

# Fulfilled Prophecies

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## Literal and Figurative



By Dan Maines

## Literal and Figurative

Whenever we read the words of the Bible, we are faced with a choice: Does God intend this passage to be taken literally, or is the meaning symbolic or metaphorical? Is the language used strictly literal or is it a figure of speech? Understanding the Bible is not to prefer either literal meanings or figurative meanings. It is to understand what God intended the words to mean.

Sometimes God intended a literal meaning, sometimes a figurative meaning, and occasionally both. We need to explore each context. When Jesus gave 5,000 people bread and fish (John 6:1-15), for example, he gave them real bread to satisfy their physical need. Here we are reading literally. But just a few

verses later, we are told that Jesus is "the bread of life" (verse 35). Here we must read figuratively: Jesus is the source and sustainer of eternal life, not a loaf of bread. The real bread that Jesus gave the people had symbolic value. The bread portrayed the important truth that just as Jesus could miraculously create and give the substance of physical life to humans, he could also give them eternal life. His miracle pointed to a spiritual truth that is much more important than satisfying physical hunger. His miracles were special signs that can help us believe in him and thereby have eternal life (John 20:31). When Jesus told people that they must eat his flesh (verse 53), he did not mean it literally. Even when he said that his flesh was "real food" (verse 55), he did not mean it literally. He explained that flesh is not important (verse 63). To be given eternal life, we need something spiritual. Jesus called himself a shepherd, a gate, a light. Some of the most important words in the Bible are figures of speech. We should not interpret them literally, because they aren't meant to be read literally. "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29). But can an eye really cause us to sin? No. Jesus was making a bold statement to emphasize an important principle. The apostle John saw a beast coming, out of the sea (Revelation 13:1) and another beast out of the earth (verse 11). Were the animals real, or only a vision? Were they literal or symbolic? Figurative meanings are not second best or inferior or anything to apologize for. They are often better, closer to the truth. Symbolic meaning is usually more powerful and profound. For example, it would be difficult to state literally the profound truth, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), or "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). As the Bible discusses spiritual truths, we should expect to find figurative language more often in the Bible than in a history textbook. It is clear that parts of the Bible are meant figuratively, and we are rejecting the Word of God if we refuse to consider the possibility of figures of speech. We should not refuse to understand a method the Bible itself uses. It is dishonest to reject figurative meanings when they were

intended, just as it is dishonest to read them where they shouldn't be. We should not be in a hurry to seek a figurative interpretation, nor should we be in a hurry to reject one. We need to cautiously examine each verse in its context, and to exercise some patience with ourselves and with interpreters who come to different conclusions. We need to be aware of the figurative devices in the Bible and interpret accordingly. We need to carefully read and study the Bible to become familiar with the way it uses language. Never read a Bible verse. That's right, never read a Bible verse. Instead, always read a paragraph at least. When we read the paragraph containing the verse in question, the larger context almost always provides the information we need to help us understand what's going on. The key to the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph, not just from the individual verse. With the context now in view, you can narrow your focus and speculate on the meaning of the verse itself. When you come up with something that seems right, sum it up in your own words. Then paraphrase it, (plug it into the verse) See if it makes sense. See if there is other scripture to back it up. Remember, Don't forget the rule: Never read a Bible verse. Always read a paragraph at least if you want to be confident you're getting the right meaning of the verse.

What About the "Days" of Genesis and the "1,000 Years" in Revelation? How is one able to say that the "days" of the creation week are literal days, while the "1,000 years" of Revelation 20:1 represents a figure of speech? The answer is this: by the contexts of the two portions of Scripture, and the language considerations found within them. The "days" of the creation week are divided into periods of light and darkness (vv. 4-5). The "days" are distinguished from "years" (v. 14). And the "days" are defined by Moses as the same type of "day" as the Sabbath which the Hebrews were required to observe (Ex. 20:11). There are other reasons for the view that the creation days must be literal, but this should suffice for the present.

Regarding the "thousand years" of Revelation 20, it should be observed that the opening of the book itself provides caution that this is a document characterized by symbols (see

"signified" - 1:1). In addition, the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 is nestled in the midst of a number of other dramatic figures - a pit, a great chain, the dragon/serpent, thrones, a beast, a mysterious "mark," resurrections, etc. Why should the pit, chain, dragon, etc., be viewed as figures, and yet the "thousand years" be singled out as literal? That defies common sense. The fact is, the numeral "thousand" is found more than twenty times in Revelation, and not once is it employed in a literal sense. In Chapter 20, the most likely interpretation of the number is that of "completeness." The thousand years mentioned in the passage express no period of time?. Its the idea of completeness or perfection. It means a complete period of time sufficient to accomplish God's purpose.

*Adapted in part from: David Curtis*

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