

## Figurative Language

Figurative language in the bible is very close to what we use in our every day conversations, usually not even realizing it.

Figures of speech are not to conceal, they are used to make things clearer, and in some cases express things that are impossible to say with literal language.

Click to the right for specific figures.

Below is a more comprehensive overview.

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### Example Not ... But ... Construct

John 6:27:

Work **not** for the food which perishes, **but** for the food which abides unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him the Father, even God, hath sealed.



*Thank you for making this page one of the favorite and most visited on BibleThought.net. We will try to add more to it as time goes on. Please sign up for our weekly mail out and we will let you know when we make significant upgrades to this page. It is hard to go two or three verses without some figurative language popping up, and our understanding the various figures of speech can help our understanding tremendously, and also refute those who would try to deceive by taking obviously figurative language and interpreting it literally.*

# Figurative and Symbolic Language (Figures of Speech)

by Dave Brown

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## Other Figures of Speech Pages:

[Non-Identical Metaphor](#)

[Synecdoche](#)

[Not-But Construct](#)

Note: those figures of speech that are underlined in the part definitions have additional articles associated with them. It is our goal to elaborate more fully on many of them as time goes by. An appendix of a small fraction of the additional scriptural references that contain figurative language according to the various figures of speech is given at the end of this article. Its primary objective is to demonstrate how much figurative language is in the bible by a small sampling. Indeed, for someone to think that anyone could "take everything in the bible literally" shows gross ignorance of the intent of the writers and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, many passages would be either unintelligible or utterly ridiculous if someone insisted on this rule of exegesis.

## **PART 1 -- simile, metaphor, parable, personification, not... but..., allegory, and euphemism**

Quite often those who believe that the bible is the authoritative word of God are accused of "taking everything literally." The implication is that our problem is that we do not understand that the bible is largely figurative in its language. It is difficult for us to see how anyone could take *all* of the figurative language in the bible literally without becoming a "Gracie Allen." If you ever get the chance to see an old "George Burns and Gracie Allen"

rerun, please avail yourself of the opportunity. She took everything literally, and the humor that came from that is something that has never been replicated to this day. What we are saying is that it is absurd to say that anyone would or could "take everything literally." This article will briefly review 14 different figures of speech that are both common to our language today and used hundreds of times throughout the New Testament. Because of its length, we will subdivide it into two parts.

The failure to recognize figures of speech in the bible has been exploited by those who teach error. We might be tempted to say that they do not understand and properly apply the knowledge of these figures, but that would be inexcusable in those who claim to be teachers of God's word. At the other extreme are those who supposedly "don't take anything literally." Their guide is their feelings since to them the bible is incapable of saying anything authoritatively. Judges 21:25: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Our King today is Jesus Christ (Acts 2:32-37), and He expects us to use the bible in order that we understand the truth and are united in practicing it to the glory of God (John 17:20-23).

Let us also preface this study by saying that figures of speech are NOT used to obscure truth and make it only understood by some clergy class who have some special gift from God. Again, this is the ploy that false teachers use to convince others that they have some special key to the scriptures that only a select God-chosen group has. Nothing is more foreign to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ -- it is for everyone and it was written to be understood! Contrary to this false assumption, figurative language is used in the bible to *reveal*, not to conceal. The bible is written in words that the Spirit gave (1 Cor. 2:11-16), and these words were calculated to communicate God's will to each of us as effectively as possible. So when we see figurative language used we should understand that there is no better way that the truth of a given passage could possibly be expressed. In some cases it is hard to even think of an alternative literal way to say the same thing.

With that, we want to briefly present the definition of each of the many figures of speech that are used in the bible (concentrating on the New Testament), and then give a few examples of each from the New Testament.

We will begin with those that are the simplest and most common and work toward those that are not as familiar to most people.

