

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The significance of colours in the Bible: Blue

Once upon a time, for that is the way all good stories start, a Martian was planning to visit planet earth and so went to the library to find a book that would teach him about earth and its culture. He came across a book of Aesop's Fables and particularly enjoyed the one about the wolf in sheep's clothing. On arriving upon earth some time later, the Martian came across a wolf but, because this particular beast was not wearing a white and woolly coat, he did not realise that it was indeed a wolf and made no attempt to escape from it and soon received a nasty bite from the wolf.

This morning as we start a new series looking at the colours of the Bible and the lessons that we can learn from them, it is important to begin with a few words about how we understand the Bible. Clearly, although the Martian had read about a wolf, he had misunderstood the meaning of the words that he was reading. None of us would make this kind of mistake with Aesop's Fables, recognising them as allegorical tales i.e. stories that convey a meaning, where the actual subjects of the story and their actions are not the prime intended meaning.

My wife often says I am like a bull in a tea shop. Now I have never actually seen a bull in a tea shop, but I am sure it would not be a positive experience!! I don't think I have sprouted horns nor put on several hundred pounds, but I know what my wife is saying to me!

When we come to studying the Bible it is vital that we understand what we are reading. If I say that we are going to study Biblical hermeneutics this morning then you may feel very pleased with yourself that you are going to do something very clever sounding, or you may just fall asleep and feel it is all a bit too much for an easy listening programme! However, hermeneutics is simply a big word meaning how we interpret the Bible. For those who are interested in this subject I would recommend David Reid's book "*Study to show yourself approved*", (ISBN: 9781593870652) which is currently available free for the first 50 listeners, from Emmaus Bible School UK (contact jonathan@emmausuk.com) and is an excellent and clear discussion of this subject.

When I read the New Testament epistles I can be quite sure that they were written for me as a Christian in the church of God. In them I find instruction as to who I am as a believer and how I am to behave. So when I read in Ephesians 5:18 "*Do not be drunk with wine*", Paul fully intends me to understand that this is wrong for me as a Christian. The words are to be taken at face value and their primary meaning is obvious and should be accepted as such. I am quite safe in insisting that this is what the Bible teaches.

Now when I come to the Psalms, for example, I recognise that they are Hebrew poetry, written by those who were not Christians and so could not understand the difference that the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus has made. Therefore, whilst the sentiments and emotions expressed within them may well be of comfort or inspiration to me, I interpret the words slightly differently to the book of Ephesians.

Furthermore, there are times when the biblical writers use allegories, stories with meanings, such as Paul in Galatians 4:21-31. So Paul is not really talking about Sarah and Hagar but using them as examples to teach a deeper truth. Elsewhere, the writers may use types, or pictures, to teach a Biblical truth.

Now this is a valid way of understanding the Bible, but it needs to be done carefully. For example, in Exodus the Passover lamb is mentioned (see Exodus 12:1-13:16, and this can be used as a type of the Lord Jesus. We know this with certainty because Paul uses the illustration of the Passover lamb in relation to the Lord Jesus: "*For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us*" (1 Corinthians 5:7). I might also think about David killing the giant Goliath and see this as a picture of the Lord Jesus winning a tremendous victory over the Devil. Now whilst I am quite certain in my own mind that this is a helpful picture, and may use the story to speak to children about the wonderful work of the Lord Jesus on the cross, the New Testament does not give a specific instruction that this is so, unlike the previous example, and so I cannot insist that I am right in interpreting the Bible like this.

On the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-49) we read that "*beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (Luke 24:27). What a wonderful Bible study that would have been! As the Author, Jesus was perfectly able to interpret what He meant when He had inspired those Old Testament writers to pen what they did. We are not the Author, and we are not infallible, so it is fitting for us to

tread a good deal more carefully. However, Paul does tell us that *“Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope”* (Romans 15:4). Therefore every verse and word of the Bible is there for a reason and is for our good, if we have the tenacity to really read and study the Bible and pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all its truth.

So this morning we are going to begin our look at the colours of the Bible by looking at the colour blue. I want to be absolutely clear that I am not saying that what we will think about is the only possible interpretation, or that you have to understand that when we read about something that is blue you have to believe such and such. The Bible does not give us this authority. I am simply saying that as a linking theme, the colour blue will hopefully give us some helpful thoughts that will cause us to worship God this morning.

The colour itself is mentioned about 47 times in the Bible, and about two thirds of these references are found in the book of Exodus. The vast majority of references are to blue cloth or blue threads, often mixed with purple and scarlet, and often linked with gold. It was used extensively in the Tabernacle and later the Temple, and also in the clothes that the priests would wear.

