

# Figures of speech and God's word

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## Introduction

God's word has been written in almost every language known to man and still holds its accuracy and unity to this very day. In this lesson we will be looking into the characteristics of God's language. Specifically; figures of speech and the use of figurative language in the Bible. An understanding of both will clarify and deepen our understanding of God's message.

## Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are used in ordinary literature that we interact with on a daily basis. God has employed some of these same tools for His purpose in providing his word to us. The following are some of the most common figures of speech and their definition:

### 1. Parable

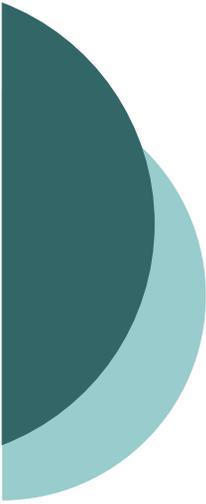
A parable is a simple, normal, real life story or illustration used to present some moral or spiritual truth. The Scriptures record at least thirty parables in the New Testament that Jesus used during His ministry, such as the good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](#)); the prodigal son ([Luke 15:11-32](#)); and the Pharisee and publican ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). A parable had a way of "concealing truth" from those who would not receive or follow it ([Matthew 13:10-16](#)), while dramatically "revealing it" to those eager to listen and trust.

### 2. Fable

We all learned about fables early in our elementary school years. Remember the "Hare and the Tortoise"? How about the "Mouse and the Lion"? This figure of speech is similar to a parable, but made up of a "fictitious" or "imaginary" story. Its purpose is to teach some moral lesson. It might designate some inanimate object as speaking ([2 Kings 14:8-10](#)). Much like the parable, fables are very difficult for those who do not want to receive it!

### 3. Simile

A simile compares two different types of things by employing the terms "Like" or "As". While a simile compares the two items, it allows them to remain distinct in spite of their similarities. For instance, a simile that compares a person with a bullet would go as follows: "Chris was a record-setting runner as fast as a speeding bullet. In our study of the Bible we often read such expressions as, "the Spirit of God descending like a dove" ([Matthew 3:16](#)); "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" ([Isaiah 1:18](#)); and "we like sheep have gone astray" ([Isaiah 53:6](#)). Understanding the use of a simile is certainly useful in understanding what you are reading and the language that contains them.



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## 4. Metaphor

A metaphor is a word or phrase that is said to be something else because of a likeness involved. It is simply calling one thing by another word, more descriptive and vividly. Compared to a simile, a metaphor is more direct type of comparison. Using our example of Chris the runner, a metaphor would be: "When Chris ran, he was a speeding bullet racing along the track." In the scripture, Jesus used a metaphor when speaking about king Herod, "Go ye, and tell that fox" ([Luke 13:32](#)). When Jesus was with his Apostles in the upper room He said, "Take, eat; this is my body" ([Matthew 26:26](#)). When we look at this metaphor, it becomes clear why we should understand their use in the scripture. Otherwise we might take a phrase such as this literally.

## 5. Allegory

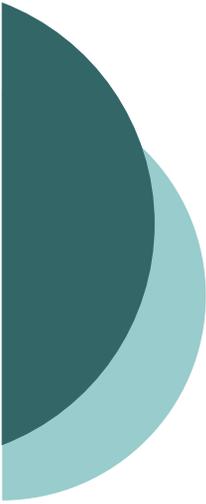
An Allegory can be described as taking a metaphor and extending it into a complete story to "illustrate" a truth. In case like this the writer does not identify all the particular parts of the story, but leaves the reader to infer their meaning. Paul's picture of the Christian putting on his armor for the battle of life is an excellent example ([Ephesians 6:11-17](#)). In this case, rather than using a metaphor for each item of armor, the entire set is told in a story fashion to paint the picture of the armor of God in its entirety.

## 6. Riddle

A riddle is a statement, question or phrase having a double or veiled meaning, written as a puzzle to be solved. Generally riddles come in two types: *enigmas*, are problems expressed in metaphorical or allegorical language that require ingenuity and careful thinking for their solution. *Conundrums* are questions which rely on "punning" for their effect in either the question or the answer. An analogy written up as a puzzle. To unravel it will thus produce some truth, as in [Judges 14:14](#).

## 7. Hyperbole

Hyperboles are exaggerations that are used to create emphasis or effect when making a point. They are often used in poetry and are frequently found in our everyday communications. An example of a hyperbole would be: "The bag weighed a ton." The hyperbole helps to emphasize the point that the bag was *very* heavy. However the bag, most likely, did not actually weigh a ton. The other figures of speech we can find these used throughout the Bible. Take a look at extreme statements in [Psalm 22:6,14](#). David, in both places speaks in such a manner for "effect" to emphasize his point. In neither case did David physically experience what he described.



