

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE

by Robert C. Walton

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE I

The Shepherd and the Sheep - Images of God

The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture to reveal God to man. This revelation came through many different thought-forms. Sometimes God spoke in explicit propositions. At other times He used examples, symbols, parables, or miraculous demonstrations. All of these find their place in the complex of ideas known as word-pictures. Sometimes these are as simple as literary devices like similes or metaphors, while at other times extended incidents or narratives serve to create images that teach us about who God is. But in order to understand God's communication of Himself to us, we must learn to live and think in the atmosphere of the Ancient Near East - a land of deserts and oases, shepherds, vineyards, changeable climate, and strange customs. The more we learn to walk in the shoes of the ancient Palestinians, the greater will be our understanding of the truths contained in God's Word. It is with this goal in mind that we now embark on the study of nine major biblical word-pictures - only a few of the many Masterpieces of the Bible.

Animal husbandry was an important part of the lives of people in Bible times. Nomads depended on livestock for their livelihood, while settled villagers needed animals for food, clothing, and shelter. Thus we should not be surprised to find that the image of the shepherd and the sheep is a prominent one in the Bible. We will be spending two weeks looking at the various uses of the image; today we will look at its application to God, while next week we will see how it is used of God's people.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD - THE SHEPHERD AS KING

Scripture in many places tells us that Israel's king was to be a shepherd over God's people, caring for them in the name of God, the true Shepherd of Israel. Such references are given in connection with Moses (Psalm 77:20; Isaiah 63:11), Joshua (Numbers 27:17), David (II Samuel 5:2; I Chronicles 11:2; Psalm 78:71-72), and even unbelieving kings like Ahab (I Kings 22:17) and Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28). What does God as the Shepherd of His people do for them?

- The true Shepherd saves His sheep. He seeks lost sinners to bring into His fold (Luke 15:3-7; John 10:16) and gives them life (John 10:10).
- The true Shepherd feeds His sheep. He provides for all their needs (Psalm 23:1-2), including the pastures where they may be fed (John 10:9; Isaiah 49:9; Jeremiah 3:15). False shepherds, on the other hand, do not feed the flock (Ezekiel 34:2; Jude 12).
- The true Shepherd protects His sheep. He uses His rod to keep predators away from them (Psalm 23:3-4) and to destroy those predators (Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). He keeps His sheep from harm (Ezekiel 34:4, 25-31) and protects them from invasion (Micah 5:5). False shepherds, on the other hand, flee when danger approaches (John 10:12-13).
- The true shepherd guides His sheep. He uses His staff to guide them on the right path (Psalm 23:3-4) and goes before them to lead them in safety (Numbers 27:17); where the Shepherd leads, His sheep follow (John 10:4). His wisdom is a goad that keeps them walking rightly

(Ecclesiastes 12:11). God showed Himself to be such a Shepherd when He led Israel through the wilderness (Psalm 77:20; 78:52; 80:1).

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD - THE SHEPHERD AS PROPHET

The prophets were guardians of the theocracy - their task was to keep the flock from straying by speaking to them the words of the Living God. But false prophets arose and scattered God's flock (Jeremiah 23:1). They were responsible for the Babylonian Captivity (Jeremiah 50:6), which was a judgment on them (Jeremiah 25:34-36). They exploited the sheep for their own advantage (Ezekiel 34:2-4) and destroyed God's people (Jeremiah 12:10). As a result, the sheep were scattered (Jeremiah 50:17).

When Christ came to earth, He found His people lost, sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 10:6; 15:24; 9:36; Mark 6:34). Those who purported to be their shepherds were really wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15; 10:16). These wicked men crucified the true Shepherd and the sheep were scattered even more (Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31). Yet the true Shepherd will gather His flock, and the theocracy will be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God (Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 31:10; Ezekiel 34:11-16; Isaiah 49:9; Micah 7:14; Zephaniah 3:13; Micah 2:12; Matthew 2:6; I Peter 5:4).

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD - THE SHEPHERD AS PRIEST

This series of Scriptures provides an unusual twist on the shepherd/sheep image. We find not only the shepherd giving his life for the sheep - an act of true love and commitment to be sure, but in the culture of Bible times, a remarkably foolish one, for who would then care for the sheep if the shepherd was dead? - but also the shepherd becoming the lamb who is offered as a sacrifice. The image thus works contrary to cultural expectations as well as being derived from the way of life with which the readers would have been familiar.

Thus Scripture presents the Good Shepherd as giving His life for the sheep (John 10:11, 15) and shedding His blood for their salvation (Hebrews 13:20). But He was also the sacrificial Lamb (Isaiah 53:7-8; Acts 8:32), spotless (Leviticus 1:10; Deuteronomy 17:1; I Peter 1:19), offered for the sins of others, not His own (Leviticus 5:6, 15, 18; 6:6; John 1:29), a sacrifice acceptable to God (Numbers 15:3). This Lamb, in fact, is the fulfillment of the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:20; I Corinthians 5:7). He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), through whom God revealed His great love in the sacrifice of His Son. The images of the Shepherd and the Lamb are brought together in Revelation 7:17, where we are told that "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd." Because He became a sacrificial Lamb for us, we can look forward to the time when we will worship the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:22-23) and proclaim Him "Lord of lords and King of kings" (Revelation 17:14).

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE II

The Shepherd and the Sheep - Images of God's People

Last week we looked at the variety of ways in which the images of shepherds and sheep were applied to God. Today, we will look at how they are applied to man in general and to God's people in particular.

MAN AS SHEEP

As has often been noted, sheep are not remarkably bright animals, thus the analogy so frequently used in Scripture is not necessarily a complimentary one. Yet there are certain characteristics of sheep that fit people very well. The images are used to describe both Christians and people in general.

First of all, Scripture pictures people as wandering like sheep, lost without a shepherd to lead them and tending to go astray when they venture off on their own:

- All unregenerate people are pictured as wandering sheep following their own way (Isaiah 53:6).
- Jesus looked out at the multitudes and saw them as lost sheep without a shepherd to lead them (Matthew 9:36), then pictured Himself as the shepherd who would find them and bring them into the fold (Luke 15:3-7).
- Believers are also pictured as wandering sheep who are continually brought back by the Shepherd (Psalm 119:176), and who can never be lost again after they are firmly within His protection (John 10:28-29).

Secondly, Scripture pictures people as sheep in that they are followers. John 10 makes extensive use of this image, noting that this following involves recognition, personal relationship, obedience (John 10:3-5) and mutual knowledge (10:14 - cf. relationship of Father to Son in verse 15). The close ties of shepherd and sheep here become an image of the connection between Christ and His people.

Thirdly, sheep in Scripture are pictured as helpless. They have no defenses to protect them against their enemies (Psalm 44:11, 22; Jeremiah 11:19). Furthermore, believers are as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matthew 10:16); deadly foes are all around. We should note, however, that Paul makes reference to this characteristic of sheep in Romans 8:36; in the middle of one of the most triumphant passages in all of Scripture, the apostle notes our helplessness, only to juxtapose it with the sure and certain victory obtained for us by Christ on the cross (cf. Psalm 23:5).

