



Stained-glass windows from three cathedrals in France: Chartres (center, with exterior view top right); Bourges (left); and Sens (opposite page). In each window, the parable of the good Samaritan is depicted together with representations of the plan of salvation.

The Good Samaritan

Forgotten Symbols



BY JOHN W. WELCH

Brigham Young University professor,
J. Reuben Clark Law School, and
editor in chief of *BYU Studies*

One of the most influential stories told by Jesus Christ is the parable of the good Samaritan. Jesus recounted this parable to a man who had asked, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded by asking, “What is written in the law?”

The man answered, referring to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself.”

When Jesus promised, “This do, and thou shalt live,” the man challengingly replied, “And who is my neighbour?” In answer to this man’s questions, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. (See Luke 10:25–35.)

Deeper Levels of Meaning

The Savior spoke often in parables because each has a deeper meaning understood only by those who have “ears to hear” (Matthew 13:9). The Prophet Joseph Smith affirmed that unbelievers did not understand the Savior’s parables. “Yet unto His disciples [the Lord] expounded [the parables] plainly,” and we can understand the parables, taught the Prophet, “if we will but open our eyes, and read with candor.”¹ Knowing this principle invites reflection on the symbolic message of the good Samaritan. In light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, this mas-

terful story brilliantly encapsulates the plan of salvation in ways few modern readers may have noticed.

This parable’s content is clearly practical and dramatic in its obvious meaning, but a time-honored Christian tradition also saw the parable as an impressive allegory of the Fall

This parable can be viewed as an impressive allegory of the Fall and Redemption of mankind.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN W. WELCH, EXCEPT AS NOTED. STAIN GLASS IMAGES COURTESY OF CL. MUSÉES DE SENS (FRANCE), E. BERRY (GENERAL VIEW), AND J. P. ELE (DETAILS); PHOTOGRAPHS OF BACKGROUND AND BANDAGES BY MATTHEW REIER

Jesus depicts the person as going down not from any ordinary place but from Jerusalem. Because of the sanctity of the holy temple-city, early Christians readily saw in this element the idea that this person had come down from the presence of God.



and Redemption of mankind. This early Christian understanding of the good Samaritan is depicted in a famous eleventh-century cathedral in Chartres, France. One of its beautiful stained-glass windows portrays the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden at the top of the window, and, in parallel, the parable of the good Samaritan at the bottom. This illustrates “a symbolic interpretation of Christ’s parable that was popular in the Middle Ages.”² Seeing this window led me to wonder: what does the Fall of Adam and Eve have to do with the parable of the good Samaritan?

I soon discovered the answer.³ The roots of this allegorical interpretation reach deep into early Christianity. In the second century A.D., Irenaeus in France and Clement of Alexandria both saw the good Samaritan as symbolizing Christ Himself saving the fallen

victim, wounded with sin. A few years later, Clement’s pupil Origen stated that this interpretation came down to him from earlier Christians, who had described the allegory as follows:

“The man who was going down is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord’s body, the [inn], which accepts all who wish to enter, is the Church. . . . The manager of the [inn] is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior’s second coming.”⁴

This allegorical reading was taught not only by ancient followers of Jesus, but it was virtually universal throughout early Christianity, being advocated by Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen, and in the fourth and fifth centuries by Chrysostom in Constantinople, Ambrose in Milan, and Augustine in North Africa. This interpretation is found most completely in two other medieval stained-glass windows, in the French cathedrals at Bourges and Sens.

A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation

Readers gain much by pondering the scriptures, especially as these writings testify of Jesus Christ (see John 5:39). The parable of the good Samaritan testifies of Christ. It teaches of the plan of salvation, the Savior’s atoning love, and our journey toward inheriting eternal life. It can be read as a story not only about a man who went down from

Jerusalem to Jericho, but also about all who come down from the presence of God to live on earth. This meaning becomes most visible in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ restored through His latter-day prophets.

Let us examine the story, starting in Luke 10:30.

“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves . . .”

