

SYMBOLIC NUMBERS

The Bible uses numbers symbolically. No scripture says a number is symbolic, but they are used in such a way to indicate there is an implication beyond its literal meaning. When studying the Bible, one sees that seven is a number of completion and perfection. A look at several scriptures will show this to be true. Genesis 29:18; 41:2, 18; 50:10; Exodus 12:15; 25:37; Leviticus 4:6; 26:24; Numbers 23:1; Deuteronomy 28:7; Joshua 6:4; Ruth 4:15; Psalm 119:164; Proverbs 24:16; 26:16; Zechariah 4:2; Matthew 12:45; Acts 6:3; Revelation 1:4.

Other numbers are used symbolically. Three is often related to the Trinity: Numbers 6:24-27; Isaiah 6:3; Matthew 28:19; II Corinthians 13:14; Revelation 4:8. Four is related to the earth: Jeremiah 49:36; Ezekiel 37:9; Isaiah 11:12; Luke 13:29; Revelation 7:1. Twelve is related to government and groups of God's people: Genesis 49:28; Exodus 28:21; Joshua 4:9; Matthew 10:1; Revelation 21:12. Forty is the number of testing: Genesis 7:4; Exodus 24:18; Numbers 14:34; Deuteronomy 8:1-5; Matthew 4:2. Other numbers could be mentioned, but these serve as obvious illustrations of the symbolic use of numbers.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING SYMBOLS

1. Study the way the Bible interprets in regards to symbols. Look for the times that the Bible interprets its own symbols. Many times the interpretations are clear. Revelation 1:19 interprets the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands. I Peter 5:8 interprets the meaning of the roaring lion. However, not all symbols are interpreted. One good idea is to use a concordance to look up as many references as possible on a certain color, material, or object to see if there is a pattern.
2. When studying natural objects, note their natural qualities. Lamb suggests meekness; salt speaks of preservation (as well as other things). Try to determine the quality that the author is emphasizing.
3. Always study the context. Many times the symbol will be explained, especially in the writings of the prophets.
4. Avoid guessing and attaching arbitrary meanings that do not come from Scripture. Don't be dogmatic. Don't be clever. The meanings of symbols are determined by usage over long periods of time. Read your Bible as much as you can. Study it carefully, and take notes of what you find.

Tomorrow we will talk about types.