

Red Flags in Scripture

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:7-9).

Anyone who has ever read these words almost certainly knows that they are not to be taken literally. Jesus was not a literal, physical door. Still, what He said is true: it’s simply a metaphor. He is not a door but His use or function is that of a door, to give access to someone seeking entrance – in this case either to the protection of a spiritually safe environment or, on the other hand, to a place of nourishment and growth. The Lord provides this access because He teaches us the truth with infinite love; He shows us how to get what we need for spiritual life.

Pretty simple, right? The amazing thing about this is that it’s just one example of the hundreds and thousands of metaphors and *correspondences* used throughout the Scriptures, many of which appear so much like literal facts that it can be hard to tell them apart. Did Noah literally build an ark 300 cubits (450 feet) long and 50 cubits (75 feet) wide that held at least one if not seven pairs of every creature on the face of the earth? Did the flood literally cover the whole earth? Many people seem to believe so, but the simple truth is that such things are not physically possible, any more than it is possible for the sun to “stand still” over Aijalon, as it is written in Joshua, or for a city to be made of solid gold, as it is written in Revelation, not to mention 12,000 furlongs high and square (that’s 1500 miles, at least 1200 miles beyond the stratosphere). *And yet the stories are true because they describe real, spiritual situations in metaphorical terms.*

The flood, specifically, was (and is) an inundation of falsity that threatened (and still threatens) the spiritual life of the human race. In order to provide for our salvation the Lord instructed those who were willing to “build” a place of refuge from this flood and store up within it all that was good and useful. Now this refuge is spiritual, not material. It is that “place” in the human mind that is secure in the knowledge of the truths that resist such falsities, and rise above them. The animals are all the affections that contribute to our spiritual lives – some clean and some unclean – and it is not only curious but deeply significant that when the flood recedes and the animals leave the ark *the unclean animals are not mentioned*. Only the good ones are preserved from destruction, representing the good affections preserved in us by taking refuge in the truth despite the deluge of falsity that is otherwise so overwhelming.

Think of an illustration in your life. Some people (or the voices in your own head) tell you that your life really has been pretty much a failure. You’ve tried hard but made a lot of mistakes, you don’t seem to have much to show for all your effort, and your impact on the world has been minimal at best. Not only that but you’ve become dissatisfied with what you do have and, comparing yourself to others, you’re beginning to feel foolish and useless. Now the problem with falsity is that it’s a perversion of the truth. If there weren’t *some* truth in it no one would pay any attention to it at all. So, yes, it’s true that you’re not perfect; it’s true that you have made and continue to make mistakes; and it’s true that your impact on the world may be small and the

stuff you have isn't very important. But these are not the most important things in life. *You need the Lord's help to rise above all this.* You need to build an ark and take refuge in it until the temptations subside. You need to remember and focus on the bigger, more important truths that assure you of the Lord's Divine Providence, the priority of the spiritual over the natural, your ability to learn from your mistakes, and so on. You need to remember that you are not the judge of your own life any more than others are, but the Lord, who alone sees everything in its proper perspective, and He will judge according to the desires of your heart. If you do this the Lord will "preserve your life from destruction and crown you with loving kindness and tender mercies."

The holy city in Revelation is just another example of the symbolism in Scripture – as, in fact, is just about everything in the book of Revelation! A city of pure gold 1500 miles high? No way! It would collapse of its own weight if we were talking about natural gold, which is both heavy and soft. Besides, no one could breath above around 12,000 feet. But the vision gives us a true picture of spiritual life in heaven and on earth when we understand that gold *corresponds* to the goodness of love. The *structure* of the city is important, too, being four-square and with all the other amazing features of its form, as these aspects represent the orderly composition of truths in the rational mind that provide the framework, you might even say the architecture of thought that gives expression to the essential love.

The Word, as we know, is full of parables – not just in the New Testament but in the Prophets, the Psalms, and many of the historical books. Some of them are hopeful and reassuring, others are quite crude, harsh and devastating. Not everyone can see the real meaning of the parables but everyone knows they mean *something* beyond the mere literal sense. Still, it's not just the obvious parables that have symbolic meaning, it's the whole narrative from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation that has it, and unless we recognize this fact we are going to encounter endless problems with the logic and relevance of what is written there.

For example, the book of Leviticus takes us through an incredible catalog of laws and statutes covering everything from incest to how a man's beard should be trimmed, from what he can or can't eat to the particular manner in which animal sacrifices must be made. But who, today, offers animal sacrifices, anyway, and why should we care about the trimming of a person's beard? Even the dietary laws have little or no practical relevance today, even though they may have helped prevent disease in Biblical times. It is just this sort of thing that has encouraged many in our culture to believe that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, even though the Scriptures roundly condemn it: after all, if those other regulations are no longer relevant, this one probably isn't relevant anymore either. In effect, they say, we know better now and we can accept it.

Well, no, not really – because the natural, physical laws and statutes all represent internal, spiritual laws that are every bit as relevant today as they were when they were written, we just have to sort out what they really mean and see how they apply to our lives.