The fourth way in which God's people are portrayed as sheep is in the context of resting in a peaceful environment. The picture of Psalm 23:2 reappears in a variety of contexts:

- Christ’s “little flock” need not fear because they will inherit the Kingdom, where they will find rest and pasture (Luke 12:32; Jeremiah 23:3-4; Ezekiel 34:25-31; 36:37-38; Micah 2:12; 7:14; Zephaniah 3:13; John 10:16; Revelation 7:17); the afflictions of the present will lead to a glorious future (Zechariah 11:11).
- The Last Judgment will witness the division of the sheep and the goats - of God’s people from those who are not (Ezekiel 34:17-22; Matthew 25:32).

MAN AS SHEPHERD

People influence one another for good or ill, and that relationship of influence is often pictured in Scripture in the context of a shepherding role, especially as applied to spiritual leaders. We should note at this point that the word *pastor* comes from the same root as the word *shepherd*.

In many cases, those who lead the flock of God astray are pictured as wicked shepherds:

- False shepherds have no relationship with God, feed themselves instead of the sheep, leave the sheep in danger, but are not followed by the faithful among the flock (Jeremiah 23:1; 25:34-36; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:1-10; John 10:1, 5, 12-13; Jude 12).
- Wicked shepherds will be judged by God (Jeremiah 10:21).
- In a few instances, the metaphor of the wicked shepherd is combined with other word pictures, such as the vineyard (Jeremiah 12:10) and marital imagery (Jeremiah 22:22 - note that the word translated “allies” is really “lovers”). While this may not be good literary form, it illustrates the extent to which the word pictures we are studying are interrelated.
- The great and final opponent of Christ is also pictured as a false and wicked shepherd (Zechariah 11:15-17) and a deceitful lamb (Revelation 13:11).

Needless to say, Scripture also pictures those faithful leaders of the flock of God as good shepherds. Not only do men such as Moses and David serve as models in their careers as actual shepherds, but the image is often used in connection with elders. Good shepherds are to care for the weak and wounded (Ezekiel 34:4), and to protect and feed the sheep (John 21:16; Acts 20:28-29; Ephesians 4:11; I Peter 5:2-3). We should note, of course, that these responsibilities are not restricted to those who hold formal office in the church. As Proverbs 10:21 indicates, “The lips of the righteous nourish [lit. *shepherd*] many.” All of us are to care for those around us as those who would demonstrate love for God’s flock.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE III

The Vine

In the agricultural economy of Palestine, vineyards were very important. The fertile slopes of the central highlands were perfect for grape-growing. Thus the vine and related terms, because they played such a major role in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Palestine, figure prominently in the imagery of Scripture. The image may be seen as existing on three levels - physical, relational, and apocalyptic.

PHYSICAL - GOD'S PRESENT BLESSING

Fruitful vineyards are seen as signs of God's blessing on His people. Such vineyards are included in the patriarchal blessings on Jacob (Genesis 27:28) and Judah (Genesis 49:11-12). The Promised Land was to contain fruitful vineyards (Numbers 13:23; Deuteronomy 8:8). Wine was pictured as a gift from God (Judges 9:13; Psalm 104:15; 107:37), and thus vineyards were not to be harvested during the sabbatical year (Leviticus 25:3-5, 11). Wine was used in offerings to God (Numbers 28:7). Jesus also made wine in His first miracle (John 2:1-11). Other references include Deuteronomy 7:13; 33:28; Jeremiah 31:12; Hosea 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24; Zechariah 9:17.

Yet God's gift was all too often perverted by those to whom He had given it. Drunkenness is often the cause of sin - see for instance Noah in Genesis 9:21, Lot in Genesis 19:32-35, and Nabal in I Samuel 25:36-37. Such abuse is universally condemned in Scripture (among many other passages, see Proverbs 20:1; 23:29-35; Romans 13:13; I Corinthians 5:11; 6:10; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18).

But because wine was a good gift of God, we find that when God poured out His judgment on His people, His good gift was removed; the wine was taken away. During the plagues, Egypt's vines were destroyed (Psalm 78:47), and God's judgment on Moab meant that their vines would wither away (Isaiah 16:8-10; Jeremiah 48:32). Israel, too, felt God's judgment in this form (Isaiah 24:7; Jeremiah 8:13; Hosea 2:12; 9:2; Joel 1:5, 11; Amos 4:9; Habakkuk 3:17). In fact, one of the curses for disobedience was that the people would plant their vineyards but not be able to enjoy the fruit of them (Deuteronomy 28:30, 39; Amos 5:11; Micah 6:15; Zephaniah 1:13).

PHYSICAL - GOD'S PROMISED BLESSING

When God promised to bless His people in the future, this blessing often involved fruitful vineyards. This was to be the case when God brought His people back from captivity (Jeremiah 32:15; Zechariah 8:12), though this blessing was to be conditional, based on obedience in matters such as tithing (Malachi 3:11) and the completion of the Temple (Haggai 1:11). The eschatological kingdom promises also include the blessing of fruitful vines (Isaiah 65:21-22; Ezekiel 28:26; Hosea 2:15; Joel 2:22; 3:18; Amos 9:13-14; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10).

RELATIONAL - ISRAEL AS GOD'S VINEYARD

Israel is often pictured as a vineyard planted by God, watered by Him, and fruitful (Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 17:1-10; 19:10-14), but because of disobedience (Hosea 10:1) it produced

sour grapes (Deuteronomy 32:32-33). It would therefore become fruitless (Isaiah 32:12) and be gleaned by the Babylonians (Jeremiah 6:9), which was also pictured as being put through the winepress of God's wrath (Lamentations 1:15), though the remnant was to be preserved like wine from the winepress (Isaiah 65:8).

RELATIONAL - LEADERS AS HUSBANDMEN

If God's people are pictured as a vineyard, we should not be surprised to find the leaders of the people pictured as vine-dressers or husbandmen. Some of these were wicked, eating the fruit of the vineyard (Isaiah 3:14), destroying it (Jeremiah 12:10), or neglecting it (Matthew 21:28-32). These wicked husbandmen were pictured by Jesus as stoning and killing the prophets and the Son of the Owner of the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19).

The references to good husbandmen are more indirect. They are described as servants (Isaiah 61:5; Song of Solomon 1:6) and the "poor of the land" (II Kings 25:12). Furthermore, Jesus' disciples are characterized as laborers in His vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16).

RELATIONAL - CHRIST AS THE TRUE VINE

The most powerful positive relational image involving vineyards is the one found in John 15:1-8, where Christ pictures Himself as the true vine in whom His people must abide. In the same way that Christ as the true seed (Galatians 3:16) accomplished all that God had promised to Abraham, but that Israel had failed to do, so Christ is the true vine who fulfills all that God intended Israel to be. A similar image is also used by Paul to describe the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in God's economy in Romans 11:17-24, where he pictures an olive tree rather than a vine, though the basic idea is the same. Here Christ is thus pictured as the fulfillment of the Old Testament people of God and the Head of the New Testament people of God.

RELATIONAL - CHRIST AS THE FRUIT OF THE VINE

The vine imagery is also applied to Christ in another way, however - in connection with His suffering on the Cross. When He prays in Gethsemane, He prays to have the cup of suffering taken from Him (Matthew 26:42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11). Earlier that evening He had used wine to symbolize His shed blood - the wine produced when He endured the winepress of God's wrath (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). When He is dying on the Cross, He is offered vinegar - the sour wine produced from the rotten fruit of Israel, the vineyard of God - the cause of His suffering (Psalm 69:21; Matthew 27:34, 48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29-30). Today, we commemorate His sufferings on our behalf by partaking of wine at the celebration of the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:27-29; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17-20; I Corinthians 11:25-28). We are also told that we will share in the sufferings of Christ (Matthew 20:22-23; Mark 10:38-39).