All definitions (given *in italics*) are from the Farlex free online dictionary: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>

**Simile.** A figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are compared, often in a phrase introduced by like or as. Obviously, the key to recognizing this figure of speech is the the words LIKE or AS. Jesus concluded the sermon on the mount with one; Mt. 7:24: "Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: ..." In this passage and many others, the figure is explained further. Stop here now and review this figure and ask yourself, could this truth have been expressed more effectively in literal language? And so it is with all figurative language in the bible. There are probably hundreds of similes in the New Testament; here are some other examples: Mt. chapters 13 and 20; Eph. 5:25, 28; James 1:6,23; 1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Pet. 2:2; Isa. 40:31. Look for more -- they are almost on every page.

**Metaphor.** *A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison, as in "A sea of troubles" or "All the world's a stage" (Shakespeare).* This figure is essentially the same as the simile, but worded to exclude the words "like" or "as." An example of Jesus is given in Luke 13:31-32: "In that very hour there came certain Pharisees, saying to him, Get thee out, and go hence: for Herod would fain kill thee. And he said unto them, Go and say to that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third (day) I am perfected." Those who do not accept figurative language would have to say that Jesus said that Herod was literally a fox. Note how much figurative language is ingrained in our communications. We would be at a loss to express ourselves without it, and so would the bible. Metaphores are by far the most prolific of the figures found by the author. Here are some of them (in no special order): Phil. 2:17; Rom. 7; Heb. 5:12; Mt. 13:2; 2 Tim. 4:3; Mt. 11:28; Jn. 14:2-9; 1 Tim. 6:9-10; Mt. 5:13-16; Mt. 20:22; Mt. 7:13; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1 :22-23; 1 Cor. 3:10-11; Heb. 6:6; Eph 6:10-20; 2 Pet. 2:18f; Mt. 5:29; Mt; 6; Prov. 11:29; Heb. 10:1; 9:9. Notice others as you continue your bible

studies. A special use of the metaphor is what we call the [Non-Identical Metaphor](#).

**Parable (aka Analogy).** *A short story that uses familiar events to illustrate a religious or ethical point.* The word parable itself literally means to throw alongside of, so the story is told along side of reality so that the listener can see the truth illustrated by their similarities. The story tells it better than it can be explained in an abstract way (which might be close to impossible). The story itself is not literal in that it may never have happened (although that possibility is certainly not excluded). Parables are most often identified as such, as in the case of Luke 12:16-21: "And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be? So is he that lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Several other examples of parables are in Matthew 13, 20 and 22, many introduced with similes. The fact that a passage is a parable makes the message in it no less true.

When using the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man given in Luke 16:20-31 to demonstrate the nature of our consciousness after death, we have heard the response: "that is only a parable." We do not believe it is a parable ... there is nothing in the context to indicate that this series of events did not actually happen. But what is if WAS a parable? Would this change the truth that is being expressed by it in any way? The burden of proof is upon someone who says: "this is just a parable" to explain the meaning of the alleged parable and how it would be any different from the literal event actually happening. Parables are analogies, and while they model reality in certain points they are not to be taken beyond (extrapolated) beyond the intended points that they are illustrating. We often hear the expression: "the analogy breaks down at this point" to indicate that the analogy is being taken well beyond the truths that it is intended to illustrate.

**Personification and anthropomorphism.** *A figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are*

*endowed with human qualities or are represented as possessing human form, as in "Hunger sat shivering on the road" or "Flowers danced about the lawn."* Of course, we readily understand that flowers do not dance, although no doubt blowing in the wind they appeared to. Anthropomorphism has a shade of difference in that it gives human characteristics to things that are not human; for example, "the long arm of the law," and "the face of America."

Consider Acts 4:29-30: "And now, Lord, look upon their threatening: and grant unto thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while you stretch forth your hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of thy holy Servant Jesus." Does this mean that God has a hand? Assigning human physical attributes to God is something done throughout the bible (e.g., 1 Chron. 29:12; Isa. 14:27). Other things, both good and evil are also personified in this way. For example, wisdom is personified in the first four chapters of Proverbs. No reasonable person would conclude that the bible is teaching that what is being personified is literal.