A certain man. Early Christians compared this man to Adam. This connection may have been more obvious in ancient languages than in modern translations. In Hebrew, the word *adam* means “man, mankind,” “the plural of men,” as well as “Adam” as a proper name.⁵ Thus, Clement of Alexandria rightly saw the victim in this allegory as representing “all of us.” Indeed, we all have come down as Adams and Eves, subject to the risks and vicissitudes of mortality: “For as in Adam all die . . .” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Went down. The early Christian writer Chrysostom saw in this phrase the descent of Adam from the garden into this world—from glory to the mundane, from immortality to mortality. The story in Luke 10 implies that the man went down intentionally, knowing the risks that would be involved in the journey. No one forced him to go down to Jericho. He apparently felt that the journey was worth the well-known risks of such travel on the poorly maintained roads in Jesus’s day.⁶

From Jerusalem. Jesus depicts the person as going down not from any ordinary place but from Jerusalem. Because of the sanctity of the holy temple-city, early Christians readily saw in this element the idea that this person had come down from the presence of God.

To Jericho. Jericho was readily identified with this world. At more than 825 feet (250 m) below sea level, Jericho is the lowest city on earth. Its mild winter climate made it a hedonistic resort area where Herod had built a

sumptuous vacation palace. Yet one should note that the traveler in the parable had not yet arrived in Jericho when the robbers attacked. That person was on the steep way down to Jericho, but he had not yet reached bottom.

Fell. It is easy to see here an allusion to the fallen mortal state and to the plight of individual sinfulness: “Yea, all are fallen and are lost” (Alma 34:9).

Among thieves. The early Christian writers variously saw the thieves (or robbers) as the devil and his satanic forces, evil spirits, or false teachers. The Greek word for “robbers” used by Luke implies that these thieves were not casual operators. The traveler was assailed by a band of pernicious highwaymen in a scheming, organized society that acted with deliberate and concerted intent.

“. . . which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.”

Stripped him of his raiment. Early Christians sensed that Jesus spoke of something important here. Origen and Augustine saw the loss of the traveler’s garment as a symbol for mankind’s loss of immortality and incorruptibility. Chrysostom spoke of the loss of “his robe of immortality” or “robe of obedience.” Ambrose spoke of the traveler being “stripped of the covering of spiritual grace which we [all] received [from God].”

The attackers apparently wanted the traveler’s clothing, for no mention is made of any wealth or commodities he might be carrying. For some reason, the robbers seem interested in his garment, something brought down from

the holy place and something they envy and want to take away.

Wounded. This term was seen as a similitude of the pains of life, travails of the soul, and afflictions due to diverse sins and vices. Indeed, the enemies of the soul leave wounds (see Jacob 2:8–9). Transgression has real effects (see Alma 41:10).



Early Christian writers Irenaeus (above), Clement (above, right), and Ambrose (right).



Half dead. The robbers departed, leaving the person precisely “half dead.” We may see in this detail an allusion to the first and second deaths. The person had fallen, had become subject to sin, and had suffered the first death, becoming mortal. But the second death, the permanent separation from God, could still be averted (see Alma 12:32–36).

“And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.”

By chance. The arrival of the Jewish priest was “by chance,” not the result of a conscious search. His presence there was not by anyone’s plan.

A certain priest . . . and likewise a Levite. The early Christian commentators all saw the priest as symbolizing the law of Moses. In their minds the problem was not that bearers of the Old Testament priesthood did not want to help fallen man, but that the law of Moses did not have the power to save him. Indeed, the law of Moses was only a type and shadow of the Atonement that was yet to come, not its full efficacy (see Mosiah 3:15–17).

The Levite was seen as representing the Old Testament prophets, whose words the Lord came to fulfill (see Matthew 5:17; 3 Nephi 15:2–5). A lesser class of priests, the Levites did chores in the temple. At least this Levite came close to helping; he “came” and saw. He may have wanted to help, but perhaps he viewed himself as too lowly to help; he also lacked the power to save the dying person.

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine . . .”

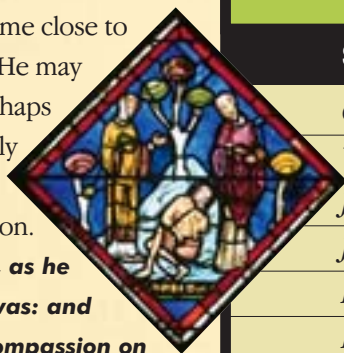
Samaritan. The early Christian writers unanimously saw the good Samaritan as a

representation of Christ. Chrysostom suggests that a Samaritan is an apt depiction of Christ because “as a Samaritan is not from Judea, so Christ is not of this world.”

