



Literal versus Figurative Language

‘I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture’ John 10:9

In the passage above, Jesus says he is “the door.” We know he is not saying that he is a literal door; he is simply using figurative language to illustrate that he is the way to salvation. The Bible contains both literal and figurative language and it is important to understand the difference between them. In this lesson, we will consider both types of language and learn how to determine if what we are reading is either literal or figurative.

A simple definition of the term “literal” is a word or statement that means what is says (e.g. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” Mark 16:16). A simple definition of the term “figurative” would be a word or statement used to represent something else, such as the passage referenced above where Jesus said he is the door. Figurative language often creates a picture or image in the mind of the reader to help them to understand what is being said.

Figurative language or figures of speech come in many different forms. Some of these you may have learned in an English class at school. Here are some figures of speech that we see in the Bible:

- **Simile:** A comparison where one thing is likened to another and often the words “as” or “like” are used. “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass...” 1 Peter 1:24
- **Metaphor:** A word or phrase where an object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. Jesus said of Herod, “Go, tell that fox...” (Luke 13:32) which was descriptive of the type of person he was, not that he was a literal fox.
- **Hyperbole:** An exaggerated statement to cause either an emotional response or give a clearer meaning of what is being said. “Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep your law” Psalm 119:136.
- **Personification:** A figure that gives an inanimate object a human quality. “The mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” Isaiah 55:12.

These are just a few examples of figures of speech; there are several others (Allegory, Synecdoche, Paradox, etc.) which you can study on your own if you would like to learn more about them.

The next question we want to consider is; how do we know if a word or statement is literal or figurative? There are a few simple rules the student should follow to help make this determination:

1. Always assume what is being said is literal unless it is not possible to draw that conclusion.
2. Allow the immediate context of what is being said to dictate if the work or statement is literal or figurative, unless it cannot be determined.
3. If what is being said contains an impossibility (something that is not possible), then it should be considered figurative language.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE BIBLE STUDY

- 4. If the section of scripture tells us it is figurative then we must accept it as such (e.g. John 2:18-22).
- 5. If what is being said contains a figure of speech, it must be considered figurative (e.g. Matthew 26:26, “This is my body”).
- 6. A word or statement should be considered figurative if the literal interpretation would cause one passage or principle to contradict another.

Sometimes, even when we apply the rules mentioned above, it can still be difficult to determine with certainty whether or not what is being said is literal or figurative. Fortunately, those cases are rare as most of the time we can confidently make the correct determination. Using study aids can assist us but ultimately it is the student’s responsibility to draw his own conclusions. It is also critical to make sure the conclusions we reach, do not conflict with established truth in other sections of scripture.

Questions

- 1. Identify the figurative word(s) or statements in the following passages and describe what they mean:
Philippians 3:2 _____
John 1:36 _____
John 6:35 _____
John 8:12 _____
Matthew 23:27 _____
1 Corinthians 3:16 _____

2. Is Jesus making a literal or figurative statement in John 14:26? How can we determine this? What is he teaching? _____

3. What figure of speech is Paul using in Ephesians 6:11-17 and what is he teaching? _____

- 4. Read Daniel 2:31-44 and answer the following questions:
Are dreams literal or figurative? _____
Were the objects in King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream literal or figurative? _____
Was Daniel’s interpretation (from the Lord) something that literally was going to happen? _____
What was the truth being taught to King Nebuchadnezzar and to us? _____

5. Should we consider the “sword” that Jesus mentions in Luke 22:36 to be figurative because to take it literally appears to conflict with the principle Jesus is teaching in Matthew 26:52? Please explain. _____

6. For each of the seven churches of Asia listed in Revelation 2-3, list one example of literal or figurative language that Jesus uses. _____

7. List two of the rules we should follow to determine if a word or statement is literal or figurative: _____