**Not ... But ...** This is a construct used throughout the New Testament especially to create a contrast. No hard and fast rule can be given for all Not-But occurrences, but generally speaking it can lead to error to *a/ways* take the NOT portion of the statement literally. John 6:27 illustrates this point: "Work not for the food which perishes, but for the food which abides unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him the Father, even God, hath sealed." Surely Jesus is not saying that we should quit our jobs. It is equally clear that he is stating that the importance of our eternal destiny is far more important than anything in this life.

Whenever a Not-But construct is identified the reasonableness of taking the not portion of it literally should be considered in light of the context. Here are a few of the many examples that illustrate this point:

**Rom 4:5** "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, ..." This one is used as a proof text by people inclined to teach "faith only." Obviously it does not contain the word "only." It teaches that trusting (faith) in God is far more important than trusting in our own righteousness (works). If taken literally, *all acts of obedience would be sinful*, assuming that we could have faith and not do any works (which is an error in itself -- see James 2).

**Example of often miss-used passage: 1 Cor 1:17** “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void.” This is another passage used to teach false doctrine. Paul baptized many people during his missionary journeys, since he was obeying the same Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-19), as all Christians are supposed to obey. It is just that preaching the gospel was his primary mission as opposed to being the specific person who performed the baptism. The passage clearly teaches that baptism does not have to be done by someone who has been ordained with some ecclesiastically-approved authority. Other examples of the Not-But construct include: Mt. 6:19-20; Rom. 2:28-29; Rom 9:16; Rom 14:13; 1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:9. We must add that there are some Not-But expressions in the bible where the “not” part is absolute. The context and a comparison with other scriptures is the key to resolving the meaning accurately. It is not difficult if we are willing to dedicate a little time to study the context and the overall subject [comprehensively](#) (2 Tim. 2:15). For a more detailed discussion of the Not-But construct, [click here](#).

**Alegory.** *A symbolic representation: The blindfolded figure with scales is an allegory of justice.* This is a very general term and we only bring it up because it is used in Galatians (Gal. 4:23-26): "Howbeit the (son) by the handmaid is born after the flesh; but the (son) by the freewoman (is born) through promise. Which things contain an allegory: for these (women) are two covenants; one from mount Sinai, bearing children unto bondage, which is Hagar. Now this Hagar is mount Sinai in Arabia and answereth to the Jerusalem that now is: for she is in bondage with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother." We will not get into the details of the meaning, but are referencing it to demonstrate that God intends us to understand some things through the use of figurative language. Note the intensive use of metaphors. Another example is the use of the word "shadow" in the book of Hebrews (8:5 and 10:1) allegorically to indicate that all of the Old Testament ritualistic structure was not "the real thing" but was only a vague image of what is now true spiritual reality (the gospel of Jesus Christ).

**Euphemism.** *The act or an example of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for one considered harsh, blunt, or offensive: "Euphemisms such as 'slumber room' . . . abound in the funeral business" (Jessica Mitford).* We often say that a person has "passed away," which is a common euphemism today. The New Testament uses the euphemism "sleep" for death (Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Thes 4:13). The following present additional examples (with our opinion as to their interpretation): Luke 2:5 "with child" (pregnant); Luke 23:46: "breathed his last" (died); Acts 1:25 "went to his own place" (went to hell); **Acts 2:39 "those that are far off" (Gentiles); Acts 22:22 "take this person away from the earth" (kill him); 1 Cor 7:1 "touch not a woman" (have no sexual relations); 1 Cor. 7:5 "come together again" (resume normal sexual relations with one's spouse); Phil. 1:23 "depart" (die); 1 Tim. 5:17 "honor" (support financially); Heb. 13:4 "marriage bed" (sexual relations); 2 Pet. 2:17 "blackness of darkness" (hell); Jude 7 "strange flesh" (homosexual partners -- partners itself being a euphemism).**

[What are the conditions of salvation given by Jesus?](#)