Jesus’s audience in Jerusalem may well have recognized here a reference by the Savior to Himself. Some Jews in Jerusalem rejected Jesus with the insult, “Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan?” (John 8:48). Because Nazareth is across the valley north of Samaria, these two locations could easily be lumped together. And just as the Samaritans were viewed as the least of all humanity, so it was prophesied that the Messiah would be “despised and rejected of men” and “esteemed not” (see Isaiah 53:3).

As he journeyed. It would appear that the Samaritan (representing Christ) was purposely looking for people in need of help. The text does not say that he arrived by happenstance. Origen noted that “he went down intending to rescue and care for the dying man.” The Savior came purposefully with oil and bandages “to bring redemption unto the world” (3 Nephi 9:21).

Compassion. This important word speaks of the pure love of Christ. The Greek word says that the Samaritan’s bowels were moved with deep, inner sympathy. This word is used in the New Testament only when authors wish to describe God’s divine emotions of mercy. It appears



SYMBOLS FROM THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Symbol	An Early Christian Interpretation
<i>Good Samaritan</i>	<i>Jesus Christ</i>
<i>Victim</i>	<i>Man wounded with sin</i>
<i>Jerusalem</i>	<i>Paradise</i>
<i>Jericho</i>	<i>World</i>
<i>Priest</i>	<i>Law of Moses</i>
<i>Levite</i>	<i>Prophets</i>
<i>Beast</i>	<i>Christ’s body</i>
<i>Inn</i>	<i>Church</i>
<i>Manager of the inn</i>	<i>Head of the Church</i>

prominently in the parables of the unmerciful servant, in which the Lord (representing God) “was moved with compassion” (Matthew 18:27), and of the prodigal son, in which the father (again representing God) saw his son returning and “had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). Likewise, the Samaritan represents the divinely compassionate Christ, who suffered so “that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12).

Bound up his wounds. Some early Christians said that the bandages represented love, faith, and hope, “ligatures of salvation which cannot be undone.” Others saw the bands as Christ’s teachings, which bind us to righteousness. Latter-day Saints would add that the rescued person is bound to the Lord through covenants (see D&C 35:24; 43:9).

Oil. An olive oil lotion would have been very soothing. While most of the early Christian writers saw here a symbol of Christ’s words of consolation, Chrysostom saw this as a “holy anointing”—which may refer to several priesthood ordinances, the healing of the sick (see James 5:14), the gift of the Holy Ghost (often symbolized by olive oil), or the anointing of a king or a queen.

Wine. The Samaritan also poured wine onto the open wound to cleanse it. Late Christian writers saw this wine as the word of God—something that stings—but the earlier Christian interpretation associated the wine with the blood of Christ, symbolized by the sacrament (see Matthew 26:27–29; 3 Nephi 18:8–11). This wine, the atoning blood, washes away sin and purifies the soul, allowing God’s Spirit to be with us. In addition to



rendering physical help, a truly good Samaritan administers the saving principles and ordinances of the gospel as well. The atoning wine may sting at first, but its effects soon bring healing peace.

“. . . and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”

Set him on his own beast. Christ, fulfilling prophecy, bears our infirmities (see Isaiah 53:4; Alma 7:11). The Samaritan’s beast was thought to symbolize Christ’s body. Being placed on his beast is to believe that God became flesh, bore our sins, and suffered for us.

Inn. For the early Christians this element readily symbolized the Church. An “inn” was “a public house open to all.” A public shelter is comparable to the Church of Christ in several ways. A wayside inn is not the heavenly destination but a necessary aid in helping travelers reach their eternal home.

For some reason, the robbers seem interested in the traveler’s garment, something brought down from the holy place and something they envy and want to take away.

Seeing the parable in the light of the gospel invites readers to identify with virtually every character in the story.



Took care of him. The Samaritan stayed with the injured person and cared for him personally the first night. He did not turn the injured person over too quickly to the innkeeper but stayed with him through the dark hours. As Origen commented, Jesus cares for the wounded “not only during the day, but also at night. He devotes all his attention and activity to him.”

“And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.”

