

# What Does the Bible Teach About Figurative Speech?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

## Introduction:

- A. Bible readers need a means of interpretation, specifically the literal or figurative meanings of passages.
  - 1. This all falls under the heading of "hermeneutics," the rules by which we interpret the Bible.
  - 2. Many of these things we do without thinking about it.
  - 3. As there are many who do not properly interpret the scriptures, it is important to confirm that we understand the truth.
  - 4. Illustration: What literal and what is figurative in 1Cor. 3:10-13?

## I. DEFINING THE MATTER

- A. Literal (Webster's): "According to the letter; primitive; real; not figurative or metaphorical; as the literal meaning of a phrase; following the letter or exact words; not free; as a literal translation."
  - 1. Literal is taking the reading at its face value.
  - 2. John 11:35 - "Jesus wept."
  - 3. We see this verse and accept the fact that Jesus, in the flesh, cried tears over the grief of others at the passing of Lazarus. We do not attempt to make it figurative.
- B. Figurative (Webster's): "Representing something else; representing by resemblance; typical; representing by resemblance; not literal or direct. A figurative expression, is one in which the words are used in a sense different from that in which they are ordinarily used as; abounding with figures of speech; as a description highly figurative."
  - 1. Figurative is not literal; it represents something else that may seem to be more abstract.
  - 2. 1Cor. 10:4 - Is Christ literally a rock? We recognize that the rock represents Jesus.
- C. There are several kinds of figurative language.
  - 1. A simile is a comparison between two events or things.
    - a. Matt. 13:45-46 - The parable of the pearl of great price
    - b. Is the Kingdom of Heaven literally a high-quality pearl? Jesus is comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a pearl which a man will give up all he has in order to own it.
  - 2. A metaphor is like a simile; however, it is not a comparison, but instead becomes the full representation of the object.
    - a. Matt. 13:1-8 - Farming and planting seed is a metaphor for preaching the Gospel and the types of people who hear it.
  - 3. A parable (Webster's): "A fable or allegorical relation or representation of something real in life or nature, from which a moral is drawn for instruction."
    - a. Jesus often spoke in parables; He understood the human need to use the familiar to grasp the abstract.
  - 4. An allegory takes an actual event and uses it to metaphorically describe something else. The allegory of Sarah and Hagar - Gal. 4:22-31

5. A symbol (Webster's): "The sign or representation of any moral thing by the images or properties of natural things; An emblem or representation of something else; etc."
  - a. The Lord's Supper - The bread is the symbol of the Lord's body, and the fruit of the vine the symbol of the Lord's blood.
  - b. They are not literally the body and blood; they are not compared to the body or blood; and, we have the physical bread and fruit of the vine to remind us of that body and blood of Jesus.
6. Metonymy or synecdoche - substituting whole for part or part for whole.
  - a. "Drink the cup" - metonymy referring to contents of cup.
  - b. "Who do men say that I am" - a synecdoche for part of what is said by some folks.
7. An hyperbole - exaggeration
  - a. Matt. 16:26 - Can anyone have the whole world?

## II. APPLICATION IN INTERPRETATION

- A. Basic principle - interpret everything literally unless:
  1. Such a reading is nonsensical,
  2. A literal interpretation would cause a contradiction with another truth,
  3. The context does not allow for a literal interpretation.
  4. If any of these conditions exist, we must interpret the material in a figurative manner.
- B. Nonsensical readings
  1. John 4:10-11 - Jesus speaks to the woman at the well about "living water." Does the living water vs. dead water make any sense?
  2. Jesus compares the physical water that can only temporarily nourish the body, and speaks to the woman about the eternally refreshing truth.
- C. Contradictions
  1. Acts 2:16-21 is a partial quotation of Joel 2:28-32
  2. Peter speaks of the sun turning to darkness and the moon to blood.
  3. There is no evidence that any of these signs literally occurred; what do we do with it?
  4. Peter is saying these things occurred on the day of Pentecost; it is up to try to understand what Joel meant by his signs, as opposed to saying that the signs have not yet occurred, causing contradictions that fuel Premillennialist heresies.
- D. Context
  1. While context is not always an absolute, contexts often guide us to accurate understandings.
  2. Apparent contradictions seem to arise between Acts 17:30-31, 2Peter 3:9-10, and the book of Revelation.
  3. When we look at context, most of the book of Revelation is a vision, and Paul's lesson to the Athenians and Peter's letter do not require a figurative context.
  4. Most of the contents of Acts and the Epistles are literal.

### Conclusion:

- A. If we are going to rightly divide the word of truth, we must interpret literally unless doing so makes the text nonsensical, in disharmony with other texts, or if the context requires a figurative understanding.
- B. You must know why you believe a thing to be true - 2Tim. 2:15; 1Peter 3:15