## **PART 2 -- hyperbole, sarcasm, synecdoche, metonymy, idiom, incipit and accomodative language**

**Hyperbole.** *A figure of speech in which [extreme] exaggeration is used for emphasis or effect, as in "I could sleep for a year" or "This book weighs a ton." or "I'm starving to death," or "I could eat a horse."* We have inserted the word "extreme" in this definition to distinguish between normal exaggeration and hyperbole. However, generally there is a big difference between exaggeration and hyperbole in that hyperbole can rarely if ever be taken literally without it being absurd; i.e., no reasonable person would take it literally. Obviously the book does not weigh a ton, and you could not sleep for a year. So there is no chance of deceit in these statements. Not so with ordinary exaggeration which, if it is not explained, could be a complete lie. To say that the fish weighed 12 pounds when in fact it only weighed 10 is both an exaggeration and a lie. *But there is no intent to deceive in the use of hyperbole.* It is so "over the top," as we say today, that no reasonable person could take it literally. However we use it all the time to make our points. (Did you notice its use in the previous

sentence?) An obvious example is in 1 Cor 6:12: "All things are lawful for me; but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful for me; but I will not be brought under the power of any." Obviously murder, fornication, covetousness, etc. were not lawful for Paul. But there were some at Corinth that were arguing that it was lawful for them to eat meat sacrificed to idols and perhaps do many other things that *in and of themselves were not wrong*. These are the "all things" that Paul is talking about. To take this verse out of context conveys something just the opposite of the truth -- i.e., that God has not law whatsoever for us today. Other examples are in Mt. 5:29; 11:23; 23:25 ("straining the gnat and swallowing the camel -- also involves metaphor); Luke 14:26; John 12:19; and 1 Tim. 6:4.

**Sarcasm.** The definitions of sarcasm that we found from other sources do not reflect the reality of what it really is. For example: "*A cutting, often ironic remark intended to wound.*" We do not argue that this describes it, but it hardly defines it. Sarcasm is the statement of a fact that the orator believes to be untrue; but it is stated in such a way that the listener can tell that the statement (and perhaps the listener) is being mocked. For example, the simple statement "yea, sure" can be quite affirmative and agreeable; But we all know that with the right voice inflection it becomes a mockery of what the other person just said. No need for further definition, we have all used it, and we have all felt the brunt of it. The problem with it in writing is that the reader cannot hear the voice. Thus, the statement made, if sarcasm is intended, *is just the OPPOSITE of what the literal meaning is*. This is why we classify it as a figure of speech. It is not just figurative of something else, it is figurative of the direct opposite of what is stated. Many writers on the Internet have discovered to their distress that their sarcasm was taken literally and this has caused them major issues. For us, writing sarcasm is just not wise -- people cannot hear how you are thinking.

In order to identify sarcasm in the bible the reader must be totally familiar with the context, the writer and the intended audience. Let us consider one example in detail, 2 Cor 10:1-2: "Now I Paul myself entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I who in your presence am lowly among you, but being absent am of good courage toward you: yea, I beseech you, that I may not when present show courage with the confidence wherewith I count to be bold against some, who count of us as if we walked according to the flesh." The first

verse is sarcasm. We know from 2 Cor. 10:10 and 1 Cor. 2 that there were some accusing Paul of being weak while he was with them. And he goes on to deny this accusation. So we can conclude definitively that this is an example of sarcasm. Paul uses sarcasm throughout 2 Corinthians chapters 10-12. If we are looking for it, we can see that it had to be extremely effective in getting the message across. An obvious case is 2 Cor. 12:13. Let us not belabor the point; this is one of the most difficult figures to identify, and it requires some intensive study to validate its usage. Here are two other potential times it was used: (1) Mk. 7:25-32 (the theory is that Jesus was not calling the woman a dog, but mocking the Pharisees who expressed that attitude in the context); and (2) John 4:17-18 (we should not think that Jesus was in agreement with the woman's past behavior). In several cases in the Old Testament it was obvious that the speaker had animus against the one spoken to and so any positive statement commending them is obviously sarcasm (e.g., Ex. 14:11; 2 Sam. 6:20; 1 Kings 18:27).