APOCALYPTIC - THE PUNISHMENT OF UNBELIEVERS

The final use of the vine imagery in Scripture is associated with the Last Judgment, as God pours out His wrath upon the wicked. This judgment is described as the operation of God's winepress, in which He treads out His wrath against those who disobey Him (Psalm 11:6; 75:8;

Isaiah 27:1-13; 63:1-6; Revelation 14:10, 17-20; 16:19; 19:15). The image is also used to describe how wicked men bring others to destruction (Revelation 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 6). Ultimately, God will pour out His wrath in great bowls upon those who have rejected Him (Revelation 15:7; 16:1-4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 21:9).

Thus the image of the vine is used in Scripture to symbolize both blessing and judgment, both the wicked and the righteous in their relationship to God, all pointing to Christ, the True Vine in whom His people must abide in order to find blessing.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE IV

The Rock - Negative Imagery

The Holy Land is a rocky place. When the Bible talks about the Israelites wandering through the wilderness or David hiding out in a desert place, we should not think of sand, but of rocks. Therefore, as we begin our two-week study of the imagery associated with rocks in Scripture, we will first talk about the various properties of rocks that provide the basis for that imagery.

PROPERTIES OF ROCKS

What are the characteristics of rocks that make them suitable sources of biblical word-pictures? Note the following:

- Rocks provide safe hiding places (Numbers 24:21; Judges 15:8; 20:45; I Samuel 13:6; Proverbs 30:26; Jeremiah 49:16; Obadiah 3).
- Rocks are hard (Jeremiah 5:3).
- A flat rock is a place of great visibility (Ezekiel 24:7-8).
- Rocks are barren (Ezekiel 26:4, 14; Luke 8:6, 13; Matthew 4:3).
- Rocks are permanent, unmoveable (Job 18:4; 19:24), but even rocks erode or fall away eventually (Job 14:18).
- Rocks make firm footing (Psalm 40:2), yet sometimes trip up the traveler (Isaiah 8:14-15).
- A rock makes a good foundation for a building (Matthew 7:24-27).
- Rocks make fine weapons (I Samuel 17:40, 49-50).

IMAGES OF FALSE SECURITY

As may be easily seen from the list above, rocks are pictured as sources of security, but not as ultimate in that sense. Thus we find that Scripture often uses the image of the rock to portray sources of false security. For example, false gods are often described as rocks (Deuteronomy 32:31). Idolaters are foolish enough to believe that a god made of stone had brought them forth (Jeremiah 2:27), and Israel is said to have committed adultery with stones (Jeremiah 3:9). Images of stone are strictly prohibited in Israel's law (Leviticus 26:1; Deuteronomy 4:28).

Furthermore, God is pictured as being stronger than the rocks, whether those rocks are images of false gods or of false sources of security. God is stronger than the false "rocks" that people worship (Deuteronomy 32:31). Even the rocks cannot protect men from the wrath of God (Job 28:9-10; Isaiah 2:21; 48:21-22; Jeremiah 48:28; Nahum 1:6), and in the face of that wrath, wicked men will beg the rocks to fall on them and crush them (Revelation 6:15-16). God's Word is like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces (Jeremiah 23:29). And in one of the most powerful

images, the stones that sealed the tombs of Lazarus (John 11:38) and Jesus (Matthew 27:60, 66; Mark 15:46) could not keep the Lord from raising the dead.

IMAGES OF DESTRUCTION

Because of the hardness of rocks, they are often pictured as causes of destruction. Stoning was the chosen method of execution in Israel (Leviticus 20:2, 7; 24:23; Numbers 15:35-36; Deuteronomy 13:10; 17:5; 21:21; 22:21, 24 among many others). Zechariah 12:3 pictures Jerusalem as an immovable rock, against which any attacking nations will be smashed. In Daniel 2:34-35, the “stone made without hands” will destroy the kingdoms of man, then grow to fill the whole earth (another counterintuitive use of an image - obviously rocks don’t grow). And when Christ spoke of Himself as a rock, He pictured that rock as one that pulverized those on whom it fell (Matthew 21:44; Luke 20:18).

Rocky ground was rough and uneven, and therefore sometimes made for hard walking. The image of the stumblingstone is therefore one Scripture uses frequently. Christ is pictured as a stumblingblock to the people of Israel, especially in His death (Isaiah 8:14-15; Jeremiah 6:21; Matthew 13:57; 15:12; Mark 6:3; John 6:61; Romans 9:33; 11:9; I Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11; I Peter 2:8), though this stumblingblock will one day be removed (Isaiah 57:14). Even the disciples were offended by Christ (Matthew 24:10; 26:31; Mark 14:27), though Peter claimed he never would be (Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29). Jesus called those who were not offended by Him blessed (Matthew 11:6; Luke 7:23), and for some, the stumblingstone that is Christ brings them to true repentance (Matthew 21:44; Luke 20:18), turning a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26).

People are also described as stumblingblocks. Balaam is said to have taught Balak to put a stumblingblock before Israel (Revelation 2:14). Peter, minutes after being called the rock upon which the Church is to be built, is called a stumblingblock in Christ’s path (Matthew 16:23). In Jesus’ parable of the soils, stones keep the Word from taking root in one’s life (Matthew 13:21). Paul speaks in some detail of the importance of not being stumblingblocks to one another (Romans 14:13; I Corinthians 8:9, 13). Ezekiel 3:20 speaks of the faithful watchman as one who warns the righteous of potential stumblingblocks. Such potential stumblingblocks are to be removed from the Body of Christ (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:6-9; Mark 9:42-47; Luke 17:2; Romans 16:7). On the other hand, those who love God’s law will stumble at nothing (Psalm 119:165).

Next week we will look at the positive uses of the image as we examine the Rock as a source of true security.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE V

The Rock - Positive Imagery

Last week we looked at the image of the Rock and noted that it often represented false security or even destruction. But Scripture also uses the image in a positive way, largely in connection with God as the source of true security for His people. Such references can be broken down into five categories.

CREATION

The image of the rock is not often used in connection with Creation, but the few occurrences are rather interesting. In one case, Job 38:6 speaks of God as laying the cornerstone of the earth. The cornerstone is what gives a building its fundamental orientation - the rest of the stones are lined up on the cornerstone to make sure the building is square. In a totally different use of the image, Revelation 2:17 speaks of a white stone given to those who overcome; this stone is associated with a new name, implying that the recipient is a new creation.

PROTECTION

Most of the passages in Scripture referring to God as a Rock allude to His strength and the safety and protection He affords to those who hide in Him (Genesis 49:24; Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18; I Samuel 2:2; II Samuel 22:2-3, 32, 47; Psalm 18:2, 31, 46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2-3; 42:9; 61:2-3; 62:2, 7; 71:3; 73:26; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1; Isaiah 26:4; 32:3 among many others). Many of our hymns make use of this image.