On the morrow. Early commentators saw here the idea that Jesus would rise on Resurrection morning. Christ ministered in person to His disciples for a short time.

After His Ascension, He left the traveler to be cared for by the Church.

The host. Accordingly, early commentators saw the host, or innkeeper, as Paul or the other Apostles and their successors. If the inn refers to the Church in general, however, the innkeeper and his staff can represent all Church leaders and workers who are entrusted by the Lord to nurture and care for any rescued soul who seeks healing.

When I come again. The Christ-figure openly promises to come again, a ready allusion to the Second Coming of Christ. The Greek word translated “to come again” appears only one other time in the New Testament, in Luke 19:15, referring to the parable of the Lord who would return to judge what the people had done with the money they had been given. That linkage markedly strengthens this allusion to the Second Coming.

Repay or reward. Finally, the innkeeper is promised that all his costs will be covered: “I will reward you for whatsoever you expend.” Perhaps more than any other element in the story, this promise—in effect giving the innkeeper a blank check—has troubled modern commentators who understand this story simply as a real-life event. Who in his right mind would make such an open-ended commitment to a strange innkeeper? But when the story is understood allegorically, this promise makes sense, for the Samaritan (Christ) and his innkeeper already know and trust each other before this promise is given.

An Eternal Imperative

Because of our difficulty in comprehending His infinite nature and divine fulness,

God speaks to us in similitudes (see Moses 5:7). Symbols draw our finite minds to sacred truths that are embedded in the mystery of Christ's incomparable gospel, and an allegorical understanding of the parable of the good Samaritan adds eternal perspectives to its moral imperatives.

In His parables, Jesus taught the essentials of the Father's plan of salvation. As a type and shadow of this plan, the good Samaritan places our deeds of neighborly kindness here in

mortality within the eternal context of where we have come down from, how we have fallen into our present plight, and how the binding ordinances and healing love of the promised Redeemer and the nurture of His Church can rescue us from our present situation, as we serve and live worthy of reward at His Second Coming.

Seeing the parable in this light invites readers to identify with virtually every character in the story. At one level, people can see

themselves as the good Samaritan, acting as physical rescuers and as saviors on Mount Zion, aiding in the all-important cause of rescuing lost souls. Jesus told the Pharisee, "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37). By doing as the Samaritan, we join with Him in helping to

bring to pass the salvation and eternal life of mankind.

Disciples will also want to think of themselves as innkeepers who have been commissioned by Jesus Christ to facilitate the long-term spiritual recovery of injured travelers.

Or again, readers may see themselves as the traveler. As the parable begins, everyone sympathizes and identifies with the lone and weary traveler. We all need to be saved.

As the story ends, all travelers can feel safe, having learned that, according to this interpretation, He who "was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves" (Luke 10:36) is none other than the merciful Christ. He is the most exemplary Neighbor.

This realization answers the lawyer's second question: "And who is my neighbour?" At the same time, it also answers the first: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Eternal life comes by loving God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind" (Luke 10:27) and by loving His Son (thy neighbor) as thyself. And that is done by going and doing as the Savior did, in loving our fellow beings, for when we serve them we are only in the service of our God (see Mosiah 2:17). ■

Elements from this window in Sens are organized by the themes they represent. The parable of the good Samaritan (digitally isolated on the right) uses the three central panes of the window, while themes from the plan of salvation, including the Fall of Adam and Eve and the Crucifixion of the Savior (digitally isolated on the left), surround the parable to complete the window.



NOTES

1. *History of the Church*, 2:266.
2. Malcolm Miller, *Chartres Cathedral* (1985), 68.
3. For a full discussion of and sources for the quotations in this article, see John W. Welch, "The Good Samaritan: A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation," *Brigham Young University Studies*, spring 1999, 51–115. Other Latter-day Saints, including Hugh Nibley, Stephen Robinson, Lisle Brown, and Jill Major, have interpreted parts of the parable of the good Samaritan in similar ways.
4. Origen, *Homily 34.3*, Joseph T. Lienhard, trans., *Origen: Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke* (1996), 138.
5. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1980), "adam," 1:10.
6. See *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), "Travel and Communication," 6:644–46. Because of the high risk of being attacked by robbers while traveling in the ancient world, people would rarely travel alone as the characters in the parable do, which is another clue that the account is well understood as a similitude.