**Synecdoche** (pronounced sin-**neck**-doll-kee). *A figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole (as hand for sailor), the whole for a part (as the law for police officer), the specific for the general (as cutthroat for assassin), the general for the specific (as thief for pickpocket), or the material for the thing made from it (as steel for sword).* These examples show that this is a common figure of speech in our language as we would expect it to be in most other languages as well. We use it often without being aware of its figurative aspects. As an example, James 1:27 states that "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, (and) to keep oneself unspotted from the world." Surely true religion is not JUST these things. However the assumption is that if your life is attuned to doing these and similar things, you will be practicing all that God expects. In almost all of his letters Paul gives lists of good things and evil things, and these lists are never totally exhaustive. He is using this figure of speech to get the message across without having to repeat everything that is involved, which would be extremely tedious. So it is with the word faith -- it is most often used in the New Testament to refer to the entire plan of salvation, i.e., all that true and living faith entails (Hebrews 11; James 2). It would be impossible for the biblical writers to include all of these lists every time they wanted to refer to all of it, so the word *faith* is used to encapsulate it all. This is

validated by the definition of faith Romans 1:16-17, which essentially says that faith includes not only a *belief of*, but a *living out* of the *entire* gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Metonymy.** *A figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated, as in the use of "Washington" for the United States government or of the "sword" for military power.*

An example of this is found in Romans 13:3-4: "For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And would you have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bears not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that does evil." Similarly Matt 10:34 "Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." But the sword here is a metaphor for contention, not warfare. This statement of Jesus uses the figures of metaphor, metonymy and hyperbole.

The understanding of metonymy avoids the error of placing undue emphasis upon the "cup" in 1 Cor 11:23-25: "For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me. In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink (it), in remembrance of me." Is he talking about the cup or the contents of the cup? The gospel accounts of the Lord's Supper clarify that Jesus was talking about the fruit of the vine and that its container was inconsequential. [In this passage, "This is my body" is a metaphor -- obviously Jesus was not giving them his physical body to eat, nor is this the case in our taking the Lord's Supper today -- they could (and we can) determine this with our physical senses. Bread is bread, and human flesh is human flesh. Jesus did not say that either one was the other. In initiating and commanding the Lord's Supper He was indicating that when they saw, felt and tasted the bread in the Supper, they were to see in their minds His body on the cross as it was given for us. See the additional article on the [non-identical metaphor](#).]

**Idiom.** *A speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements, as in "keep tabs on."* Ones that we use quite often are "keep an eye on something" and "keep your eyes peeled." Imagine that someone of a different language and culture would think of the literal meaning of these idioms. So we can see a real danger of misinterpretation here, and it surely does not hurt for us to consult with those scholars who are familiar with the first century Hebrew and Greek idioms in obtaining more accurate translations. One idiom that seems not to have been translated is the word "hate," found as a Hebrew idiom in Malachi 1 and Genesis 29:30, and also by Jesus in Matthew 10:37. To us this word has an absolute meaning, but in its original context it was a relative term, probably best literally translated "to love less" as opposed to the direct opposite of love, which is the meaning that it has in our culture today.

Similarly, an interesting non-translation of the phrase "set his face to go to ..." in Luke 9:51 occurs in most of our modern translations as: "And it came to pass, when the days were well-nigh come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, ... (ASV, and similarly in the KJV and NKJV). The idiom "set his face to go" would intuitively be thought as one of setting a course. But there is much more involved in the meaning of this idiom than moving in a general direction. The New American Standard Version captures the meaning as: "When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem." The idiom has more to do with a resolve or determination than with a mere setting of a course. In our English today "to set one's face" has no common meaning. But reverse-engineering it, we can see that there are certain facial expressions that demonstrate determination, especially when there is conflict involved.

Fortunately, these are exceptions, and all scholarly translations have created the equivalent English meaning for most of the idioms that would not make sense when translated literally, and we know of no idioms that have ever caused doctrinal issues. However, it is good to be aware of their existence and to realize that a one-to-one conversion of words from Hebrew (or Greek) to English may not be sufficient to properly convey the meaning of idiomatic expressions. This is the reason that experienced translation scholars must be well schooled in the culture of the writers in their time, as well as with the technical aspects of the language itself.