PROVISION

This is another counterintuitive use of the image. Rocks, of course, are barren and provide no sustenance whatsoever, yet God is such a powerful and faithful provider for His people that He can give them what they need even out of the rocks. He provided water for the Israelites in the wilderness from a rock (Exodus 17:5-6; Deuteronomy 8:15; Psalm 78:15, 20; 105:41; 114:8; Isaiah 48:21). When He was being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to make bread from stones, but He found sustenance in the Word of God - His Rock - instead (Matthew 4:3; Luke 4:3). Paul pictures Christ as the Rock who gave water to the Israelites in the wilderness and can provide for us as well (I Corinthians 10:4). The connection of the Rock with Christ is what made Moses' sin in the wilderness such a serious matter (Numbers 20:7-13) - the Rock was only to be smitten once, and after that it only need be spoken to.

FOUNDATION

Christ is pictured as the firm foundation on which Christians should build their lives (Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49; I Corinthians 3:11). He is also the cornerstone of the Church - that stone rejected by the builders (Psalm 118:22-23; Isaiah 28:16; Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). Not only is Christ the cornerstone of the Church, but His people are living stones that make up the building that God is constructing (I Peter 2:4-8).

Another passage that uses the foundation aspect of the rock image, though not referring to God or Christ, is found in Matthew 16:18, where Peter is called the rock on which Christ will build His Church. The passage is controversial because of the way it has been used over the centuries by the Roman Catholic Church to justify the papacy, but is best understood in the light of Ephesians 2:20 and Revelation 21:14, where the apostles as a group (for whom Peter was the spokesman and representative) are pictured as the foundation of the Church. Peter and the apostles are foundational in spearheading the spreading of the Gospel in the early years of the Church and serving as the instruments through whom the revelation of the New Testament came to us. When Peter stops confessing Christ, however, and starts trying to talk Him out of going to the Cross, he is no longer a foundation stone, but a stumblingblock (Matthew 16:23).

WORSHIP

The use of the image of the rock in connection with worship usually is related to the quality of permanence. Altars were to be built of stone, often as a memorial to coming generations (Genesis 28:11-22; 35:14; Joshua 8:31-32; Judges 6:20; 13:19; I Kings 18:31-32, 38). These stone altars were not to be polluted by man's workmanship (Exodus 20:25), but were to be made of undressed stone. The symbol of permanence is also associated with the giving of the law, which was written on stone with the finger of God (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 34:1-4; Deuteronomy 4:13; 5:22). Thus our worship of God is to be focused on what He has made rather than what we have constructed as an offering to Him. This is true of ourselves as well - living stones in the Church of Christ are stones shaped by Him and not by ourselves, thus displaying value that is permanent rather than that which is transitory.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE VI

Water - Under God's Control

Palestine is a dry place. Aside from the water flowing through the great rift that contains the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea, water is a rare commodity, provided by occasional wadis (streams that flow during the rainy season but are dry the rest of the year), oases, and wells. Preoccupation with the need for water is thus understandable among the people of Bible times, and such preoccupation is clearly seen in the frequent and varied use of water-related imagery in Scripture. We will again spend two weeks on this topic, today looking at different aspects of the idea that the waters are under God's control.

GOD OVERCOMES THE WATERS

One significant part of God's control over the waters is that His strength is greater than theirs. Note the different ways in which this idea is communicated in Scripture:

- God created the waters and divided them as He chose (Genesis 1:2, 6, 9).
- The mighty Nile was the lifeblood of the nation of Egypt, but God turned its waters to blood (Exodus 7:21) and caused it to bring forth frogs (Exodus 8:6).
- God parted the Red Sea for His people (Exodus 14:21), and did the same with the Jordan River on several occasions (Joshua 4:17; II Kings 2:8, 14).
- God made the bitter waters of Marah fit to drink (Exodus 15:25).
- God's fire overcomes the water-soaked altar on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:33).
- Christ on many occasions showed that He controlled the seas (Matthew 8:24-27; 14:28-29; Mark 4:39; 6:48-49; Luke 8:24-25; John 6:19), and turned water into wine (John 2:9).
- The two witnesses in Revelation 11:6 are given control of waters like Moses (turning water to blood) and Elijah (stopping the rains). In other places in Revelation, judgments are poured out on bodies of water (Revelation 8:10-11; 16:3-5, 12).

GOD PROVIDES WATER

The provision of water is pictured as a means of God's blessing for His people. He provided water for Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-13; 21:16; Deuteronomy 8:15; Psalm 107:35) and in Canaan (Deuteronomy 6:11; 8:7; 11:11; Isaiah 58:11). He also promises water in abundance when His people obey Him (Exodus 23:25; Leviticus 26:4; Deuteronomy 28:12; Isaiah 30:25; 33:16; 41:17-18; Jeremiah 17:8; Hosea 6:3; Joel 2:23; Matthew 6:25, 31; John 6:35). A similar promise is given in connection with the coming Kingdom (Isaiah 35:6-7; 44:3; 65:13; Ezekiel 34:13, 26; 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; Zechariah 10:1; 14:8; Revelation 7:16-17; 21:6; 22:1, 17).

God also provides water for His enemies (Matthew 5:45), sending His rain upon the just and the unjust alike [contrary to the old joke that insists that God sends the rain only upon the just because the unjust have stolen their umbrellas]. He sends the rain upon the wicked as a testimony to His existence and power (Acts 14:17; Hebrews 6:7).

God also provides water as a means of judgment. This water is sometimes literal, as in the Flood (Genesis 6:17), the storm that defeated Sisera's army (Judges 5:4), and the storm that detoured Jonah's flight (Jonah 2:5). More often, water is used as a metaphor for judgment (Psalm 83:15; Isaiah 8:7-8; 28:2; 30:28; Jeremiah 23:15; 47:2; Ezekiel 13:11, 13; 38:9, 22; Daniel 9:26; Amos 8:8).

GOD WITHHOLDS WATER

God's control over the waters also means He withholds water both in blessing and in judgment. In blessing, we see such control in the promise given after the Flood (Genesis 9:11), and metaphorically in various assurances that God's people will be safe from the floods of affliction and turmoil (II Samuel 22:17; Psalm 18:16; 32:6; 46:3; 66:12; 69:1-2; Isaiah 25:4; 43:2; 59:19).

Water is also withheld in judgment, often literally by sending drought upon disobedient Israel (Deuteronomy 28:48; I Kings 8:35; 17:1; Isaiah 1:30; 3:1; 5:13; Jeremiah 3:3; 14:4; Ezekiel 4:11, 16; 12:18-19; 19:13; Hosea 2:3; Amos 8:13; Haggai 1:11). God's enemies also are visited by the judgment of drought, including Egypt (Isaiah 19:5) and Babylon (Jeremiah 50:38). When the drought God sent failed to produce repentance among God's people (Amos 4:8), He followed it with a much more drastic punishment - a drought of God's words to His people (Amos 8:11). Ultimately, when Christ was suffering for the sins of His people on the Cross, He, too, suffered the judgment of the deprivation of water (John 19:28).

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE VII

Water - Symbolizing the Godhead

In addition to symbolizing God's power in both blessing and judgment, water is often used as a symbol of God Himself. Today we will look at various ways in which Scripture uses the image of water to give us insight into who God is, and also look at a few other miscellaneous uses of the image.

WATER AS A SYMBOL OF THE FATHER

Metaphorically, God gives water to the thirsty soul (Psalm 42:2; 63:1; 143:6) and "is a place of broad rivers and streams" to His people (Isaiah 33:21). When they disobey Him they are said to have forsaken the fountain of living water and dug for themselves leaky cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13).