It is not absolutely clear how this blue dye was produced to create the blue threads. Some have suggested that it was from using indigo, as the Egyptians used in producing their blue material. Others have suggested that it was from the glands of a mollusc. Either way, the cloth produced would have been expensive and impressive looking. When David went to fight the giant Goliath he was dressed in his rustic shepherd’s clothing, and would not have made a particularly striking figure! However, when in Ezekiel 23:6 and Ezekiel 23:12 we read of the Assyrian warriors dressed in blue we can imagine that they made a pretty impressive sight, designed to strike terror into the enemy. If even the foot soldiers are clothed in expensive cloth, then this was an army that was well equipped! In Jeremiah 10:9 we read: *“Silver is beaten into plates; it is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz, the work of the craftsman and of the hands of the metalsmith; blue and purple are their clothing; they are all the work of skilful men.”* In making a link between silver and gold and the blue dye that was used to produce blue cloth then perhaps we can see the kind of worth that was placed upon the material. Interestingly, Jeremiah 10:10 goes on to say: *“But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth will tremble, and the nations will not be able to endure His indignation.”*

I think from Jeremiah 10:10 we begin to see the thoughts that the colour blue suggests to us. As already mentioned this morning the vast majority of the references to the colour blue are to do with the cloth that was used for the priestly garments and in the Tabernacle, both in its structure and for carrying the implements during the wilderness journey. It was also extensively used later in the Temple.

Let us read together the key reference of Numbers 15:38-40: *“Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God.”*

When the Israelites went into the Tabernacle they would have been awed by the dazzling blue, with purple and scarlet and gold that featured so prominently. And then they would have been given that daily reminder by the tassel that would have touched and tickled their skin, and woven through that tassel was the blue thread. I think, for me, that the lesson they would have gained from all this is that there is a God in Heaven. As we look into the clear blue sky, our eyes are turned heavenward and we should feel a sense of awe at the vastness of God who has created it all and who inhabits the heavenlies. But note too that, when the Israelites saw the blue tassels they were reminded of the commandments God had given, and that they were to do them. So there was a very practical implication of this heavenward look.

In my mind then I would sum up the thoughts concerning the colour blue in three words beginning with the letter “H”:

- Heaven;
- Holy; and
- Home.

Heaven

Have you ever had the experience of standing out in the countryside and looking up into a completely cloudless sky of brilliant blue? As you turn through a full 360 degrees you see nothing but sky above. I know that I am left with a sense of being very small compared with the vastness of space. Astronomers speak about measuring the “known” universe, and in that there is an implicit acknowledgement that we simply do not yet know the extent of the limits of space. Where does it all end? And then what happens?

And as we begin to consider the vastness of the universe it all seems a bit big if, as some suggest, there is no God and that we are alone in the universe! But, of course, there is a God and this universe then becomes just the right size for Him, because He made it so, by the word of His mouth! I think the Psalmist David certainly had a sense of this, when he wrote in Psalm 8: *“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? ... O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!”* (Psalm 8:3-4, 9)

Now just in case you are thinking that “OK, I appreciate how big the universe is and understand that God is really big too!”, we need to remember the words of Job: *“Indeed these are the mere edges of His ways and how small a whisper we hear of Him! But the thunder of His power who can understand?”* (Job 26:14). We can be absolutely sure that we will never adequately appreciate the majesty and power and glory of our God. This makes the fact that He came in human flesh, as the Baby of Bethlehem, all the more incredible!

*“Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man!”*

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

It is no wonder at all that when Mary was told of this she exclaimed *“How can these things be?”* (Luke 1:34). But we have something all the more remarkable to look back upon in awestruck wonder. For the same God who spoke and worlds came into being, hung upon a cross and cried out *“Finished!”* (John 19:30) and laid down His life for you and me. Can you understand how the One who *“sustains all things by the word of His power”* (see Hebrews 1:3) could lie dead in a garden tomb? Can you understand why the One who inhabited the infinite splendour beyond the blue skies should choose to make His home with us?

It is important in life to have this upward sight and know that there is a God who sees all and knows everything! Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar were both great generals who changed the course of human history. They held the lives and deaths of thousands within their hands. But I have no cause to fear them, for they are dead and I shall never meet them. However, I shall meet God either as my Saviour or my Judge! This ought to have the profoundest effect upon my attitude toward Him. This leads us onto our second consideration - that of Holiness.

