thus we can say that symbols are material objects made to convey spiritual or mental conceptions to the minds or souls of men.

II. THREE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF SYMBOLISM

1. The names of symbols are to be understood in a literal or material manner. Example: in Daniel 7:1-8, the four great beasts are symbols of literal animals, which all can relate to.

2. The symbols always describe something essentially different from themselves. Example: the four great beasts are said to represent four kings which should arise out of the earth (v. 17). So the beasts are symbols of either kings or kingdoms.

3. Some resemblance must exist between the symbol and the thing symbolized. Example: both the beasts and the kings have power over others.

III. GOD’S USE OF SYMBOLISM TO EXPRESS HIMSELF

Symbolism is as old as humanity. Anthropologists, regardless of their attitude toward religion, agree that man made use of symbols before the formation of the great civilizations, along with their alphabets. The Biblical evidence of their antiquity is clear: Before the Fall, God gave man his first symbols, namely the sun and the moon (Genesis 1:14-16 and Psalm

104:1-9, 19-23) READ. He also gave man the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with its forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:9, 17; 3:1-3). This symbolized man's responsibility to his sovereign Creator. After the Fall, God gave the flaming sword to guard the tree of life (3:22-24) symbolizing that man had forfeited his fellowship with God through sin as set forth in the Adamic covenant or arrangement. Likewise, after the Flood, God gave man the rainbow symbolizing the Noahitic covenant not to destroy the earth again with water (Genesis 9:12-17). Man's golden age was in his Edenic paradise, and there God used symbols as one means of communicating with His human creatures.

IV. VARIETIES OF BIBLICAL SYMBOLS

The varieties of Biblical symbols are numerous. Nevertheless they can be classified under three major headings. They are:

1. **First, Miraculous Symbols.** Examples (a) The flaming sword at the east of Eden (Genesis 3:24); (b) The burning bush at Horeb (Exodus 3:2); © The pillars of cloud and fire which went before the Israelites (Exodus 13:21) all symbolized the miraculous workings of God's providence.

2. **Second, Material Symbols.** Examples, (a) The blood offered in the animal sacrifices; (b) The tabernacle and temple with their apartments and furniture; (c) The bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper.

3. **Third, Visionary Symbols.** Examples, The dreams and visions of the prophets, both the major and minor prophets. Examples found in Ezekiel and Daniel, and even John allude to the symbols found in the Book of Revelation.

Under these three major headings, various classes can be listed in which the magnitude is seen in how the Bible makes use of symbols. They are:

- There are symbols *taken from nature*: such as the sun, moon, stars, fire, lightning, thunder, rain, snow, sea, mountains, sands, desert, rivers, springs, and valleys.
- There are symbols of *non-human creatures*: such as the lion, wolf, lamb, goat, ox, eagle, dove, vulture, serpent, locust, bee, scorpion and spider.
- There are symbols of *vegetarian life*: such as trees, grass, flowers, and grain.
- There are symbols of *things made by man*: such as the yoke, crown, lamp, girdle, shoes, helmet, shield, sword, bread and wine.
- There are symbols of *colors*: such as red, blue, purple and white.
- There are symbols of *metals*: such as gold, silver and iron.

- There are symbols of *jewels and precious stones*: such as ruby, emerald, sapphire, amethyst, and pearl.
- There are symbolic *persons*: such as Adam, Abel, Cain, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Ezekiel, and Solomon.
- There are symbolic *names*: such as Jehovah (I Am who I Am) - Exodus 3:14; Jehovah-Jireh - “The Lord will provide;” Joshua - “Jehovah is salvation;” Abram - “exalted Father;” Abraham - “father of a multitude;” etc. etc.
- There are symbolic *parts of the human body*, such as the eye, hand, the heart, the kidneys, and bowels. The blood was in a special class by itself. In Hebrew thinking, the blood was the principal component of the body because life itself was thought of as residing in the blood. Thus we read in Leviticus 17:11, **“For the life of the flesh is in the blood.”** The great concentration of the Old Testament references to the blood is in Leviticus, the book of sacrifices. Blood symbolizes life given up in death, and in the Old Testament it has a cleansing and atoning meaning as it points forward to Christ’s sacrifice. So in the New Testament, blood is a major symbol of the atoning death of Christ and its benefits. In instituting the Lord’s Supper, the Lord used the wine to point to the blood, signifying His life given in a vicarious or substitutionary sacrifice - **“This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”** (Matthew 26:28). The blood is mentioned frequently elsewhere in the New Testament - Romans 5:9 **“Justified by His blood;”** I Peter 1:18,19 **“Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible (perishable) things, like silver or gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot;”** I John 1:7 **“the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.”**

V. DIFFERENT REALMS IN WHICH GOD HAS USED SYMBOLS

God has chosen to make use of symbols in several different realms. We will list them in their ascending ranks of importance.