WATER AS A SYMBOL OF THE SON

In connection with the coming Messiah, Isaiah spoke of one who would be like rivers of water in a dry place (Isaiah 32:2), and who would bring salvation that would be like water for the thirsty (Isaiah 12:3; 55:1). For those who see in the book a metaphor of Christ and the Church, the Song of Solomon pictures the bride as a well of living water (Song of Solomon 4:15). Jesus memorably spoke of Himself as the source of living water in His conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:6-30).

WATER AS A SYMBOL OF THE SPIRIT

In Isaiah 44:3, the Lord promises His Spirit to the thirsty. When Jesus speaks to the crowds, He speaks of the Spirit as living water flowing from the believer (John 7:37-39). Paul says in I Corinthians 12:13 that we all drink of one Spirit. On the other hand, false teachers are described as wells or clouds without water (II Peter 2:17; Jude 12).

John 3:5 is also an interesting reference in this regard because it *contrasts* water and the Spirit. But what exactly is the nature of the contrast? Is it physical versus spiritual, the first birth contrasted with the second birth? Though I believe that to be the correct explanation, especially given the context, others have seen in the contrast the distinction between cleansing and filling or repentance and faith (but these would have made no sense to Nicodemus, thus in my opinion should be rejected).

WATER AS A SYMBOL OF THE WORD OF GOD

As already noted, Amos 8:11 warns of a drought of God's revelation to His people. When God doesn't speak, His people suffer as in a drought. On the other hand, Habakkuk promises that in God's Kingdom the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters fill the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). In the New Testament, the Word cleanses like water (Ephesians 5:26) and preaching nourishes like water (I Corinthians 3:6-8).

OTHER USES OF THE IMAGE IN SCRIPTURE

Water is also used to symbolize other ideas as well. Note the following:

- Water is, not surprisingly, associated with cleansing. It was used for ceremonial purification in the Old Testament (Exodus 29:4; 30:20; Leviticus 8:6; 11:32; 14:8; 15:5; Numbers 8:7). Naaman was cleansed of his leprosy when he washed seven times in the Jordan (II Kings 5:10). On a metaphorical level, Israel was filthy when found by God, but was washed by Him (Ezekiel 16:4, 9). The river coming from the sanctuary in the temple described by Ezekiel cleanses everything it touches, even the Dead Sea (Ezekiel 47:1-12).
- In the New Testament, the water of baptism symbolizes cleansing and repentance (Matthew 3:1; Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:26; Acts 8:38; 10:47; 22:6), though the symbolism of Jesus' baptism differs from that of believers. The image continues in Hebrews 10:22, where the believer is said to be clean because he is "washed with pure water." On the negative side, Pilate tried to wash his hands of Jesus' blood, but failed (Matthew 27:24).
- Water is also associated with servanthood in various ways. Women had the task of drawing water (Joshua 9:21; I Samuel 9:11), and foot-washing was a common courtesy (Luke 7:44) performed by a servant, as Jesus showed when He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:5).
- Water is also used to symbolize noise, whether the voice of God (Ezekiel 1:24; Revelation 1:15) or the roar of conquerors (Isaiah 5:30; Jeremiah 6:23; 50:42). It also is used to describe the meaningless blather of false teachers, who are like "raging waves of the sea" (Jude 13).
- Water is a metaphor for instability. Reuben is called "unstable as water" (Genesis 49:4) when Jacob blesses him, fearful people are those whose hearts melt like water (Joshua 7:5), and one without faith is unstable like a wave of the sea (James 1:6).
- Waters are also used to symbolize multitudes of people (Psalm 18:4; Isaiah 17:12; 59:19), though some of the following may be debated as to the significance of the symbolism. For example, Isaiah 57:20 describes the wicked as being like polluted troubled waters of the sea, the four beasts in Daniel 7:3 come out of the sea, and Babylon is said to "dwell upon many waters" (Jeremiah 51:13; Revelation 17:1, 15). In Revelation 13:1, the Beast is said to come from the sea. On the other hand, in Jesus' parable of the growth of the Kingdom, the dragnet is cast into the sea (Matthew 13:47), and in the New Heavens and the New Earth, that rebellious and tempestuous sea will no longer exist (Revelation 21:1).

Next week we will examine the image of bread, which was equally a staple for the survival of the people in Bible times.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE VIII

Bread

The words translated “bread” in Scripture may also be translated as “meat” or “food,” so what we are dealing with when we look at this image is the basic sustenance for all of life. Not surprisingly, we again find the image used both positively and negatively, in both physical and metaphorical senses.

BREAD AS A BLESSING

God’s provision of bread for His people (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 136:25; 146:7; 147:9) appears in many contexts:

- Israel was given manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:3-36; Deuteronomy 8:3; 29:6 among many others), and was promised that bread would be plentiful in Canaan (Deuteronomy 8:9) if they kept God’s commandments (Exodus 23:25). In fact, the righteous were told that they need never beg for bread (Psalm 37:25; Isaiah 30:23; 33:16).
- In specific situations, God provided bread after a famine (Ruth 1:6), for Elijah at the brook Cherith (I Kings 17:6), and for the widow of Zarephath and her son (I Kings 17:14).
- Jesus told His followers to request their daily bread from their Father in heaven (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3) and instructed the disciples to take no bread with them on their preaching tour (Mark 6:8; Luke 9:3). His faithfulness is such that believers never need fear famine (Romans 8:35).
- Jesus miraculously provided bread for the multitudes (Matthew 14:15-21; 15:32-38; Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-9; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14).

THE ABSENCE OF BREAD AS A CURSE

- Not surprisingly, God’s judgment is marked by the absence or withholding of bread. Famine is a sign of God’s anger (Leviticus 26:26; II Samuel 3:29; II Kings 8:1; 25:3; Isaiah 3:1; 51:19; Jeremiah 5:17; 11:22; 14:12-18; 16:4; Ezekiel 4:13-17; 5:12; 14:13).
- One of the consequences of the Fall is that bread becomes difficult to obtain (Genesis 3:19). In fact, the wicked must constantly concern himself about the possibility of getting bread (Job 15:23).
- The last days are to be marked by famines among other disasters (Matthew 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11), and famine contributes to the destruction of Babylon (Revelation 18:8).

FELLOWSHIP - THE BREAKING OF BREAD

Those who share a common bond also share their basic sustenance (Luke 24:30; John 13:18; Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7; I Corinthians 10:16-17). In fact, that sharing of food is seen as a way of

acknowledging commonality. When the Son of God became man, He shared food with those among whom He lived (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19), unlike the Angel of the Lord, who could not eat Manoah's bread (Judges 13:16).

BREAD AS A SYMBOL OF COMMON EXPERIENCE

This particular figure of speech is not one common to our language, but was certainly common in the language of Bible times. Note the following:

- The Canaanites were to be bread for Israel, and thus were not to be feared (Numbers 14:9).
- The wicked were said to eat God's people as they eat bread (Psalm 14:4; 53:4) and to eat the bread of wickedness (Proverbs 4:17).
- The disobedient would be fed the bread of tears (Psalm 80:5), but God's people need never eat the bread of sorrows (Psalm 127:2).
- Wisdom, personified in the book of Proverbs, offers her bread to man (Proverbs 9:5).
- The virtuous woman does not eat the bread of idleness (Proverbs 31:27).
- When God wants to turn His people back to Himself, he feeds them the bread of adversity (Isaiah 30:20), and the repentant psalmist says that his tears have been his meat (Psalm 42:3).
- In Revelation 2:17, overcomers are given hidden manna to eat.

