

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## The significance of colours in the Bible: Gold

Today we come to the end of our series on colours in the Bible, and we are going to look at the colour gold. Gold is mentioned in many places in the Bible, and so we are going to try to get an understanding of what we can learn from its Biblical usage. Let's start by considering gold itself and its properties. Gold, as we all know, is a beautiful, soft, yellow-coloured metal. Its colour reminds us of the sun, and indeed, for the ancient alchemists, gold symbolised the sun. According to the Chambers etymological dictionary that I have, our English word "gold" is thought to derive ultimately from a word meaning "yellow." The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology states that there were five different Hebrew words for "gold", each probably denoting gold of different degrees of purity, but that these are all translated by one Greek word in the Septuagint.

Gold has certain properties that make it relatively unique, hence its enduring status as a material of worth and preciousness. I have already mentioned its pleasing yellow colour. This does not easily tarnish, because gold is a noble metal and does not react easily. Most other metals do, as we know. When I was a child, the church we attended in West London had a copper roof. When it was first set up, I expect it looked beautiful, but I always remember it as a green roof, because the surface layer of the copper had oxidised to a green copper oxide. Iron, as we well know, oxidises to form rust. Even silver tarnishes. But gold is pretty unreactive, and remains as it is. As I was reading around to inform myself about gold, I saw a comment that gold, because of its unreactivity, can be mined as the pure metal. Most other metals would be mined as their ores, and would need purifying, but gold can be dug out as the pure metal.

These initial considerations show us that gold would be a good symbol for something of enduring worth and preciousness, and indeed we will see that the Bible does use gold as a symbol for just that. We will look at that in more detail in just a moment. But first, one other property of the metal gold that is important is that it is a relatively soft metal. This means that it is ideal for working into jewellery, artistic objects, and so on. Again, we will see that this property of gold is used in the Bible symbolism. Finally, we know that gold is quite rare - if it was a very common material, it would not be so precious.

So, let's start with the thought that gold is generally considered to be an item of enduring worth and preciousness. Its use in Scripture is usually (but not always) along these lines. Gold is first mentioned early in the Bible, in Genesis 2:10-12: *"Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which skirts the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good. Bdellium and the onyx stone are there."* Gold is thus spoken of as a natural resource of significance, that is, something of worth. The next mention is in Genesis 13, part of the story of Abraham. Genesis 13:1-2 read, *"Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold."* Gold is mentioned together with silver and livestock as commodities that make one rich.

Slightly later on, in Genesis 24, we again come across gold, this time in the story of Abraham's servant who went to find a bride for Isaac. In Genesis 24, Abraham's servant met Rebekah (Genesis 24:10-28), and then her brother Laban (Genesis 24:29-56). I will read Genesis 24:22, Genesis 24:35 and Genesis 24:53, and listen out for the mention of gold. Genesis 24:22: *"So it was, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a **golden** nose ring weighing half a shekel, and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels of **gold**";* Genesis 24:35: *"The LORD has blessed my master greatly, and he has become great; and He has given him flocks and herds, silver and **gold**, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys";* Genesis 24:53: *"Then the servant brought out jewelry of silver, jewelry of **gold**, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother."*

In Genesis 24:22, Genesis 24:35 and Genesis 24:53 we see gold as a precious material, used for making valuable jewellery, and as evidence of riches and material prosperity. The next time we read about gold is in the story of Joseph, in Genesis 41. Here gold is used to symbolise importance and dignity. Pharaoh adorned Joseph with gold after Joseph had explained Pharaoh's dream to him. Genesis 41:42 reads, *"Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph's hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck."*

To sum up so far, we have seen from these initial uses of gold in the first book of the Bible, that gold is considered as a precious material, a part of material riches, used for beautiful jewellery and worn by persons of dignity and importance. This helps us to understand the important symbolism of the tabernacle in Exodus 25 and onwards, to which I want to turn our attention to. The tabernacle, as described in Exodus, was the means by which God would dwell among His people Israel. The set-up, the furnishings and the materials used for the tabernacle speak to us about the character of God, about our approach to Him, and about His approach to us. Hebrews 9 in the New Testament explains to us that the tabernacle and its set up were indeed symbolical of our approach to God - *"the way into the Holiest of All"* as we read in Hebrews 9:8. Gold was an important part of the materials used in the construction of the tabernacle.

Central to the tabernacle, in the section called the Holiest of All, was the ark of God covered with the mercy seat and the cherubim. The ark is described in Exodus 25:10-22, and at the end of that section, that is Exodus 25:22, God says, *"And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel."*

The ark and the mercy seat were where God could meet with the representative of His people, the High Priest. The ark, made of acacia wood and covered with gold, is generally thought of as a type, or symbol, of Christ, since He is the means by which we can approach God. *"For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus"* (1 Timothy 2:5).

It has been suggested that the acacia wood represented His incorruptible manhood, and the overlaying gold His divinity. We have already considered how gold represents worth and value, incorruptibility, riches and dignity. All of these things are true of one Person, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the One who is truly valuable, precious and worthy of supreme dignity. It was fitting that the items of the tabernacle that spoke of Him should be covered in pure gold. They were copies, or representations, of eternal realities, as Hebrews 9:24 tells us: *"For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."*

Another item in the tabernacle that speaks of Christ is the golden lampstand. Exodus 25:31 reads, *"You shall also make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be of hammered work. Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its ornamental knobs, and flowers shall be of one piece."*

Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life"* (John 8:12). The golden lampstand and its lamps gave light in the Holy Place of the tabernacle, and is a fitting symbol of Christ the Light. Once again, we see that it was made of pure gold, symbolising value, purity and incorruption.