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## 8. Irony And Sarcasm

### IRONY

Irony is a rhetorical device, literary technique, or situation in which there is a sharp strangeness that goes beyond the simple and evident intention of the words used or actions taken. We've all either heard or used the phrase "That's ironic" probably more than once in our lives. Ironic statements imply a meaning that is in opposition to the literal meaning. A situation is often said to be ironic if the actions taken cause an effect that is opposite from what was intended. Several types of irony exists as seen below:

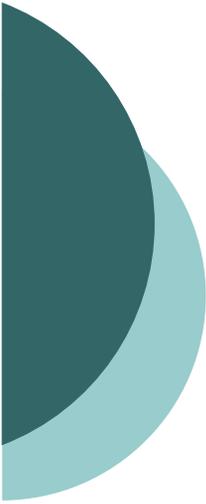
Other types of irony

- **Verbal irony:** Irony that comes from words spoken
- **Situational irony:** Irony that comes from situations or events
- **Comic irony:** Irony that is humorous (most irony is not)
- **Dramatic irony:** When the audience (or reader) knows a fictional character is making a mistake, because the audience has more information than the character.
- **Tragic irony:** A type of dramatic irony. In tragic irony, a character's actions lead to consequences that are both tragic, and contrary to the character's desire and intentions.
- **Historical irony:** A kind of situational irony that takes a long period of years for the irony to become evident.
- **Socratic irony:** When a person asks questions, pretending not to understand, to lure the interlocutor into a logical trap. (Socrates, in Plato's dialogues, was a master of this technique.)

Verbal and situational irony are used for emphasis in the explanation of a truth. In dramatic irony, the author causes a character to speak or act wrong, because they are ignorant of some portion of the truth of which the audience is aware. In other words, the audience knows the character is making a mistake, even as the character is making it. This technique *highlights* the importance of truth by portraying a person who is strikingly unaware of it. In situational or historical irony, a truth is highlighted by some person's complete ignorance of it or his belief in the opposite of it. This type of irony is often more evident, or more striking, when viewed with hindsight, in the light later developments which make the truth of the past situations more obvious to all.

### SARCASM

Sarcasm is a sharp, bitter, or cutting expression or remark. In sarcasm, ridicule or mockery is used harshly, often crudely and contemptuously, for destructive purposes. Sarcasm can be used in an indirect manner, and take the form of irony, as in "What a fine musician you turned out to be!" It can be used in the form of a direct statement,



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"You couldn't play one piece of music right even if you had two assistants." The distinctive part of sarcasm is in the word used and the vocal inflection associated with it. Irony can also be used in sarcasm by using hostile, critical comments such as saying "don't work too hard" to a lazy worker. Using irony with sarcasm will on occasion introduce an element of humor which can make the criticism seem more polite and less aggressive. Sarcasm can be much harder to recognize in print form because the inflection or tone of voice is not there to indicate the quip.

Irony and Sarcasm are basically the same except that sarcasm is more severe in degree and intensity. A good example is the taunting mockery which the soldiers threw into the face of Jesus just before He was crucified ([Matthew 27:29](#)), and again when the chief priests and scribes cried out later as He hung on the cross ([Mark 15:31-32](#)).

## 9. Interrogation

The goal of most interrogations is to extract a confession or get some specific information. The subject of an interrogation is usually a suspect, victim, or witness of a crime. Interrogation can involve a many techniques, ranging from developing a rapport with the subject to outright torture. Often an interrogation uses questions for effect rather than seeking an answer. This method is used to bring out a point very strongly simply by the way the question is asked. Read [Hebrews 2:3](#) and notice that to ask the question is to answer it with deadly force!

## 10. Metonymy

Metonymy is where a thing or concept is not called by its own name but rather by a name of something intimately associated with it. This figure of speech can be contrasted with metaphor. Both figures of speech involve the substitution of one term for another. However, in metaphor the substitution is based on something similar. In a metonymy, the substitution is based on an association. For example; The phrase "to fish pearls" uses metonymy which is drawn from "fishing" or the idea of taking things from the ocean. What is carried across from "fishing fish" to "fishing pearls" is the realm of metonymy.

By contrast, the metaphorical phrase "fishing for information" transfers the concept of fishing into a new realm. If someone is "fishing" for information, we do not imagine that he or she is anywhere near the ocean; rather, we swap elements of the action of fishing (waiting, hoping to catch something that cannot be seen, probing) into a new realm (a conversation). Metonymy works by calling up a realm of usage and an array of associations (in the example above, boats, the ocean, gathering life from the sea), whereas a metaphor picks a target set of meanings and transfers them to a new realm of usage.



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When Jesus spoke of “the cup” ([1 Corinthians 11:25-26](#)), He was referring to what was in the cup. Or when we read that “Moses...being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day” ([Acts 15:21](#)), it means that the word “Moses” is used for the “writings of Moses”.

## 11. Personification

This figure of speech occurs when an inanimate object is represented as a person or with personal attributes. The following phrases are examples of personification: "The trees danced in the wind", "The fire roared with anger", "The storm raged with fury." And example of this found in the scripture can be seen in [Psalm 114:3](#) where we read "The sea saw it, and fled."

## Conclusion

Figures of speech are used to provide emphasis, freshness of expression, or clarity in the Bible. They are used from the old to new testaments. If we misuse these figures of speech (take them literally) we can very easily introduce an ambiguity between literal and figurative interpretation of the scripture. However, with a clear understanding of these figures of speech, we can bolster our understanding and interpretation of God's word. word that God has given us.

## Assignment

Use your Bible and lookup (and write down) 2 examples of each type of figure of speech studied in this lesson. Be prepared to discuss how the figure of speech could be misused and lead to a wrong interpretation of God's word. Make sure to include your scripture.