BREAD AS A SYMBOL OF THE WORD OF GOD

God's Word is pictured as bread for His people. When He sent them manna in the wilderness, He indicated that man is not to live by bread alone, but by the Word of God (Deuteronomy 8:3); Jesus quoted these words when being tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:3-4; Luke 4:3-4). Ezekiel is told to eat a scroll (Ezekiel 3:1-3), which is sweet food for him and for those to whom he speaks the words it represents. In the incident of the Samaritan woman, Jesus told His disciples He had food of which they were unaware - doing the will of God (John 4:32-34). The bread of God's Word is precious, and is not to be given to dogs (Matthew 15:26; Mark 7:27).

The use of bread as an image of the Word of God appears preeminently in reference to Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Note the following:

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the "House of Bread" (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4).
- While physical bread never satisfies, the bread of salvation is free (Isaiah 55:2).
- The central use of this metaphor is found in John 6:27-58, Jesus' "Bread of Life" sermon. He indicates that the bread He offers is imperishable (verse 27), in contrast to the manna in

the wilderness (verse 31). He is the true bread (verse 33), and the one who eats this bread will never hunger again (verse 35). Manna did not prevent death (verse 49), but the Bread of Life does (verse 50). This bread represents Christ's flesh, given for the world (verse 51), and those who eat it abide in Him (verse 56).

- The same image is carried over in the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19) and in the observance of the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:23-28).

LEAVEN OR YEAST

Leaven or yeast, clearly connected with the preparation of bread, is also a frequently-used symbol, though the significance of that symbol is not always consistent. Note the following:

- The bread of the Passover was to be baked without leaven (Exodus 12:15; 13:3, 7; Deuteronomy 16:3). The obvious practical reason here was the need for haste, but the fact that leaven also represents evil in some contexts, and this bread was ultimately used to represent the body of Christ, indicates a symbolic meaning as well.
- In the sacrificial system, some sacrifices were to involve unleavened bread (Exodus 23:18; Leviticus 2:11; 6:17), while others were to contain leaven (Leviticus 7:13; 23:17). Later, the Israelites were castigated for improperly offering leavened bread in their sacrifices (Amos 4:5).
- Leaven is clearly a symbol of evil when Jesus warns His followers against the leaven of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:6, 11-12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1), though the image may also point to the surreptitious and pervasive ways in which leaven permeates a lump of dough.
- Another association with evil is seen in I Corinthians 5:6-8, where the leaven of malice and wickedness is contrasted with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (see also Galatians 5:9).
- A positive use of the image may be found in Jesus' parable of the leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Here Jesus speaks in encouraging ways about the growth of the Kingdom, which will enter the world in a single place and ultimately spread throughout the entire range of humanity. [Note that some who, on the basis of other passages noted above, have concluded that leaven must always represent evil will insist that Jesus here speaks not about the growth of the Church, but about its ultimate corruption. In my opinion, this simply does not fit the context of what Jesus is teaching His disciples in this passage.] The point is not only that the Kingdom would eventually permeate the entire world, but that it would do so *slowly* in contrast to the Jewish expectations for the immediate establishment of a political empire.

Next week we will examine oil - a commodity that had multiple uses in the ancient world - as an image for truth about God and His work.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE IX

Oil

Oil was a very versatile substance in the Ancient Near East, and so it should come as no surprise that it figures frequently into the imagery used by the authors of Scripture.

THE USES OF OIL

We want to begin today by looking at the various uses to which oil was put. We should note that, generally speaking, the oil being referred to is olive oil, made by crushing olives in an oil press. Petroleum had not yet become an issue in the Middle East.

- Oil was used in cooking. The manna God gave the Israelites in the wilderness tasted like oil (Numbers 11:8). Elijah and Elisha provided destitute widows with miraculously multiplying stores of oil (I Kings 17:14; II Kings 4:6-7). Oil was a sign of prosperity (Deuteronomy 8:8; Job 29:6). God fed Israel with oil in her youth (Ezekiel 16:9, 13), but Israel thought the oil came from her “lovers,” the idols (Hosea 2:5).
- Oil was also used for washing. People in Bible times didn’t use body soap, but removed dirt by anointing with oil. It was used to beautify women (Ruth 3:3; Esther 2:12) and was a common courtesy when receiving a guest (II Chronicles 28:15; Luke 7:46). Those in mourning didn’t anoint themselves with oil (II Samuel 14:2), but Jesus instructed those who were fasting to do so in order to hide their condition (Matthew 6:17-18).
- Oil was used for fuel. It was burned in the lampstand in the Holy Place (Exodus 39:37; Leviticus 24:2).
- Oil had healing properties. God soothed Israel’s wounds with oil (Ezekiel 16:9, 13). Jesus’ disciples anointed with oil when healing (Mark 6:13), as did the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34). In James 5:14, anointing with oil by the elders has both real and symbolic value. Even Jesus anointed the eyes of the blind man (John 9:6), though not with oil. The reference to anointing in Psalm 23:5 could refer either to washing or healing.

OIL AS A METAPHOR

Some of the same variety appears in the metaphorical references to oil:

- Because Israel was to acknowledge that God was the source of their oil, some was included in sacrifices (Leviticus 2:1; 7:12).
- The cleansing properties of oil came into play when anointing was to be used as a symbol of purity (Leviticus 21:10, 12). Priests were to be anointed (Exodus 29:7; 30:30), as were the vessels in the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:9). Purified priests had to remain in the sanctuary while God judged Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:7). Oil was used in the cleansing ceremony for lepers (Leviticus 14:18). Many kings are described as being anointed (Saul - I Samuel 10:1; David - I Samuel 16:13; Absalom - II Samuel 19:10; Solomon - I Kings 1:39;

Hazael - I Kings 19:15; Jehu - II Kings 9:1-3; Joash - II Kings 11:12; Jehoahaz - II Kings 23:30; Cyrus - Isaiah 45:1). Elisha was anointed as a prophet (I Kings 19:16). Satan is referred to as an “anointed cherub” (Ezekiel 28:14-15). And the Messiah is said to “give oil of joy for mourning” (Isaiah 61:3).

- As far as oil for burning is concerned, a lampstand fed with oil represents Zerubbabel and Joshua in Zechariah 4:14 and the two witnesses in Revelation 11:4. Also, in Jesus’ parable of the Ten Virgins, only those with oil to burn (the Spirit?) may enter the wedding feast (Matthew 25:1-13).
- The healing properties of oil appear symbolically in James 5:14, as already noted, and in Revelation 3:18, where the church in Laodicea is told to anoint their eyes with eyesalve.

OIL AND THE PERSON OF GOD

The most obvious reference here, of course, is to Jesus as the Messiah or the Christ, the Anointed One. The Messiah is “anointed with the oil of gladness” (Psalm 45:7; Hebrews 1:9), is anointed to preach, heal, and liberate (Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18). He is also described as being anointed at the end of the Seventy Weeks in Daniel’s prophecy in Daniel 9:24. In the apostolic sermons in the book of Acts, Jesus is called the Anointed One (Acts 4:27), one who is “anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power” (Acts 10:38). Oil also serves as a symbol of the Holy Spirit in Zechariah 4 (note especially verse 6).