For a list of Old Testament idioms and their meanings, see:

<http://www.mayimhayim.org/Hebrew%20Perspectives/Biblical%20Idioms.RX5.htm>

**Incipit.** *The beginning or opening words of the text of a medieval manuscript or early printed book.* In this case, of course, the bible. Recognize that the book chapters and verses of our bibles are of relatively recent origin. Thus the typical way for referencing a scroll or part of the Old Testament was by citing the incipit -- the first verse in the section of concern, perhaps of the chapter or scroll. Many scholars believe that Mark 15:34, "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" is an incipit reference to Psalms 22. This conclusion is hard to avoid when we see so many of the details of the crucifixion in Psalms 22. The passage in Psalms actually turns out quite positive indicating that the conventional belief that God forsook Jesus on the cross is not true. Other fairly clear incipit references are 2 Cor. 6:2 to Isa. 49:8, and Romans 1:16-17 to Habakkuk 2:4. We say this because of the very brief references as opposed to the richness of the content of the passage referenced. In other words, it is clear that the New Testament writer did not want to cite just a single part of a verse, but rather wanted the reader to go to the Old Testament and reference the subject matter of the entire passage (assuming that the reader was not already familiar with it). Habakkuk, for example was urging the people of his day not to just talk about their faith, but to live it out. There is no reason to think that Paul would have any other motive than this for citing it, since this was Habakkuk's motive in writing it originally. It is easy to generalize these thoughts and see that a very large proportion of the Old Testament quotations given in the New Testament may be familiar incipits to passages, since no doubt an understanding of that Old Testament context would certainly improve their (and our) understanding of the New Testament passage that makes the reference.

**Accommodative Language** -- the use of words that get the primary message across without regard to stretched literal detail. It is usually possible to parse any statement (combination of words) well beyond their original intent. The goal of the writer is to get the message across effectively. As an example in the New Testament, Phil. 4:6: "In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let

your requests be made known unto God." But does not God already know our requests before they are spoken or thought (Matthew 6:8)? Of course, but this is not the subject, nor is it a contradiction of that truth.

The writer did not have the subject of God's omniscience in mind; he only wanted to urge us to pray. So he uses the term "make known unto God" accommodatively to express this. (Note that Phil. 4:6 is also a Not-But statement, indicating the possibility that some anxiety might be of value at times, but that our lives should be spent in prayer as opposed to angst.)

Consider Acts 24:24: "But after certain days, Felix came with Drusilla, his wife, who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ Jesus." Extremely reliable history tells us that Drusilla was technically the wife of another man at this time (i.e., she was not scripturally divorced). Does the fact that Luke calls her Felix's wife give legitimacy to their relationship? Of course not. He is speaking in terms that most people would use and is not in a discussion of marriage, divorce and re-marriage. To stretch this to address that issue is just out of order. How would Luke have better stated it without opening a can of worms? (Note the metaphor.) The bible writers could not anticipate every miss-use that would possibly be made of their writings, and the Holy Spirit that inspired them expected us to use our intelligence in this regard.

The example in Acts 27:31 is a bit more complex. In Acts 27:23-24 Paul had already told the passengers that an angel had informed him that no life would be lost in the shipwreck. But when the sailors seek to abandon the ship in Acts 27:31: "Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." But wait -- did Paul not say that they would be saved? The question of a contradiction can be resolved by recognizing that Paul was using accommodative language. Think about how Paul would have stated it while at the same time incorporating his former statement. I think we can all agree that if he did say something of that complexity, not only would he not have been understood, but by the time that he got done speaking the crew would have been long gone (and perhaps themselves killed). (This is a very interesting study in the sovereignty of God and how He sets conditions on outcomes, and yet may well know beforehand how those conditions will be observed. Paul's statement was, in fact, the truth; but it was known that they would properly respond. I apologize for getting way off the subject of figurative language.) Most language is

accommodative to some extent, and when pressed to its literal limit would probably come up less than totally accurate in some aspect. It is important for us to focus on the subject at hand and try not to squeeze meanings out of biblical statements that have nothing to do with the obvious truths being revealed regarding the subject of concern.