1. In Nature Itself: The universe is one grand school, teaching man through countless symbols, patterns and analogies, the truth of the invisible God and the invisible realm of eternity. Psalm 19:1-6 - **“The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line (sound) has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to**

run its race. Its rising is from one end of heaven, and its circuit to the other end; and there is nothing hidden from its heat."

The things on earth are but patterns or symbols of the things in heaven. Earth is but a shadow of heaven. The two resemble each other, but the greater reality resides in heaven, the realm of the invisible. On all of God's works are written God's truth, speaking in type and symbol of His divine wisdom and power, of our responsibilities to acknowledge and serve Him. Nature, from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy, is one magnificent parable or symbol of God for man, illustrating for him, its manifold laws, forces, and actions. Nature is a minister, preaching in a universal language through repetitions of birth and death, growth and decay, sleeping and waking, sowing and reaping, light and darkness, mountains and oceans, numbers and spaces. All of nature's phenomena is designed to educate man unto God's glory and his need to prepare for a sinless life in eternity.

The song writer, who penned the words of "This is My Father's World," captures the words of David in Psalm 24:1, *"The earth is the Lord's and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein."* The words are as follows:

This is my Father's world, and to my list'ning ears,
All nature sings, and round me rings, the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world, I rest me in the thought,
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,
His hand the wonders wrought.
This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise;
The morning light, the lily white declare their Maker's praise.
This is my Father's world, He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.
This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father's world, the battle is not done;
Jesus, who died, shall be satisfied, and earth and heav'n be one.

2. Special Revelation - Old Testament.

We now ascend upward from natural revelation into the realm of special revelation as found in the Old Testament Scriptures. The Old Testament economy is packed with types and symbols. We find:

- a. Symbolical localities: such as Eden, Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem.
- b. Symbolical personages: such as Adam, Cain, Abel, Melchisedek, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Joshua, David, and Zerubbabel.
- c. Symbolical events: such as the flood, the call of Abraham, the offering of Isaac, the wrestling of the angel with Jacob, the bondage in Egypt, the passover by the destroying angel, the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the passage of the Jordan, the settlement in Canaan, the Babylonian captivity, the restoration to the land, Jacob's ladder, the burning bush, the pillar of cloud and the fire, the manna, the smitten rock, the brazen serpent, the tabernacle, the outer court, the laver, the altar of incense, the candlestick, the veil, the holy of holies, the ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat, and the cherubim.
- d. Symbolic rituals: such as circumcision, the cleansing by water, the day of atonement, the sacrifices, the sprinkling of blood, the laying on of hands, the scapegoat, and on and on. In point of fact, the entire Old Testament economy is but one grand scheme of symbols pointing forward to a future reality to be realized in the Apostolic age and the eternal state which was to follow. Paul describes it in one word in Hebrews 9:9 where he says, ***"It was symbolic (figure - KJV) for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"*** (Hebrews 9:9-14)

3. Special Revelation - New Testament

We now ascend into a still higher range to that of the New Testament. The four gospels give us a record of the teaching style of Jesus. If ever any man taught with authority, it was Christ. He could confound the scribes and Pharisees with the depth of His teachings. But we are impressed as to how commonly and naturally His doctrines take on a parabolic or symbolic form. Look at His many references to Himself in the ***"I Am"*** expressions - ***"I am the Bread of Life, the water of life, light of the world, the good Shepherd,"*** etc. If we erase from the gospels

all that Jesus said in the form of parable, figure, or metaphor, we would be amazed at how little we would have of His direct teachings.

In the New Testament church, symbolism seems to have been centered in the ordinances (sacraments) of baptism and the Lord's supper, along with the Lord's day for worship. This was the first day of the week to recognize Christ's resurrection. All of these serve to identify the believer with Christ.

4. Final Revelation - Christ Jesus Himself (Son of God incarnated in the Son of Man).

Jesus is the final and complete revelation of God to man. He is Himself, the symbol of symbols, being the manifestation of the divine in the human. He is called the Word of God, meaning that God's thoughts, feelings, character and will, are expressed to men in Christ, who is the ***"image of the invisible God."*** (Colossians 2:15). While He was a true Man, He was also true God. One unseparated Person in two separated natures. He was the "Theanthropos," the God-Man.

As we have surveyed God's revelation of Himself through nature, the Old and New Testament scriptures, and Christ Jesus Himself, we are overwhelmed how God has so widely used symbols to convey His truth to us.

This entire message has been to lead us up to the next message in which we will focus on the nature of baptism. If God has used all of these symbols to convey His truth, then what is the nature of baptism? Is it a symbol of a deeper reality, namely the gospel itself? Or is it a power in and of itself? If it is a symbol, just what is it symbolizing? If it is not a symbol, then what is it? The Lord willing we shall delve further into the issue in the next message.