Holy

Remember the tassels? They were there to remind all the people of the commandments of their God and this would lead them to be holy! I think it is important to make a distinction between holiness and righteousness, although the two are connected. Righteousness has to do with right living, and the avoidance of wrong living. God is righteous and so we should be also. In fact, part of the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross was to clothe us in His righteousness so that we are now suited for Heaven, because we are “in Christ”. Holiness has to do with separation and being kept special. My wife has a pair of scissors that she keeps for cutting material. She only uses them for this purpose so they remain razor sharp and the cut they make is clean and sharp. Those scissors are holy - special for her use and her purpose. Once I tried to use them for trimming a piece of carpet to fit the inside of a cupboard. Let’s just say I won’t be doing that again!

The blue thread in the tassels was to remind the Israelites that they belonged to God and they were to live their lives exclusively for His benefit. We as Christians also belong to the Lord Jesus and we are to live our lives for His benefit - we are to be holy! The more we think about heaven and the Person who lives there, the more we will indeed be holy. There is a rather trite saying: “So and so is so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good”. I understand what is meant by this criticism, but it is utterly wrong. The more heavenly minded we are, the more earthly good we will be. It is those who pretend to be heavenly minded, putting on a façade of spiritual religiousness, or those who are not heavenly minded at all who are in fact no earthly good. It was the Samaritan man who was heavenly minded and so helped the wounded traveller behaving just like God would have. The Pharisee and the lawyer were so earth bound that they were no use whatsoever to that poor traveller (see Luke 10:25-37).

Particularly these days, I hear people saying that Christians or the church needs to change and get into the 21st Century. They then proceed to junk the Bible and try to mimic the way that this world behaves. Well this world is under the control of the Devil, and we who claim to be Christians should want to have nothing to do with his authority. Christianity has its own culture and we are to behave in a way that mimics God - we are here for His use only. This world’s fashions will come and go. Christianity looks to eternity and the God who exists there and takes its lead from Him. I am not for one moment suggesting that we deliberately walk out of step with the culture of the society in which God has placed us, merely that when the culture of this world and the truth of the Bible conflict, it must always be the authority of the Bible that guides our actions, morals and thoughts.

The idea that being heavenly minded affects our behaviour was powerfully brought home to me in a story related by Max Meyer, a Missionary Aviation Fellowship pilot, in his book *"Eyes Turned Skyward"*. He related the time he was asked to transport a couple of heifers from one village to another. Well, these particular cows were none too happy about being tied up in the back of a plane and were making quite a noise and a mess. Desperate to calm the beasts, Max gained altitude where the thinner air soon calmed the cows and completed the journey safely. When we become anxious and our behaviour erratic, we too need to "gain altitude" in our vision and thinking and fill our minds with the thought of Heaven!

Home

Finally, the wide blue expanse of the sky often makes me think of home. Whenever I see the Liver Buildings I know that I am nearly home, and that is a good feeling. Sometimes, as I look out my window and see the clear blue sky I think to myself that one day I might be doing that when a giant crack will appear and through it the Lord Himself will appear. What a wonderful day that will be! As Christians we are heaven bound and that will be going home for us.

Paul tells us about this wonderful time in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: *"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."*

The Apostle John adds a beautiful thought to this time in 1 John 3:2: *"Beloved, now we are children of God: and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."*

Imagine that - seeing Jesus face to face! What a wonderful and glorious thought that is! For now, we are pilgrims in a foreign country, left here by God to witness to the better things that there are in Christ. But we know that one day He will come to take us home and the vastness of that big blue sky will be no barrier to our journey home.

But going home affects our behaviour. I don't think I have much of a scouse accent, and yet when I am in Liverpool and amongst those who have lived here all their lives I do take on a pronounced accent. In a similar way, it ought to be that the prospect of going home should change the way that I behave. I mean, just imagine how embarrassing it would be to be having a stand up row with a fellow Christian here on earth and then suddenly to find myself in the heavenly throne room surrounded by myriads of angels all listening to ripe language and bitter words. I suspect I would feel a little embarrassed slamming on the brakes beside the pearly gates as I try to slow the car from 90 to a legal 70! The fact that we just do not know at what moment we may find ourselves called home must have a preserving effect upon our lives if we truly accept the truth of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Conclusion

This morning we have considered three main thoughts suggested by the colour blue, and that may well have been in the minds of those Israelites as they entered the Tabernacle or Temple precincts and saw the priests.

- We have an awesome God, who needs the vastness of the heavens to make His home.
- We have thought of the holiness that is required of us as we come into relationship with that God; and
- We have thought of the joy of being called home, beyond the clouds and the vast blue sky.

May these thoughts have their proper effect upon our lives here and now.

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