Consider Romans 4:4: "Now to him that works, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt." Works here is being used as a shortcut for those who were attempting to be saved by keeping the Old Testament laws; [see commentary on Romans 1-5](#). If we did not allow that the word works here is being used accommodatively, then there would be a strong inference that a man could obtain salvation by works. Yet we know that this is just the opposite of what Paul was trying to communicate. Like hyperbole, when a statement made is so obviously counter to the intent of the author, then we know that figurative language is being used.

Another excellent example of accommodative language is in Galatians 1:6 where Paul uses the term "another gospel" to refer to false teaching, and then quickly explains that it really is not another legitimate gospel (i.e., good news) at all.

In assessing whether something is being used accommodatively, we need to ask: how could this be said if accommodative language were not used. In many cases the wording would border on the ridiculous and the intent of the writer would be obscured. Accommodative language is extremely common in our communications today -- to see that all we need to do is to look for it.

[What are the conditions of salvation given by Jesus?](#)

## **Appendix - Additional Examples Figurative Language**

Ordered by book, chapter and verse within the figures, which are listed alphabetically. This is not at all an exhaustive list -- some have compiled hundreds for several of these categories. However, this list does demonstrate how extensive the use of figurative language is in the bible, and if we are to attain to the proper understanding of the passages in which these figures occur, we will need to have some familiarity with the various figures of speech.

### **Accommodative Language**

Eccl. 1:5; Ps. 19:6; 58:8; Amos 9:2; Mt. 5:45; Acts 24:24; 27:31; [1 Cor. 1:12-13; 4:6; 2 Cor. 11:13]; Rev. 20:8; 21:8

### **Allegory (Including Types and Anti-types)**

2 Sam. 12:1-8; Isa. 5:1-6 ; Ezek. 17:1-24; 24:3-14; Dan. 2:31-45; 4:10-33; 7:1-28; 8:1-27; 1 Cor. 10:1-11; 15:45 (first and second Adam); Gal. 4:24 (Gen. 16:1-6); Eph. 5:31-32; Heb. 5 (Melchizedek and Christ); 8-9 (tabernacle and church); 11:19; Rev. 12:1-6

### **Euphemism**

Gen. 2:24; 4:1; 26:8; 31:35; Lev. 18:22; Judg. 3:24; 1 Sam. 24:3; 25:22 (and several other places); 1 Kings 2:2, 10; Job 16:22; Prov. 30:20; Ecc. 12:5-7; Mt. 1:19; Mk. 6:24; 1 Thes. 4:13; Rom. 1:27; 13:13; 1 Cor. 12:15-24; Jude 7

### **Hyperbole**

Ps. 1:2; Mt. 5:29; Mk. 10:25; Lk. 14:26; 1 Cor. 8:8; 2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:6; 1 Tim. 6:4

## Idiom

Deut. 8:14 (pride); 15:17 (selfish); Job 1:6; 2:1 (angels); Ps. 7:9 (thoughts and emotions); 11:6 (their destiny); 75:5 (defy God); Prov. 24:20; Luke 13:34-35; Luke 22:15 (celebrate the passover -- it cannot be literally eaten, although the passover lamb was eaten); [all in all: 1 Cor. 12:6; 15:28; Eph. 1:23; Col. 3:11]; [walk = behavior Mark 7:5; Col. 2:6; similarly , live Rom. 1:17]