We can get a further insight into the use of gold as a symbol in the Old Testament book of Daniel. If you remember the story, towards the end of the history of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, Daniel and his three friends had been taken to Babylon along with many other captives, and they were to serve in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. The king had a dream and he wanted to have it interpreted for him (Daniel 2:3). None of his wise men could do this for him, and the king became very angry, ordering to kill all the wise men (Daniel 2:5-12). Daniel stepped in just in time, and prayed to God for understanding. As a result, Daniel was able to both remind the king of his dream, and provide the interpretation (see Daniel 2:14-49). The dream that the king had was of a strange statue, or image, made of different materials.

Let's read some of the verses in Daniel 2 that describe and explain King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. First, Daniel 2:31-33: *"You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay."* Now Daniel 2:37-39: *"You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all - you are this head of gold. But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth."*

Nebuchadnezzar was what we would call an absolute sovereign. We see this described later in the book of Daniel, where Daniel confronts the later King Belshazzar, at the famous occasion of the writing on the wall. Daniel 5:18-19: *"O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down."* We can see the absolute power that Nebuchadnezzar wielded. He was symbolised in his own dream as a head of gold, because at the time there was no one more powerful than he. Later kingdoms were portrayed as inferior metals to gold - silver, bronze, and iron - because there was a lessening of authority of the sovereign. For

example, remember the incident of Daniel in the lions' den during the reign of Darius the Mede (see Daniel 6:1-28). In this case the king was bound by having signed a decree of the Medes and Persians, and he had been effectively tricked by his officials who wanted to get rid of Daniel (see Daniel 6:1-8). Nebuchadnezzar would have had no such string tying his hands!

I said that Nebuchadnezzar was what we would call an absolute sovereign, but that was only true up to a point. I read Daniel 5:18-19, where Daniel was explaining matters about King Nebuchadnezzar to King Belshazzar, but if we continue with Daniel 5:20-21 we see the following: *"But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him. Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses."*

No one is above the Most High God - He is the only One who can be said to be the absolute sovereign. Nebuchadnezzar was the "head of gold" as far as men and women were concerned in his day, but the true honour of being the head of gold belongs to the Lord Jesus, and we see that in the Song of Solomon 5:10-11: *"My beloved is white and ruddy, Chief among ten thousand. His head is like the finest gold; His locks are wavy, and black as a raven."*

Regarding Nebuchadnezzar, we read, *"Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive"* (Daniel 5:19), but regarding the Lord Jesus, we read in John 6:37-39, *"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day."* He is a Head of gold that we can celebrate!

Now I said at the beginning that gold does not react easily and so is a symbol of incorruptibility, and so it is. However, under certain circumstances, gold can be made to react. If you look up "aqua regia" in Wikipedia, you will see that it is a mixture of nitric acid and hydrochloric acid, and that it can be used to dissolve gold. With that in mind, let's read 1 Peter 1:3-7: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ."*

Gold is certainly precious and stable, but not infinitely so. Peter tells us about our hope - an inheritance that really is incorruptible and will not fade away, unlike gold that does perish. Note that our faith is described as being much more precious than gold. Faith is how we relate to God, how we can access His grace. *"But without faith it is impossible to please Him"* (Hebrews 11:6). No wonder it is described as being more precious than gold.

There is something else in the Bible that is also described as being more precious than gold. 1 Peter 1:18-19 tell us: *"knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."* Once again, gold is spoken of here as something that can be corrupted, whereas our redemption is based on something that will never, ever, lose its value - the precious blood of Christ.

So what have we learned about the use of gold as a symbol in the Bible so far? We have thought about some of the properties of gold, such as its pleasing colour, its stability, its use for objects of value and beauty. Gold often symbolises something or someone of worth, value and dignity, and is a fitting material for Old Testament symbols of Christ, such as the golden ark and the golden lampstand in the tabernacle of Israel. Nebuchadnezzar might have been the head of gold as far as the men and women of his day were concerned, but the true Head of gold is the Lord Jesus. Gold is stable and relatively incorruptible compared to metals such as silver and copper, but even gold can be dissolved. The precious blood of Christ, our means of redemption, is of eternal worth, and our faith that believes this is described as being more precious than gold.

What does all this mean for us practically? We have some encouragements in the New Testament. Let's read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:11-14: *"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward."*

We are encouraged to build on the foundation with gold, silver and precious stones - in other words, to do things that will be of lasting value and worth, in other words, things done for and by the power of the Lord Jesus.

In his second letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy 2:20-21, Paul writes, "*But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.*" Here the exhortation is to be living a holy life, such that the Master can use us, as a worthy vessel like one made of silver or gold.

Thus a consideration of gold as it used in the Bible has practical value

1. It helps us to focus on what is truly valuable, that is the Lord Jesus and His work of redemption, and
2. It helps us to desire to lead worthwhile lives in thankfulness to Him, to be a vessel of gold and to be building with gold.

Perhaps we find we lack this? I certainly do - and often so! In that case, let us resort to the Lord Jesus Himself as He writes to the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:18: "*I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.*" He always provides what we lack!

I trust that we will have been encouraged as we have considered the value of our Lord Jesus over these 20 minutes or so. It is good that we know such a wonderful Person!

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