

PathLights

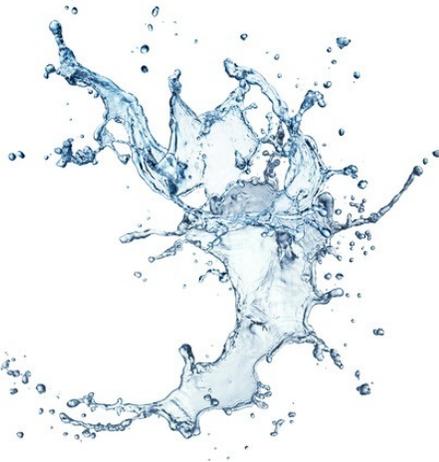
*"Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path"
Psalm 119:104*

April 10, 2016

Literal or Figurative?

by Frank Himmel

"John, you're all wet." What do I mean by that? It depends on whether I am speaking literally or figuratively. I may just mean that John is soaked. But if we are having a disagreement, I likely mean that he is completely wrong. Anyone listening in will have to decide which way I am speaking in order to correctly interpret my remark.



Bible speakers and writers use both literal and figurative language. One reason students come away with vastly different conclusions is that we make opposite assumptions about whether a statement is literal or figurative. How shall we decide?

Some go to extremes. One school insists on a constant literal interpretation, particularly in Bible prophecy. Any suggestion that a prophet is speaking in a figure is dismissed as wrongly "spiritualizing" the text. Others, such as Christian Scientists, go to the opposite extreme.

Nothing means what it says. Everything has a hidden meaning. The Bible becomes one giant allegory. This approach opens the door for endless interpretations.

Honesty demands a reasoned basis for taking a statement literally or figuratively. To arbitrarily "pick and choose" according to what we want some passage to mean is transparently self-serving. Guesswork is little improvement. We must be consistent. We must be fair.

Here is a simple rule of thumb that works for any language: *take what is said literally unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.* Now consider a few of those "compelling reasons."

It is said to be figurative. Sometimes the speaker or author will tell us that the language is figurative. In such cases there is no doubt! For example, when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," He was speaking of His resurrection. We know that because John tells us so (John 3:21-22). Not all who heard the statement understood it at the time. His enemies used it against Him to sustain their charge of blasphemy (Mark 14:58).

Much misinterpretation of the book of Revelation could be avoided if we would follow this simple rule. In the opening verse, John says it was a message signified (NKJV) — shown in signs — to him. This is a book of figures, including its numerology.

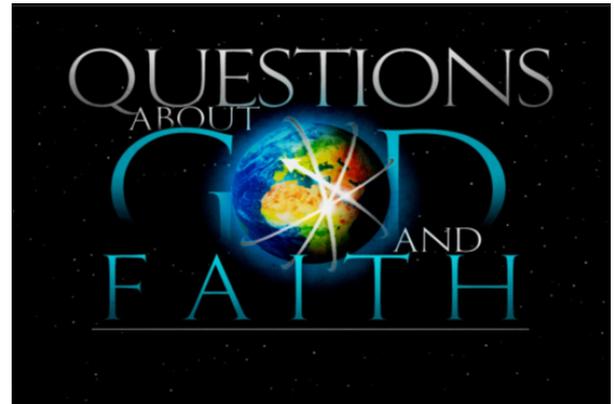
Taking it literally involves an impossibility. When a man says he is so hungry he could eat a horse, we ▶

know he is using a figure. No man can eat that much (and few of us would knowingly eat horse meat!). Jesus once met a would-be follower who said he first had to bury his father. The Lord responded, “Follow me; and allow the dead to bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22). Obviously, physically dead people cannot dig a grave or conduct funerals. Jesus must have been speaking of the dead in a figurative or spiritual sense. (Incidentally, the Lord was not opposed to funerals. The point here was simply that *nothing* takes priority over following Him.)

Taking it literally involves a contradiction. The Bible is God’s word. It is truth. Truth, by its nature, is not self-contradictory. If the literal interpretation of a remark makes it contradict other plain statements, figurative language is likely being employed.

Jesus said of the bread in the Lord’s Supper, “Take, eat; this is My body” (Matthew 26:26). Of the cup He said, “For this is the blood of My covenant which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). Was He teaching cannibalism? Are these elements literally His body and blood? No. To so interpret them would be to contradict universal prohibitions against consuming blood (Genesis 9:4; Acts 15:29). The bread and fruit of the vine simply stand for and remind us of His body and blood.

The context demands that it be figurative. When James and John asked for preeminent places in the kingdom, Jesus replied, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with



Gospel Meeting with Joseph Casimier

April 10-13

which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). What did He mean? He did not say this was figurative language. Taking Him literally would not be impossible or contradict some truth. Yet context plainly indicates this was a figure. Jesus was not headed for dinner. He had long ago been baptized. No, He was headed for the cross. Soon He prayed, “Let this cup pass from Me.” *Cup* is an ancient figure for one’s lot in life (Psalm 23:5).

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Service Leaders for the Week

	Sunday Morning	Sunday Evening	Wednesday Evening
GREETER	John Baucom	Howard Moore	Chad Brock
SONG LEADER	Carlos Garcia	William Lefort	Paul Richmond
OPENING PRAYER	Steven Turner	Bruce Williams	
LORD’S SUPPER			
BREAD	Howard Moore	Howard Moore	
CUP	Albert Lee Harrison	Albert Lee Harrison	
CONTRIBUTION PRAYER	David Gray		
SERMON/INVITATION	Joseph Casimier	Joseph Casimier	Joseph Casimier
CLOSING PRAYER	Jason Chandler	Ron Cunningham	Albert Harrison Sr