

The Use Of Figurative Language In Scripture

Introduction

In the Bible, God often expresses a truth in what we would call its normal sense (literal), God also uses what we know as a symbol which is a story or another more descriptive means (figurative). For example, we know that God loves us and he states that to us literally in ([1 John 4:9](#)). And yet, how this truth is beautifully expressed with so much more impact in [Psalms 23](#) with all its lovely figures of speech.

What is God's Purpose In Using Figurative Language?

It would not be out of the ordinary to simply ask, "Why use the figurative, when the literal is so plain and much more easily understood?" Well, because figurative language can add beauty and enhancement to plain truth; and it can illustrate and explain a truth more vividly making a more lasting impression on the mind and heart. The Bible says God loves us and longs to forgive us ([1 Peter 3:9](#)). But how much more rich is the meaning of this truth when Jesus tells us the parable of the prodigal son in ([Luke 15:11-24](#)).

The real purpose of figurative language is not to teach *new* truth, but to *illustrate* and graphically *portray* truth that is taught in the scripture. With that in mind we should understand that figurative language must always be in harmony with any "literal" facts. Only then will it help to make the truth vitally interesting and more easily remembered by us. So how do we really know when a passage is figurative?

1. When It Involves An Impossibility Or An Absurdity

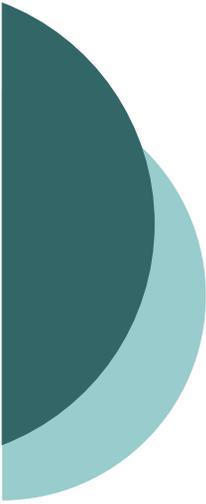
Let's read [Luke 9:60](#). Would it not be absurd to take this literally? Can a dead person really bury another dead person? NO! That is what makes this a perfect example of how the impossibility or absurdity indicates that we must understand it as "figurative language" in order for this passage to make sense. This would have helped Nichodemus when he was being taught the concept of "born again".

2. When It Involves A Contradiction Or Inconsistency

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" ([John 11:25-26](#)). If this is all "literal", Jesus is contradicting himself.

3. When It Involves An Immoral Conclusion

A good example of this is Jesus' command to "cut off" one's hand or foot, or pluck out one's eyes if such causes one to stumble ([Matthew 18:8-9](#)). At first this might seem that it would fall under the "absurd" rule. However, God's word teaches us that it is a sin to harm our bodies([1Cor 6:19](#)). So not only is it absurd, but it is morally



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wrong as well as physically impossible to carry out this command “literally”. Just think how odd one might look if they amputated a member of their body the first time it caused them to sin? Jesus is merely using a figure of speech to teach a basic principle about temptation.

4. When It Is Otherwise Implied By The Context Of The Passage

Often times it will help to carefully read the entire section of thought surrounding a passage when determining if it contains figurative language. If we do this most of the time we can determine from the general context, if it is to be taken as “literal” or “figurative”.

5. When It Is Otherwise Stated

We can't leave out the obvious reason for knowing a passage contains figurative language. There are times when the author of the passage simple comes right out and “says” it is a figure of speech. For example Jesus boldly stood in Jerusalem and declared if they destroyed this temple He would raise it up in three days. After recording the question of the Jews concerning taking 46 years to build the temple, the author simply says “...But he was speaking about the temple of his body”. ([John 2:18-21](#)).

6. Because of Sheer Common Sense

When Jesus promised to give the woman of Samaria “living water” ([John 4:10-15](#)), He was using highly figurative language to dramatically show this woman of sin and frustration what He really could do for her life. There simply is no such thing as the “fountain of youth”.

Conclusion

Understanding the use of figurative language in God's Word will help us from getting confused and coming to a wrong interpretation concerning a passage (or passages) of scripture. Keep these point to help determine if a passage is using figurative language.