In the case of homosexuality, apart from the fact that it's a natural aberration from the norm, it's an intimate relationship between two of the same kind, or as we say today, the same gender. As such it represents a deep love and conjunction between two of the *same* spiritual quality or character, whereas a true marriage is supposed to be the union of two who are of different but complementary characters so that each can provide an approach to life that the other lacks, and

form a more balanced whole. Of course there is nothing wrong with close friendships between men, or between women, but one reason these friendships are so pleasant and reassuring is that they are built on the same spiritual platform so that what is internal with each is simply reinforced in the other. And that's fine as far as it goes. But a sexual relationship builds on complementary *differences*, and challenges each of the parties to acknowledge their need for fulfillment in the *other*, balancing their approach to life. We could go on at length, but the real point here is just to show that even the most obscure and seemingly outdated laws in the Old Testament have real power and significance when understood on a deeper level, symbolically.

It's not for nothing that this sermon today is titled "Red Flags in Scripture," since a red flag is usually a sign of some danger. The danger, however, is not in the Scripture, it's in *not seeing the signs* because that is when we get carried away in misunderstanding. And misunderstanding can be really hurtful. This is why these flags are everywhere in Scripture, warning us to look deeper, to be careful, to watch our steps, because the literal problems not only challenge us intellectually, they confirm and illustrate the deeper truths to which they point. You see, the human mind does not do well with abstractions unless they can be illustrated and contained in the imagery of the senses. Sure, we can memorize a name or a formula without really understanding it, but it's always easier to do if it's associated with some physical experience or mental picture. That's why we have the adventures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, the Judges and so on. If you can remember the story, no matter how strange (and sometimes precisely because it IS strange), you can remember the meaning, too, and then you have something you can use in your daily life.

But, you may ask, why should we have to assume this deeper meaning in the histories? What if they are, in fact, nothing more than history, biased and embellished as history always is by the perspectives of the ones writing it? Sure, there are parables and metaphors IN it, but why not accept it as the dated, culturally limited record of events that it purports to be? – The answer is that this is NOT what it purports to be, nor was history in these ancient times ever written in the same way that we try to write it today, namely as a pure chronology of facts. Instead, for example, one section of a given book will document all sorts of details that took place in a very short span of time – a day, a week, or a few years, but then skip over a period of hundreds of years as if nothing happened at all. Varying accounts of the same incident also hint of meaning or intentions that are deeper than the literal sense of the story. And while we do not doubt the occurrence of miracles, having experienced things in our own lives that seem quite miraculous, the way some of these things are described is so preposterous that they can ONLY mean something different than they seems to mean. Again, the sun cannot stand still at any time or the universe as we know it would collapse. And how could Jonah *breathe* in the belly of a great fish for three days and nights, assuming he could have been swallowed whole in the first place? The point of the story, that is to say, the truth of it, is not in the literal sense, it's in the spiritual sense – where the spiritual sun is always constant and the belly of a great fish is the interior knowledge or perception of an important truth.

But take another curious and more mundane example from Exodus: when Moses crossed the Red Sea on his way out of Egypt, it is said that there were 600,000 men on foot, not counting women and children, as well as "flocks and herds (and) a great deal of livestock" (Ex. 12). Given that they had been persecuted by the Egyptians for the number of children they were having, this account suggests up to two million people altogether, who, marching ten abreast, could have

formed a line 150 miles long! To quote one of my colleagues in the ministry, “When the Israelites camped they would have been the largest city in the ancient world. Imperial Rome at its height was about 1 million people, according to Wikipedia, and ancient Babylon was never bigger than 500,000. As a slave population in Egypt they would have been more numerous than the slave population of the United States in 1860, an incredible number to have originated from one family in only 400 years.”

But the Writings for the New Church tell us that the real significance of numbers in Scripture is in the primary *factors*, not the literal total. Also, when definite numbers appear, such as “the word ‘thousand’ when used in prophetic parts, especially when these are linked together as historical descriptions, [it] appears to mean a thousand. But in fact it means people who are many or countless – an unspecified number” (AC 2575). So 6, 60, 600 and 600,000 all mean much the same things but with varying degrees of emphasis or intensity. This figure, surely then, is just another yellow flag warning us to dig deeper and see what the story is really all about.

We are indeed fortunate in this church to have a revelation of the spiritual sense of substantial portions of the Old and New Testaments. With this revelation if we read carefully and maintain a genuine desire to see the truth we can be pretty confident that it will be opened up to us. On the other hand there’s much that is not directly explained, and yet the teaching is that every bit of it exists for the sake of the spiritual sense and powerfully expresses that sense. What can we do with this knowledge? How can or should it affect us?

Well, first of all, it should inspire us to be deeply respectful of every word, even to be wary of the translations we read, lest we lose some of the significance of peculiar terms and idioms. As well, it should motivate us to reflect deeply whenever we read, to see if we can see and understand at least a little of the deeper meaning even when it is not explained for us. This is not as difficult as it seems, since we read, all we really need is some basic knowledge of the genuine truths in the Word, a basic understanding of correspondences, and enlightenment from the Lord, which is granted in so far as we shun evils as sins against Him (see SS 55-56 & de Verbo 21).

But most of all it should reassure us about the content of the Word, its holiness, its power and its *credibility*. *Of course* it doesn’t make sense in every story and verse! It’s not meant to! The literal sense is written – selectively and very creatively – in order to *contain* the internal sense so that we have an interesting and memorable story line to remind us of the deeper meaning that relates to our own lives. This, therefore, is not only the answer to the critics but the challenge to ourselves – that we use it as it is intended, searching out that meaning as best we can and putting it to work in our personal lives, which of course means that we have to read it, and learn it, and be conversant in it, and then think deeply in self-examination about it.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 13:selections up to verse 34
Children’s talk on the hidden beauty of the Word

Psalm 78: 1-8

True Christian Religion #231 or de Verbo #21