

Some of Paul's Many Metaphors

METAPHOR	WHAT IT REPRESENTS	REFERENCE
From Country Life		
Cattle kicking against the goad	~ Paul's own conversion experience, denying an education in the gospel	Acts 26:14
The flock	~ The church	Acts 20:17-35
Shepherds	~ Elders of the church	Acts 20:17-35
The olive tree	~ Israel, both Jew and Gentile	Rom 11:16-24
A wild olive tree	~ From whence Gentiles came	Rom 11:24
Grafting	~ Gentiles, against their nature, brought into the realm of God and the Jews	Rom 11:24



Sheep on lintel from an early church in Constantinople.

The marriage contract	~ Christ and the church	Eph 5:27
Betrothal	~ A pledge to Christ	2Cor 11:2
One husband	~ Jesus Christ	2Cor 11:2
Bridegroom	~ Jesus Christ	2Cor 11:3
Friend of the bride	~ Paul, presenting the Christians to Christ pure and righteous	Rev 19:7
The father/parent	~ Paul the parent of his converts	1Cor 4:15; 2Cor 12:14; Phlmn 10
Children	~ Paul's new converts	1Cor 4:15; 2Cor 12:14; Phlmn 10
The human body	~ Church	1Cor 12
Head	~ Christ	Eph 4:15-16; Col 2:19
Veil, woman being veiled	~ Jews not seeing beyond the Old Testament to understand Christ to be the fulfillment of it	2Cor 3:12-18; 4:3-6

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From the Legal Sphere

Advocate (legal adviser)	~	The Lord, the one who pleads our cause	2Tm 4:17
Justification	~	God forgives sinners by the grace of Jesus Christ	Rom 4:25; 5:18
Judge	~	God and Jesus Christ	Rom 14:10; 2Cor 5:10
Those whom [the judge] summoned [to] the judgment seat	~	All people will be judged of Jesus Christ God's executor in giving judgment	Rom 14:10; 2Cor 5:10
A last will and testament	~	God's promises which cannot be annulled or amended	Gal 3:15
Citizenship, civic pride	~	Loyalty Christians should have to Christ (not only to Rome); be as citizens of heaven	Phlp 1:27; 3:20
Fellow citizens	~	Gentiles as fellow saints	Eph 2:12, 19
An ambassador	~	Paul in his ministry	2Cor 5:20; Eph 6:20



Courtroom in Priene near Ephesus.

From Slavery and Freedom

Stewards, agents	~	Church leaders	1Cor 4:1; Titus 1:7
Slavery	~	Human condition, humans innately in service to sin	Rom 6:6, 16, 17, 20
Branding, "the marks of Jesus"	~	Paul bearing the stigmata of Jesus, demonstrating his devotion	Gal 6:17
Redemption of a slave	~	Christ's blood bought the Christians freedom	Eph 1:7
Purchase of slaves by a new master: "You were bought at a price"	~	Believers being purchased (converted) from one master (sin) to another (God) at the price of Christ's crucifixion	1Cor 6:20; 7:23
A ransom	~	Jesus Christ's atonement	1Tm 2:6

From the World of Manufacturing and Marketing

A workman/mason	~	Timothy “cutting” the word of truth to the required dimensions	2Tm 2:15
Wage	~	What God will “pay” the teacher according to his works	Rom 4:4; 1Cor 3:8, 14; 9:17–18
Fellow worker/partner	~	Titus in his co-ministry with Paul to the Corinthian church	2Cor 8:23
A potter	~	God	Rom 9:21
Peddlers (of God’s word)	~	Insincere teachers who water down the gospel, what Paul professes he and his colleagues are not	2Cor 2:17
A guarantee	~	God’s promise that we belong to Christ	2Cor 1:21–22
Entered into an account	~	The believer is credited to Christ	2Cor 1:21–22
A seal (“it is he who has sealed us”)	~	God’s sign of ownership	2Cor 1:21–22
An installment	~	God has put his Spirit in our hearts	2Cor 1:22
Debtors	~	Those who are saved by grace who still owe it to God to live their lives righteously	Rom 8:12
Immeasurable riches	~	Spiritual reward for being a follower of Christ	Eph 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16
Deposit	~	Paul’s life, dedicated to Christ and entrusted to God	2Tm 1:12



Jars from ancient Israel.

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From the World of Travel

Paul's letter of recommendation	~	Corinthians (Paul's converts in Corinth could vouch for him as their teacher)	2Cor 3:1-3
Coming out to meet an official visitor	~	Coming up to meet Christ at his coming	2Cor 7:6-7; 1Th 4:17
Helmsmanship	~	Leadership in the church as a gift of the Spirit	1Cor 12:28
To furl or reef a sail	~	Paul assuring the Ephesian elders that he holds back none of the counsels of God	Acts 20:20
Trim his sails	~	Peter separating himself from the Jewish Christians	Gal 2:12
Departure	~	Death	2Tm 4:6
Haven for ships	~	Access to God and God's grace through Christ	Rom 5:2; Eph 2:18; 3:12
Tossed to and fro by the waves (whirled) about by every wind	~	The theological fad-following Ephesians	Eph 4:14
Shipwreck (of their faith)	~	Certain Ephesians rejecting their faith in Christ; Paul considered them no longer Christian	2Cor 11:25
Drowning in a "sea" of destruction	~	Spiritual danger of loving money more than Jesus Christ	1Tm 6:9
Walking	~	Christian life	Rom 5:7; 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:15; 1Cor 3:3; 2Cor 4:2; 5:7; 10:2-3; Gal 5:16; Eph 2:1-2; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15; Col 1:10; 3:5-7; 4:5; 1Th 2:12; 4:12; 2Th 3:6,11
Walk the straight line	~	Follow the "road" Christ has set for us	Gal 2:14
The road blocked	~	Satan hindering Paul in his travels (specifically in his return to the Macedonian capital)	1Th 2:18
Clear the way	~	Hope that God instills to encourage progress toward Christ	1Th 3:11; 2Th 3:5



Oarsman on a Greek sailing vessel.

