

Don't Just Take The Bible Literally

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Skeptics and non-believers frequently look for “gotcha” moments to pin on Christians. One of their favorite questions is, **“Do you take the Bible literally?”** – hoping you will say “yes.” And before that “yes” leaves your lips, their response is ready:

“So you believe only 144,000 thousand will be saved?” (alluding to Rev. 7:1-7; 14:1-5).

“So you believe we should all drink Jesus’ blood and become cannibals?” (referencing Matt. 26:28-29).

“So you think you should hate your family members? (pointing to Luke 14:26).

“So why haven’t you plucked your eyes out?” (citing Matt. 5:29).

“So should parents be stoning their kids today?” (misunderstanding Lev. 20:9).

Boom. Burn. Gotcha.

The only problem is, we shouldn't take the Bible literally – at least not in that sense. Next time someone asks if you take the Bible literally, say, “**Not exactly, but I do believe everything in the Bible is true.**”

This is not just an “*I see what you did there*” trick. This is an important point for us to understand. **Not everything in the Bible is meant to be understood *literally*, but at the same time God's Word is always totally true.** There is not a single problem, contradiction, or failure contained in Scripture.

Every word of God proves true;
He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him.
(Prov. 30:5)

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

There is not a single falsehood in all of Scripture. It completes us. God has revealed His truth in all 66 books of the Bible in several beautiful ways.

- Sometimes God speaks **poetically**. In Psalm 19:3-6, God's comforting care is described as a hen protecting her chicks – with her wings lovingly protecting her children from predators and the elements. Of course, this is just poetic license. God is not literally a big bird.
- Sometimes God speaks **metaphorically**. The parables of Jesus, for example, are metaphors. When Jesus says we must build our house on the rock (Matt. 7:24-27), He is not giving architectural advice; He is teaching us to build our lives on His Words instead of the popular wisdom of culture.
- Sometimes God speaks **synecdochically**. A synecdoche is a part used to symbolize the whole or the whole for the part. Today, “ABCs” is a synecdoche for the alphabet. When we say “Germany won the World Cup in 2014,” we don't literally mean the entire country of Germany won the World Cup (FIFA supposedly has rules, after all). Likewise, if we want to enjoy “eternal life,” we need to do more than *merely* “believe” (John 3:16) – our belief needs to cause us to obey by repenting and being baptized (Acts 2:37-38). “Belief” can be a synecdoche for God's entire plan of salvation.
- Sometimes God speaks **rhetorically**. Did literally *all* of the Judas' intestines spill out (Acts 1:18-19)? I doubt it. Did literally all of Israel gather around Jeremiah in the temple (Jer. 26:9)? No. Did literally all of Jerusalem and Judea go out to hear John the Baptizer

(Matt. 3:5)? No, but a large number did. Did every single animal, bird, and insect appear on the sheet in Peter's vision (Acts 10:12)? It is unlikely.

- Sometimes God speaks **anthropomorphically**. Mankind is not capable of grasping the magnitude of God, and therefore God must ascribe human characteristics (such as human physique and human-like emotions) to Himself in order for us to understand Him. For example, when man sinned, our omniscient God did not *literally* regret creating man and He did not literally repent (Gen. 6:6). This figure of speech is just used to vividly paint God's displeasure of our rebellion against Him.
- Sometimes God speaks **literally**. Jesus literally died, was literally buried, and literally rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:12-19). And likewise, if we want to be saved from sin, we must literally repent and be immersed in water (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21) so figuratively we can be buried and raised with Christ (Rom. 6:4).

There are many more literary devices that God utilizes in His Word to communicate to us. God intends for us to use our minds as we engage His Word, examining the context and the message He is trying to say. The Bible is full of beautiful language that is not only elegant to the ears, but it appeals to our entire being at all levels – emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

While Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door” (John 10:7), He is not literally the door, but He is truly the only “door” to the Father (John 14:6). His Words are true.

We must be entirely dedicated to God's Word. We cannot compromise our view of Scripture. And holding to a “literal view” of *all* of God's Word would mean we can no longer be literally true to His Word.

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