OIL AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Christ as the Anointed One is the fulfillment of God’s Chosen People, who are also described as being anointed. Israel is said to be God’s anointed (I Chronicles 16:22; Psalm 89:38, 51; 105:15; Habakkuk 3:13), as are believers in the New Testament (II Corinthians 1:21). God’s anointed are saved by Him (Psalm 20:6; 28:8), “know all things” (I John 2:20), and are taught all things by Christ from whom the anointing is received (I John 2:27 cf. John 14:26).

Next week we will begin our consideration of the uses of the image of fire in the Scriptures.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE X

Fire - Deity and Purity

The basic thrust of the fire image in Scripture is that of *holiness*. This shows up in three ways - God Himself pictured as a fire, fire representing purification, and fire representing judgment. Unlike some of the other images we have studied, this image shows little breadth of meaning; despite the fact that it is a frequently-used image, almost all occurrences fit rather neatly into one of the three categories mentioned above. We will look at the first two of these this week, then spend next week's lesson looking at the last one.

GOD AS FIRE

God often appears in the form of fire:

- When renewing the covenant with Abraham, God passed between the pieces of the sacrifices in the form of a burning lamp (Genesis 15:17).
- He later appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2).
- He led Israel through the wilderness by night in the form of a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21-22) and descended on Mount Sinai in smoke and fire (Exodus 19:18). Someday, God will return to a restored Israel in a pillar of fire (Isaiah 4:5).
- When the fiery serpents invaded the camp of Israel, a fiery serpent on a pole became the sign of their deliverance as well as a symbol of Christ (Numbers 21:8 cf. John 3:14).
- The Holy Spirit appeared on the Day of Pentecost in tongues of fire (Acts 2:3).
- Visions of the Godhead - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - often involve fire (Isaiah 6:2, 4, 6; Ezekiel 1:4, 13, 27; 8:2; Daniel 7:9; 10:6; Revelation 1:14; 2:18; 4:5; 15:8; 19:12).

We also find metaphorical references to God involving fire:

- The King of Tyre (symbolic of Satan) is driven from God's presence, described as "the midst of the stones of fire" (Ezekiel 28:14-18).
- The Lord is described as a wall of fire around Jerusalem (Zechariah 2:5).
- The Messiah will be a refiner's fire to purify His people (Malachi 3:2).
- God's Word is described as a fire (Jeremiah 23:29).
- Even God's angels are pictured as flaming fire (Psalm 104:4).

THE FIRE OF PURIFICATION

Fire is associated with purity in many other instances as well. Incense was to be burned before the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:12-13) and priests were to burn incense in the Holy Place (Exodus 30:7-8; I Samuel 2:28; note also that Revelation 5:8 compares incense to the prayers of the saints). When Israel burned incense on the high places to other gods, they were condemned for their idolatry (I Kings 22:43; II Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35 among many others); they were described as burning incense “to vanity” (Jeremiah 18:15). In fact, when Solomon’s wives burned incense to other gods, they began Israel’s departure from godly worship (I Kings 11:8). Later Uzziah got leprosy because he burned incense to the true God, which was to be done only by the priests (II Chronicles 26:18-19).

Fire is also said to refine whatever is put into it. The remnant of Israel was to be refined by being brought through fire (Zechariah 13:9). The iniquity of Jerusalem was to be purged by burning (Isaiah 4:4). When believers go through fiery trials (I Peter 4:12) their faith is tested (I Peter 1:7). The Laodiceans were told to buy gold refined in the fire (Revelation 3:18). In the Day of Judgment, believers’ works are to be tested by fire (I Corinthians 3:13, 15).

Thus we see that fire is used in many cases as a positive image to represent the holiness of God and the holiness He requires of and produces in His people. Next week, we will look at the negative uses of fire as an image of judgment and destruction.

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE XI

Fire - Judgment and Destruction

Last week we saw fire as an image of purity and holiness. But we also must recognize that because God is pure and holy, He will destroy whatever is not. Thus we should not be surprised to find that the majority of uses of fire as an image are associated with God's judgment.

FIRE AS SYMBOLIC JUDGMENT ON SIN

The fire used in the sin offering represented the judgment meted out against the substitute - a judgment deserved by the one offering the sacrifice (Exodus 29:14). The same applied to other sacrifices as well. Similarly, part of the treatment for leprosy involved the burning of the garments of the sufferer (Leviticus 13:52), again a metaphorical judgment against impurity.

FIRE AS JUDGMENT ON INDIVIDUALS

Instances in Scripture of fire as judgment against individuals abound:

- A flaming sword kept Adam and Eve from reentering the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24).
- Nadab and Abihu were destroyed by fire from God (Leviticus 10:1-2).
- Daughters of priests who became prostitutes were to be burned (Leviticus 21:9).
- The followers of Korah were consumed by fire (Numbers 16:35).
- Achan, his family, and his goods were to be burned (Joshua 7:25).
- Fire from heaven destroyed one hundred men trying to arrest Elijah (II Kings 1:10-12).
- Job's flocks and servants were destroyed by fire from God (Job 1:16).
- In the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus, fruitless trees and branches were cast into the fire (Matthew 3:10; 7:19; Luke 3:9; John 15:6; Hebrews 6:8) and chaff was to be burned (Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17).
- Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16).
- Sexual lust is also described using the image of fire (Romans 1:27; I Corinthians 7:9).
- Giving one's body to be burned is an exercise in futility without love (I Corinthians 13:3).

Fire is also mentioned in contexts that speak of deliverance from judgment:

- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were delivered from the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:24).

- The high priest Joshua was “a brand plucked from the burning” (Zechariah 3:2).
- The shield of faith quenches the fiery darts of Satan (Ephesians 6:16).
- God’s people are to snatch sinners from the fire and save them (Jude 23).

FIRE AS JUDGMENT ON PAGAN NATIONS

Scripture contains a long list of God’s enemies who are to be judged by fire. These include Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), plagues on Egypt (Exodus 9:23-24), Midian (Numbers 31:10), the gods of the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7:5, 25; 12:3), the Canaanites themselves (Deuteronomy 9:3; 13:16), the cities of Jericho (Joshua 6:24), Ai (Joshua 8:8), and Hazor (Joshua 11:11), the Philistines who had their crops burned by Samson (Judges 15:5), David’s enemies (II Samuel 22:9; Psalm 18:8), the Arameans (II Kings 16:7), the wicked in general (Psalm 11:6; 21:9; 68:2; 83:14; 97:3; 140:10), Assyria (Isaiah 10:16-17; 30:27, 30, 33), the enemies of God in the Last Days (Isaiah 66:15-16), Egypt (Jeremiah 43:12-13; Ezekiel 30:8, 16), Ammon (Jeremiah 49:2; Amos 1:14) and Damascus (Jeremiah 49:27; Amos 1:4), Babylon (Jeremiah 51:58), Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:19, 22; 39:6; Revelation 20:9), Philistia (Amos 1:7), Tyre (Amos 1:10), Edom (Amos 1:12), and Moab (Amos 2:2).

