

How to Interpret the Bible – Lesson Four

Interpreting Figurative Language

A. Interpreting short figures of speech

Genesis 1:5 – day

Psalms 18:2 – rock

2Kings 2:11 – in a whirlwind

Philippians 3:2 – dogs

James 3:6 – fire

Jonah 1:17 – inside the fish

Matthew 26:26,28 – this is my body, this is my blood

How can you tell if an author is using a figure of speech?

1. Always take a text literally unless you are forced to do otherwise
2. Take the words figuratively if the author indicates that he wants them to be understood that way.
3. Take the words figuratively if the context indicates that they are to be understood that way.

Simile: a comparison introduced by the words *like* or *as*

Metaphor: a comparison that does not use *like* or *as* to give away the comparison

Personification: human characteristics applied to something inanimate.

Hyperbole: exaggeration for effect, not meant to be taken literally

Rhetorical question: a question that does not seek an answer; rather, it emphasizes a truth.

Irony: the speaker or writer says the very opposite of what he or she intends to convey.

Metonymy: a word or expression is used in place of another to portray some actual relationship between the things signified

Synecdoche: substituting a part of something for the whole or the whole for the part.

1. Proverbs 1:16
2. “How was the exam?” a student replies, “Simple! Simple!” Yet the tone of voice indicates it was difficult.
3. Jeremiah 50:6
4. Psalm 6:6
5. 1Peter 1:24
6. Romans 8:31
7. “The White House reported today...” when actually the president or one of his aides reported.
8. Isaiah 55:12

Interpret the following passages:

Ps 119:105

Micah 4:3

Matthew 6:35

Luke 16:29

Luke 17:24

John 21:25

1Corinthians 4:8

B. Interpreting Parables

Parable = Greek *para* (beside or alongside) and *ballein* (to throw). A parable is a story that is thrown alongside the truth to illustrate the truth. A parable is an extended simile. When you run into a parable, keep the following thought in mind.

1. Jesus told parables to illustrate a single truth. The main goal for the interpreter is to find that truth. Use the context.
2. Be careful about overinterpretations. Sometimes many details help us understand the main truth. Sometimes only a few do. Sometimes all that can be interpreted is the parable's main truth.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Matthew 21:33-39

Luke 16:1-13

C. Interpreting Symbols

A symbol is an item used as a reminder of something important. The best example of a symbol is a cross. What symbol did God establish in Genesis 9:12-17?

Read Revelation 1:20. Also refer to 1:12-16

What are the two symbols Jesus interprets in this verse? What do they symbolize?