

The Ground is Thirsty

by Dr. E.W. Bullinger

A figure is simply a word or a sentence thrown into a peculiar form, different from its original or simplest meaning or use. These forms are constantly used by every speaker and writer. It is impossible to hold the simplest conversation, or to write a few sentences without, it may be unconsciously, making use of figures. We may say, "the ground needs rain": that is a plain, cold, matter-of-fact statement; but if we say "the ground is thirsty," we immediately use a figure. It is not true to fact, and therefore it must be a figure. But how true to feeling it is! how full of warmth and life! Hence, we say, "the crops suffer"; we speak of "a hard heart," "a rough man," "an iron will." In all these cases we take a word which has a certain, definite meaning, and apply the name, or the quality, or the act, to some other thing with which it is associated, by time or place, cause or effect, relation or resemblance.

Some figures are common to many languages; others are peculiar to some one language. There are figures used in the English language, which have nothing that answers to them in Hebrew or Greek; and there are Oriental figures which have no counterpart in English; while there are some figures in various languages, arising from human infirmity and folly, which find, of course, no place in the word of God.

It may be asked, "How are we to know, then, when words are to be taken in their simple, original form (i.e., literally),

and when they are to be taken in some other and peculiar form (i.e., as a Figure) ?" The answer is that, whenever and wherever it is possible, the words of Scripture are to be understood literally, but when a statement appears to be contrary to our experience, or to known fact, or revealed truth; or seems to be at variance with the general teaching of the Scriptures, then we may reasonably expect that some figure is employed. And as it is employed only to call our attention to some specially designed emphasis, we are at once bound to diligently examine the figure for the purpose of discovering and learning the truth that is thus emphasized.

From non-attention to these Figures, translators have made blunders as serious as they are foolish. Sometimes they have translated the figure literally, totally ignoring its existence; sometimes they have taken it fully into account, and have translated, not according to the letter, but according to the spirit; sometimes they have taken literal words and translated them figuratively. Commentators and interpreters, from inattention to the figures, have been led astray from the real meaning of many important passages of God's Word; while ignorance of them has been the fruitful parent of error and false doctrine. It may be truly said that most of erroneous and conflicting views of the Lord's People, have their root and source, either in figuratively explaining away passages which should be taken literally, or in taking literally what has been thrown into a peculiar form or Figure of language: thus, not only falling into error, but losing the express teaching, and missing the special emphasis which the particular Figure was designed to impart to them.

This is an additional reason for using greater exactitude and care when we are dealing with the words of God. Man's words are scarcely worthy of such study. Man uses figures, but often at random and often in ignorance or in error. But "the words of the Lord are pure words." All His works are perfect, and when the Holy Spirit takes up and uses human words, He does so,

we may be sure, with unerring accuracy, infinite wisdom, and perfect beauty.

We may well, therefore, give all our attention to "the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth."

Introduction

Jehovah has been pleased to give us the revelation of His mind and will in words. It is therefore absolutely necessary that we should understand not merely the meanings of the words themselves, but also the laws which govern their usage and combinations.

All language is governed by law; but, in order to increase the power of a word, or the force of an expression, these laws are designedly departed from, and words and sentences are thrown into, and used in, new forms, or figures.

The ancient Greeks reduced these new and peculiar forms to science, and gave names to more than two hundred of them.

The Romans carried forward this science: but with the decline of learning in the Middle Ages, it practically died out. A few writers have since then occasionally touched upon it briefly, and have given a few trivial examples: but the knowledge of this ancient science is so completely forgotten, that its very name to-day is used in a different sense and with almost an opposite meaning.

These manifold forms which words and sentences assume were called by the Greeks *Schema* and by the Romans, *Figura*. Both words have the same meaning, viz., a shape or figure. When we speak of a person as being "a figure" we mean one who is dressed in some peculiar style, and out of the ordinary manner. The Greek word *Schema* is found in I Cor. 7:31, "The fashion of this world passeth away"; Phil. 2:8, "being found in fashion as a man." The Latin word *Figura* is from the verb *ingere*, to form, and has passed into the English language in the words *figure*, *transfigure*, *configuration*, *effigy*, *feint*, *feign*, etc.

We use the word figure now in various senses. Its primitive meaning applies to any marks, lines, or outlines, which make a form or shape. Arithmetical figures are certain marks or forms which represent numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.). All secondary and derived meanings of the word "figure" retain this primitive meaning.

Applied to words, a figure denotes some form which a word or sentence takes, different from its ordinary and natural form. This is always for the purpose of giving additional force, more life, intensified feeling, and greater emphasis. Whereas to-day "Figurative language " is ignorantly spoken of as though it made less of the meaning, and deprived the words of their power and force. A passage of God's Word is quoted; and it is met with the cry, "Oh, that is figurative" -- implying that its meaning is weakened, or that it has quite a different meaning, or that it has no meaning at all. But the very opposite is the case. For an unusual form (figura) is never used except to add force to the truth conveyed, emphasis to the statement of it, and depth to the meaning of it. When we apply this science then to God's words and to Divine truths, we see at once that no branch of Bible study can be more important, or offer greater promise of substantial reward.

