

Should I Read the Bible Literally or Metaphorically?

Discussion Questions:

1. Write down Proverbs 22:6. Then restate the passage in your own words. What is this basically saying?
2. So... if we see a child from a Christian home not following God, what can we infer based upon the above verse?
3. Does this seem right? (I'm not asking you to judge if the Bible is right as if you were an authority over the Bible. Rather, I'm asking you if that is in line with the rest of Scripture.)

Recapping:

In this Trellis series we're studying the Bible to become more familiar with it, more confident in it, more able to learn from it. So far, we've looked at two foundational questions:

1. Who really wrote the Bible?
2. How can we be sure the Bible is accurate?

For the first question, we learned that God is the ultimate author who inspired human agents to write the Bible. (See lesson 1.) God intended and orchestrated it, and humans penned the words. God is the ultimate source, which means the Bible is **authoritative** and **true**. Humans wrote it reflecting their **context** and **personality**. Theologians call this **verbal, plenary inspiration** because the very words (verbal) are from God (inspired) and this includes all of the words (plenary). So the original documents are true, authoritative, and intended for us to learn from.

For the second question, we learned that we don't have any of the original documents, called *autographa*. So how do we know the versions we have are accurate and reliable? To summarize, both the Old and New Testaments have proven histories of **highly accurate scribal transmission**. That means professional scribes copied manuscripts very carefully. We have literally thousands of these for the NT and the Dead Sea Scrolls and other evidences for the OT. And scholars have combed over these manuscripts to produce our English translations. (See lesson 2.) So **we can have confidence** that our standard English Bibles are accurate. (Lesson 5 will discuss different English translations.)

These principles are foundational because they form a logical progression:

1. God is the source of the Bible: authoritative
2. God inspired human authors – their personalities, their situations—to write the Bible: accurate.

3. Thus we should read the Bible looking for God’s intended meaning in the author’s point and situation.

Because this is so crucial, let me say it again in another way.

Is there a Meaning in this Text?

Yes, the author’s intended meaning. Authorial intent serves as a guiding principle for what we consider proper interpretation. This principle is based upon these doctrines:

1. Revelation - God has revealed truth to us
2. Inspiration – God revealed that truth through human authors
3. Inerrancy – That truth was accurately conveyed through the words

Name of the Doctrine	Meaning of Doctrine	Implication of Doctrine
Revelation	Bible is truth revealed by God	Bible is authoritative (as far as we take God as authoritative)
Inspiration	God revealed truth through human agents	We understand the message as we understand the human situations
Inerrancy	The Bible is accurate	Bible is trustworthy. This is a logical corollary based upon the other doctrines.

If God has revealed this truth to us, then we glean to principles. First, that truth is authoritative for our lives insofar as God is God and over all. Second, that truth should be drawn from the words God gave us. Thus, we are looking for the human author’s intended meaning to understand the divine author’s message.

That last statement is crucial. As one understands that more, we move to several new questions.

1. Should I read the Bible metaphorically or literally?
2. Are all interpretations of the Bible equally valid?

Today’s lesson will focus on the first question: should I read the Bible metaphorically or literally?

Metaphorically or Literally? That’s A “Dumb” Question

If you’re having a conversation or reading an email and you have to ask someone, “Do you mean that metaphorically or literally?” what does that mean? Perhaps it was a comment that you’re not sure is sarcastic or serious. Perhaps it was a dead-panned joke or a genuine report of something unusual.

The answer to that question is the same answer to the question in most situations: it depends. What’s the context? What is the intended communication form? Is it a joke or an exaggeration? Then it’s probably not literal. Is it a technical or serious work? Then it probably is.

Example, “She’s really hot.” Is that literal or metaphorical? Does she have a fever, or is she dressed to kill? Did she just run a few laps and has to cool down? Is this even a person or is this a PC that needs to cool off?

Basic Breakdown of Genres¹

1. Epistles – letters
2. Narratives – stories
 - a. Three levels of narrative
 - i. Top level: overall redemptive plan of God to bring glory to Himself through the redemption of His people
 - ii. Second level: story of God’s redeeming a people for his name, in both the former covenant and the “new” covenant in Christ.
 - iii. Third level: compound narratives and the individual stories that make them up, such as Genesis and the stories of Joseph, Abraham, etc.
 - b. So, when Jesus said the Scriptures “testify about me” (John 5:39), which narrative level was he talking about?
3. Law – God’s covenantal commands for Israel
4. Prophetical books – Enforcing God’s Covenant and Commands
5. Gospels – Nightly news from different perspectives.
6. Wisdom – general truths for then and now
7. Psalms – Israel’s prayers and ours
8. Apocalyptic – a vision of the futures

So whether we take a passage literally or metaphorically is based upon authorial intent and genre.

For example, consider these passages: metaphorical or literal?

Jesus saying in John 6:35 – “I am the bread of life,” and then in verse 53, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Now consider Proverbs 22:6 again...

¹ Much of the following material adapted from *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, as well as from countless other sources I’ve read over the years!