



Is the Bible literal or figurative?

Another great question from one of our confirmation students.

The answer: “Yes, and Yes.” It contains mainly things that are meant to be taken literally. It also contains some things that are figurative.

This may come as a bit of a surprise. We know the Bible is 100% true, so we tend to think of all of it as “literally meaning what it says.” But the Bible contains many different kinds of writings, not all of which are meant to be taken literally. Here’s an example:

Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” Luke 14:26

That is NOT a literal statement. If it was literal, it would contradict Jesus’ command “By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” John 15:35

In Luke 14:26 Jesus is using a common way of speaking called hyperbole (exaggeration to drive home a point). The point He wants to make sure everyone understands is that if you want to be His disciple, then HE has to be your number one priority in life. Even above family. We use hyperbole all the time in our own speech. For example, most of us have said at some point during a downpour, “It’s raining cats and dogs.” Thank God it never literally does that! We’re speaking figuratively, exaggerating to make sure everyone knows that it is raining really hard!

The book of Proverbs is another example. Proverbs is mainly a collection of wise sayings. We need to keep in mind when reading the Proverbs that these sayings are “principles,” not hard and fast “promises” that are literally true in every circumstance. A principle is a “rule of thumb,” something that is true most of the time - but there are exceptions. I see such an exception as I’m writing this. A basic principle or rule of thumb is that if the temperature is above 32 degrees and moisture is coming down, it will be rain. That’s true in general. But today we have an exception to that rule. Today it’s snowing!

Finally, the whole Book of Revelation is what is termed “apocalyptic” literature. It’s a type of literature that is filled with symbolism. For example, most numbers in Revelation are symbolic - they represent something other than the literal number. “10” is a number representing “completeness.” “3” is a number that represents God (because God is 3 Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Therefore, 1000 years (10x10x10) represents “God’s Complete Time” - however long that may be in literal years.

There is a problem, though. A big problem! Very often, people who don’t want to believe the truths in the Bible treat things that ARE meant to be taken literally as though they are figurative or just parables. For instance, you will hear people say things like “Adam and Eve are not real people, they are merely symbols,” or “Noah and the flood is just a parable - a made-up story designed to make a point,” or “The six ‘days’ of creation really represent thousands of years.” Well, no!!! Whenever those people and

events are referred to elsewhere in the Bible, they are treated as real people and real events and actual days, not thousands of years. They are literal.

Distinguishing literal from figurative is one reason I often say that it's extremely important to know the context of a passage of Scripture. Does the author treat it as literal fact, or does he treat it as figurative (like when Jesus uses a parable)? We take the things written in the Bible as literal, unless the context or the type of literature indicates otherwise.

Thanks for asking,  
Pastor David

**Send your questions to [pastor@livingwordlutheran.net](mailto:pastor@livingwordlutheran.net)**