## Incipit

Mt. 22:44 (Ps. 110); Mt. 27:46 and Mk.15:34 (Ps. 22); Mk. 12:36 (Ps. 110); Lk. 6:24 (Amos 6); Lk. 7:27 (Mal. 3); Jn. 7:38 (Isa. 55); Jn. 12:38 (Isa. 53); Acts 2:34 (Ps. 110); Acts 4:25 (Ps. 2); Acts 7:3 (Gen. 12); Rom. 3:18 (Ps. 36); Rom. 4:7 (Ps. 32); Rom. 9:13 (Mal. 1); Rom. 10:16 (Isa. 53); Rom. 10:20 (Isa. 65); Rom. 15:11 (Ps. 117); Rom. 15:12 (Isa. 11); 1 Cor. 10:26 (Ps. 24); Gal. 4:27 (Isa. 54); Rev. 12:7 (Dan. 12);

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/quotes04.cfm>

## Metaphor

Deut. 33:27; Ps. 91:4; 119:28; Prov. 4:14; 11:29; 14:26; Mt. 5:13-16; 29; 6; 7:13; 11:7, 28; 13; 15:7-8; 20:22; 23; 26:39; Lk. 1:17; 3:7-15; 24:49; Jn. 1:29-30; 6:35, 58, 63; 8:12; 9:5; 12; 12:46; 14:2, 6, 9; Rom. 7; 1; 8:35ff; Cor. 3:10-11; 5:6; 12:13; Gal. 2:20; 5:15, 24; Phil. 2:17; 4:1, 18; Eph. 1:22-23; 4: 14;24; 5:1; 6:10-20; 1 Thes. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:19; 2:8; 6:9-10; 2 Tim. 2:1; 4:3; James 3; Heb. 4:12; 5:12; 6:6, 19; 9:9; 10:1; 12:1, 29; 1 Pet. 5:5; 2 Pet. 2:18f; Rev. 5

[Metaphor of type "X is Y" and "I am X" \(click for article\)](#)

Mk. 14:22-24; Jn. 4:24; 6:51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 30 (see 17:22); 11:25; 14:6; 15:1; 1 Cor. 6 (body == temple); Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Jn. 1:5; 4:8, 16;

### **Metonymy (Note that Synecdoche is a Type of Metonymy)**

Prov. 2:1; Mt. 5:37; 6:19; 10:34; 18:9; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 3:15; Phil. 3:19; Col. 4:11; James 1:27;

[Not... But ...](#) (click for examples given within the article)

### **Parable**

Mt. 13:18, 24, 31, 33; 21:33; 24:32 (and comparable parallel passages in Mark and Luke); Jn 10:1-6.

### **Personification (aka Anthropomorphism)**

Ex. 31:18; Numbers 11:2; Deut. 8:3; 11:12; 1 Chron. 29:12; Job 13:24; 19:21; 40:9; Ps. 36:7; 130:2; Prov. 1-5; 6:17-18; 25; 15:31; Isa. 1:15; 14:27; 53:1; Mt. 4:4; Acts 4:30; 11:21; 1 Cor. 13 (of Love); 2 Thes. 3:1; James 1:15; 1 Pet. 3:12

Human emotions or modes of thinking: Gen. 6:6; 22:12; 1 Sam. 15:35 (We are only posing this as a possibility; not asserting that these are necessarily figurative.)

### **Simile**

Ps. 1:1-3; Isa. 40:31; Mt. 20; Mt. 7:24; Lk. 22:44; Eph. 5:1, 22, 25, 28; 1 Pet. 1:24-2:2; 1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Pet. 2

## Sarcasm

Gen. 4:9; 2 Sam. 16:20; 1 Kings 18:27; 22:15; Isa. 40:19-20, Jer. 46:11; Mk. 7:9; 25-30; Jn. 4:17; 1 Cor. 4:8-13; 2 Cor. 10:1; 12:13;

## Synecdoche (a form of metonymy - click for article)

Ps. 18:20; 25:3; 119:48; Prov. 6:16-19; Mt. 22; Rom. 12:9-13; Rom. 14:17; 1 Tim. 2:8; 3:1ff; Tit. 1:3; James 1:27; 4:8; 1:Cor. 13 (love); Gal. 6:2; Col. 3:18f;

Note that most lists given in the New Testament of either good or bad things are not exhaustive (and thus are synecdoches) -- they exemplify all good things or all bad things and they are not to be viewed as being a complete and exhaustive list.

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