It lies at the very root of all translation; and it is the key to true interpretation... As the course of language moves smoothly along, according to the laws which govern it, there is nothing by which it can awaken or attract our attention. It is as when we are travelling by railway. As long as everything proceeds according to the regulations we notice nothing; we sleep, or we read, or meditate as the case may be. But, let the train slacken its speed, or make an unexpected stop; -- we immediately hear the question asked, "What is the matter?" "What are we stopping for?" We hear one window go down and then another: attention is thoroughly aroused, and interest excited. So it is exactly with our reading. As long as all proceeds smoothly and according to law we notice nothing.

But suddenly there is a departure from some law, a deviation from the even course -- an unlooked for change -- our attention is attracted, and we at once give our mind to discover why the words have been used in a new form, what the particular force of the passage is, and why we are to put special emphasis on the fact stated or on the truth conveyed. In fact, it is not too much to say that, in the use of these figures, we have, as it were, the Holy Spirit's own markings of our Bibles.

This is the most important point of all. For it is not by fleshly wisdom that the "words which the Holy Ghost teacheth" are to be understood. The natural man cannot understand the Word of God. It is foolishness unto him. A man may admire a sun-dial, he may marvel at its use, and appreciate the cleverness of its design; he may be interested in its carved-work, or wonder at the mosaics or other beauties which adorn its structure: but, if he holds a lamp in his hand or any other light emanating from himself or from this world, he can make it any hour he pleases, and he will never be able to tell the time of day. Nothing but the light from God's sun in the Heavens can tell him that. So it is with the Word of God. The natural man may admire its structure, or be interested in its statements; he may study its geography, its history, yea, even its prophecy; but none of these things will reveal to him his relation to time and eternity. Nothing but the light that cometh from Heaven. Nothing but the Sun of Righteousness can tell him that. It may be said of the Bible, therefore, as it is of the New Jerusalem -- "The Lamb is the light thereof." The Holy Spirit's work in this world is to lead to Christ, to glorify Christ. The Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit; and the same Spirit that inspired the words in the Book must inspire its truths in our hearts, for they can and must be " Spiritually discerned " (I Cor. 2:1-16).

On this foundation, then, we have prosecuted this work. And on these lines we have sought to carry it out.

We are dealing with the words "which the Holy Ghost teacheth." All His works are perfect. "The words of the Lord are pure words"; human words, indeed, words pertaining to this world, but purified as silver is refined in a furnace. Therefore we must study every word, and in so doing we shall soon learn to say with Jeremiah (15:16), "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart..."

It is clear, therefore, that no branch of Bible-study can be more important: and yet we may truly say that there is no branch of it which has been so utterly neglected.

A figure is, as we have before said, a departure from the natural and fixed laws of Grammar or Syntax; but it is a departure not arising from ignorance or accident. Figures are not mere mistakes of Grammar; on the contrary, they are legitimate departures from law, for a special purpose. They are permitted variations with a particular object. Therefore they are limited as to their number, and can be ascertained, named, and described.

No one is at liberty to exercise any arbitrary power in their use. All that art can do is to ascertain the laws to which nature has subjected them. There is no room for private opinion, neither can speculation concerning them have any authority.

It is not open to any one to say of this or that word or sentence, "This is a figure," according to his own fancy, or to suit his own purpose. We are dealing with a science whose laws and their workings are known. If a word or words be a figure, then that figure can be named, and described. It is used for a definite purpose and with a specific object. Man may use figures in ignorance, without any particular object. But when the Holy Spirit takes up human words and uses a figure (or peculiar form), it is for a special purpose, and that purpose must be observed and have due weight given to it.

Many misunderstood and perverted passages are difficult, only because we have not known the Lord's design in the difficulty.

Thomas Boys has well said (Commentary, I Pet. 3), "There is much in the Holy Scriptures, which we find it hard to understand: nay, much that we seem to understand so fully as to imagine that we have discovered in it some difficulty or inconsistency. Yet the truth is, that passages of this kind are often the very parts of the Bible in which the greatest instruction is to be found: and, more than this, the instruction is to be obtained in the contemplation of the very difficulties by which at first we are startled. This is the intention of these apparent inconsistencies. The expressions are used, in order that we may mark them, dwell upon them, and draw instruction out of them. Things are put to us in a strange way, because, if they were put in a more ordinary way, we should not notice them."

This is true, not only of mere difficulties as such, but especially of all Figures: i.e., of all new and unwonted forms of words and speech: and our design in this work is that we should learn to notice them and gain the instruction they were intended to give us.

The Word of God may, in one respect, be compared to the earth. All things necessary to life and sustenance may be obtained by scratching the surface of the earth: but there are treasures of beauty and wealth to be obtained by digging deeper into it. So it is with the Bible. "All things necessary to life and godliness" lie upon its surface for the humblest saint; but, beneath that surface are "great spoils" which are found only by those who seek after them as for "hid treasure."

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November, 1899.