

Figurative or Literal: Understanding Scriptures

The Bible tells us that it can be understood by anyone (Eph. 3:3). However, it also tells us that sometimes it is hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). One of the difficult aspects of Scripture for many is discerning when they are speaking in figurative or in literal language.

For example, here are three passages that the literal or figurative meaning is disputed:

PASSAGE	John 6:54 <i>"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."</i>	Revelation 20:4 <i>And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them..... And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.</i>	Genesis 1:1 <i>In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.</i>
LITERAL MEANING	We eat and drink Jesus blood in communion (TRANSUBSTANTIATION)	We will literally reign 1000 years with Jesus (PREMILLENNIALISM)	God literally created the world in 6 days
FIGURATIVE MEANING	Jesus is referring to His words	We reign with Christ since His resurrection	God created the world through other means (THEISTIC EVOLUTION)

You can see just from these three passages that understanding when a passage is literal or figurative is important. When we say "literal" we mean the face-value meaning, the idea that something means exactly what it says. Figurative means that something is symbolic or allegorical. We use this type of language every day. If I say I am going to run to the store, do I mean I am physically running, or perhaps driving?

How is it that we have little problem understanding each other in our language use of literal and figurative expressions? It is because we are trained to interpret language by the context and the speaker. What is important to understand is that the Bible is not different in this way.

One of the most important rules in understanding the Bible is the concept of context. We often say that when it comes to understanding the Bible, context is King. That means that the context of any statement tells us what it means. When we look at a passage of Scripture, we first ask "what is the immediate context", then "what is the broader context" and finally "what is the Biblical context". Even when we are unsure of the context, there are ways to discern it. We can first look at parallel passages of Scripture to discern the meaning of a passage. Finally, we can ask logical questions such as "does it contradict reason or doctrine" or "does it contradict common sense"?

As well, when we speak day to day, we often consider the character or nature of the speaker. For example, Jesus used a great deal of figurative language. He even tells us this in Mark 4:34 and John 16:34. The Apostle John wrote a great deal in figurative language. On the opposite side, Moses seldom used figurative language in his writings. This helps us to create expectations in understanding.

What are some rules we can use to discern a literal or figurative understanding of Scripture?

- 1) All language is presumed to be literal unless there is evidence it is figurative
- 2) Context is the first thing to look at to discern if a word might be figurative
- 3) A passage is presumed to be figurative if being literal is impossible
- 4) A passage is presumed to be figurative if being literal is unscriptural
- 5) A passage is figurative if it says it is
- 6) A passage is figurative if other parts of the same passage are

Now let's apply this to our three test passages.

Is John 6 Literal or Figurative

CONTEXT: Jesus is the bread of life. He is not literally bread; it is a figurative context

SPEAKER: Jesus often speaks figuratively, as in John 4, etc.

SIN: Drinking blood was sinful in the law of Moses, and in Acts 15 is mentioned too is a sin

PASSAGE DECLARES ITSELF FIGURATIVE: Jesus tells us later that it is His words that are life

OTHER PARTS FIGURATIVE: One does not live forever literally from eating

PARALLEL PASSAGES: Nowhere else are we told something parallel to this

Is Revelation 20 Literal or Figurative

CONTEXT: Revelation 1:1 sets the context as events in the time of the writer

SPEAKER: John often wrote figuratively

SIN:

PASSAGE DECLARES ITSELF FIGURATIVE: John speaks of the signs of his vision

OTHER PARTS FIGURATIVE: Much of Revelation 20 and Revelation is figurative

IMPOSSIBLE STATEMENTS: Many figures in Revelation are not possible

PARALLEL PASSAGES: Parallel passages describe all saints as reigning now (Eph. 1:26)

Is Genesis 1 Literal or Figurative

CONTEXT: Presumed to be literal

SPEAKER: Moses was usually literal

SIN: NA

IMPOSSIBLE: NA (Luke 18:27)

PASSAGE DECLARES ITSELF FIGURATIVE: NA

OTHER PARTS FIGURATIVE: NA

PARALLEL PASSAGES: Other passages refer to this chapter as a literal event

In these passages, using the tools of Biblical understanding, we can discern which of them are literal and which are figurative. It is not always easy to understand the Bible But by being diligent to understand we can discern when the Bible is speaking literally or figuratively. We simply need to apply our diligence (2 Timothy 2:15).