FIRE AS JUDGMENT ON GOD’S PEOPLE

Many passages speak of fire as judgment against God’s people (Number 11:1-3; Deuteronomy 28:22; 29:23; 32:22; II Kings 25:9; Psalm 78:21; 80:16; Isaiah 5:24; 9:19; 29:6; 33:11-14; Jeremiah 4:4; 11:16; 17:27; 39:8; Ezekiel 15:4-8; 16:41; 19:12, 14; 21:31-32; 22:20-21; Amos 2:5; 5:6; Zephaniah 1:18).

In more specific terms, note the following:

- The Golden Calf was destroyed by fire (Exodus 32:20).
- Words of false prophets are described as fire devouring the people (Jeremiah 5:14).
- Ezekiel burned his shaved hair to show that fire would destroy Jerusalem (Ezekiel 5:4).
- God sent fiery serpents among the people as judgment for their complaining (Numbers 21:6).
- Fiery indignation fell upon Israel’s deliberate sin (Hebrews 10:27).
- In Jesus’ parable, those who despised the king’s messengers had their cities burned (Matthew 22:7).

FIRE AS ETERNAL JUDGMENT

Human sacrifice was one of the grossest abominations of the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 12:31) and one of the reasons for their destruction by God. This practice was forbidden for Israel

(Deuteronomy 18:10), but was practiced anyway (II Kings 16:3; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5), leading to her captivities. The site of these sacrifices, Tophet or the Valley of Hinnom, came to symbolize the eternal fires of Hell, especially after Josiah desecrated the place and it became a garbage dump where a fire burned continually (II Kings 23:10). *Gehenna*, one of the New Testament words translated “Hell,” literally means “Valley of Hinnom.” When Jesus used this word to describe eternal punishment, He was using an image that would have been familiar to His hearers (Matthew 10:28; 23:15; Luke 12:5).

Other references to eternal judgment as a place of fire include:

- Fire associated with the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:30; Malachi 4:1).
- One calling his brother a fool is in danger of the fires of Hell (Matthew 5:22).
- In Jesus’ parables the rich man is tormented in flames (Luke 16:24) and the tares and bad fish are cast into the fire (Matthew 13:40, 42, 50), as are the goats (Matthew 25:41).
- Jesus spoke of the offending member of the body being cut off to keep the body from the fire of Hell (Matthew 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-48). Note that the Mark passage uses the word *gehenna*, and that the references to maggots and fire fit the garbage dump outside Jerusalem.
- The Second Coming is a time of fiery judgment (II Thessalonians 1:8).
- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is a type of eternal fire (Jude 7).
- The book of Revelation is full of judgments of fire (Revelation 8:5, 7-8; 9:17-18; 14:10; 16:8; 17:16; 18:8; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15 cf. Daniel 7:11).

MASTERPIECES OF THE BIBLE XII

Marriage

The last image we will consider in this course is that of marriage. The connection Scripture makes most frequently is the parallel between God's relationship to His people and a husband's relationship to his wife. We will see that the image works both ways, i.e., that God's relationship to His people is held up as a model for marital bliss and that Christian husbands and wives are supposed to demonstrate to the world the relationship between Christ and the Church through their love for one another.

GOD AND HIS PEOPLE

The history of the marriage of God to His people in the Old Testament begins in a peculiar fashion - with adoption, followed by marriage, unfaithfulness on the part of Israel, rejection, and eventual restoration. Note the following passages:

- The parable in Ezekiel 16 tells the whole story of God's relationship with Israel and Judah, while the story of Aholah and Aholibah in Ezekiel 23 pictures the unfaithfulness of God's people.
- The marriage, adultery, rejection, and restoration of Israel are portrayed symbolically by Hosea's marriage to Gomer (Hosea 1-3) and by his succeeding prophecies (Hosea 4:12-19; 5:3-4; 6:10; 9:1).
- Because God's people belong to Him, intermarriage with Canaanites is forbidden, since they will lead the people to worship other gods (Deuteronomy 7:3-4; Joshua 23:12-13).
- Idolatry is repeatedly pictured as spiritual adultery (Exodus 34:14-17; Leviticus 20:5; Deuteronomy 31:6; Judges 2:17; 8:27, 33; I Chronicles 5:25; Psalm 73:27; 106:39; Isaiah 1:21; 57:1-8; Jeremiah 3:1-25; 4:30-31; 5:7-9; 13:27).
- Physical adultery led to spiritual adultery - the "doctrine of Balaam" (Numbers 25:1-9 cf. Revelation 2:14).
- Solomon was led astray by pagan wives (I Kings 11:1-8).
- When the people intermarried with the pagan nations around them, they needed to be cleansed (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:23-31).
- God divorced Israel because of her unfaithfulness (Isaiah 50:1).
- Adulterous Israel is to be restored (Isaiah 54:1-10) and is to be called Beulah - "married" to the Lord (Isaiah 62:4-5), and be clothed in righteousness and salvation (Isaiah 61:10).
- The religious leaders of Israel were called adulterous by Jesus because they asked for a sign but refused to believe (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38).

- Ironically, those who were guilty of spiritual adultery try to condemn an adulteress, but are stopped by Jesus (John 8:1-11).
- Israel, the woman who bore Christ, is persecuted by Satan in Revelation 12.

CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

The New Testament often portrays the Church as the Bride of Christ. This portrayal is grounded in Christ's work of salvation, but also includes images of unfaithfulness and future expectation and exaltation. Note the following:

- Christ's love for the Church is pictured as the model for Christian husbands and wives (Ephesians 5:22-23).
- Paul was jealous for the Corinthian church, having espoused them to Christ (II Corinthians 11:1-3).
- John the Baptist is pictured as the friend of the Bridegroom, who is Christ (John 3:29).
- Jesus tells the Pharisees that the friends of the Bridegroom need not fast while He is present (Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35).
- Fornication is pictured as a spiritual offense because of the connection between marriage and the relationship of Christ to the Church (I Corinthians 6:13-20).
- Those who befriend the world are called adulterers and adulteresses (James 4:4).
- False teachers have "eyes full of adultery" (II Peter 2:14).
- The church at Thyatira is accused of committing adultery with Jezebel, a false teacher in the city (Revelation 2:20-22).
- The apostate religious system represented by Babylon in the book of Revelation is pictured as a prostitute (Revelation 14:8; 17; 18:3).
- Those who wish to participate in the marriage feast of the king must be ready (Matthew 22:1-14; Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 14:16-24).
- The book of Revelation pictures the marriage feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-10) and describes the Bride (Revelation 21:9-22:5).

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

The central themes in these passages involve love, faithfulness and permanence. Note the following:

- Marriage was central to what God intended man to be; He created them male and female (Genesis 1:26-28), established their marriage relationship (Genesis 2:18-25), and saw that relationship damaged by the Fall (Genesis 3:16-20).
- The Song of Solomon is a dramatic poem celebrating marital love.
- Standards for marital relationships exist because marriage is a picture, intended to display to the world God's love for His people (I Corinthians 7; 11:2-16; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; I Timothy 2:8-15; I Peter 3:1-7)
- Because of this connection, adultery is viewed as a serious sin (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10) and divorce is absolutely forbidden (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-11; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:8) except in cases of adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:9).

Thus husbands and wives have a serious responsibility - not only to one another, but also to God before whom they spoke their vows. This responsibility extends to the world as well, before whom Christian spouses are supposed to give testimony of the reality of Christ's love for His Church.

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