From Warfare and Soldiering

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Front liner	~ Paul as the leader of the Nazarenes	Acts 24:5
In proper battle array	~ Worshiping in a decent and orderly manner	1Cor 14:40
Ranks	~ Lines of believers, the first line being Christ in his singular glory	1Cor 15:23, 52
Keep in step (with the Spirit)	~ Enjoining Christian "soldiers" to set a pace towards likeness to Christ	Gal 5:25
Battles	~ Trials Paul faced when he returned to Macedonia	2Cor 7:5
At war	~ Skirmishes between the flesh and the Spirit	Rom 7:23
Enemy	~ Flesh	Rom 8:5–9
A prisoner of war	~ He who does not accept the Savior and submits to the flesh	Rom 7:7–25
Weapons of warfare	~ God's power	2Cor 10:3–6
Strongholds	~ Arguments against the Gospel	2Cor 10:4
Prisoner (of Christ)	~ Paul	Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2Tm 1:8; Phlmn 1, 9
Armor of light	~ Jesus Christ	Rom 13:11–13
Fiery Darts	~ Burning personal attacks	Eph 6:16
The full armor	~ God's protection	Eph 6:10–18
Belt	~ Protection	Eph 6:14
Breastplate	~ Virtue of righteousness	Eph 6:14
Sandals	~ Preparedness or readiness of the gospel of peace	Eph 6:15
Shield	~ Faith, trust in God	Eph 6:16
Helmet	~ Assurance of salvation	Eph 6:17
Sword	~ Word of God	Eph 6: 17
Fellow soldiers	~ Epaphroditus and Archippus	Phlp 2:25; Phlmn 2
A good soldier (of Jesus Christ)	~ Timothy	2Tm 2:3



Armor on gladiators from Ephesus.



Race course in Aphrodesias.

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From Public Shows and Sporting Events

Lead in triumph	~	Christ as the triumphator (the head of a victory procession), leading the apostles in his train behind him	2Cor 2:14
Chariot or foot race	~	Life in the church, the believer pressing forward, never back, with the goal to know Christ by enduring to the end	Phlp 3:13–14
Charioteer's prize	~	To be like Christ	Phlp 3:14
A spectacle	~	The apostles	1Cor 4:9
Fighting wild beasts	~	Costliness of Christian service	1Cor 15:32



Stadion at Delphi.

METAPHOR		WHAT IT REPRESENTS	REFERENCE
From Village or City Life			
Nighttime darkness in narrow streets	~	Children of the world in this age	1Cor 4:5; 1Th 5:5
Light	~	Children of God	1Cor 4:5; 1Th 5:5
A thief in the night	~	Jesus' return	1Th 5:4
A doorway	~	God opening the gospel to the Gentiles	Acts 14:27
An entrance	~	Opening of Macedonia to the gospel	1Th 1:9; 2:1
Scum	~	Apostles in the sight of the world	1Cor 4:13
Offscouring, filth	~	Apostles in the sight of the world	1Cor 4:13
Refuse, dung, garbage	~	Things of the world	Phlp 3:8
Do not quench the fire of the Spirit	~	Gifts of the Spirit	1Th 5:19
The foundation platform of a building	~	Jesus Christ	1Cor 3:10–15
Builders and their materials	~	Teachers and teaching	1Cor 3:10–15
Buildings	~	Those who are taught	1Cor 3:10–15
Fine structures	~	Likeness to Christ	1Cor 3:10–15
Fire sweeping through wooden buildings	~	Second coming of Christ	1Cor 3:10–15
Expert builder	~	Paul	1Cor 3:10
Foundations laid	~	Having Christ dwell in the hearts of the believers	Eph 3:17
Built on the foundation	~	Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the cornerstone	Eph 2:20–21
Cornerstone	~	Jesus Christ	Eph 2:20
The (builder's) mark	~	"The Lord knows those who are his"; God's seal	1Cor 9:2; 2Tm 2:19
Fitting together in the construction of the temple	~	Integration of the Jews and Gentiles	Eph 2:21; 4:16
Tents, tabernacles	~	Our spiritually nomadic state on earth	2Cor 5:1–5
House	~	Solidarity from God, in heaven	2Cor 5:1–5
Utensils, vessels	~	Members in God's household	2Tm 2:20

Some of Paul's Many Metaphors

Explanation

The letters of Paul are difficult to understand, for many reasons. Besides his convoluted sentence structures and huge vocabulary (see chart 11-10), Paul loved to use metaphors. This is fine for people who know the surrounding culture from which Paul drew those metaphors. But for modern readers, many of these images require clarification. Chart 15-12 displays and explains Paul's main metaphors, drawn from the worlds of city, country, and family life; law, slavery, and freedom; manufacturing, marketing, and travel; warfare, sports, and entertainment. By understanding the Greek cultural worlds of Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, and the other cities where Paul worked, modern readers can better appreciate the vivid and beautiful images invoked and evoked by his writings.

Reference

Extracted from David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).