

Should People Take the Bible Literally?

By Jonathan Morrow

*Maybe...*how's that for an answer? It really all depends on what someone means by the *literally*. But most often it has to do with the *implications* of what the plain or straightforward reading of a text or passage says. It isn't a matter of understanding at all...it is just the implications we aren't big fans of. Take one of Jesus' statements in the Gospels as an example "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you*" (Luke 6:47).

Now, is the basic thrust of this statement difficult to understand? Of course there was a cultural background in which Jesus spoke these words, but the meaning of the passage seems pretty clear (even though the implications are quite demanding and uncomfortable to put into practice!).

However, sometimes the question "Do you take the Bible literally?" comes up in conversation or on the news or in a magazine in a different sense. The idea here is usually something like this, I can understand "love thy neighbor" well enough, but when it comes to creation out of nothing, floods, really big fish, gender issues, sexuality, people rising from the dead, waters being parted, slavery, war, people walking on water, demons, talking bushes etc. that is just too incredible, or too outdated, or unscientific, or that makes me uncomfortable...

And if some of us are honest, we have probably all felt that at some point in our own faith journeys when reading some of these passages. So how should we think about this question of taking the Bible literally? Here are a couple of brief thoughts and then I will suggest some resources for further exploration.

First, I think this is not a very helpful way to ask or frame the question. I agree with Greg Koukl, of www.str.org, who deals with this quite a bit on his radio show; "When someone asks, Do you take the Bible literally?, I respond by saying that ***I try to take the Bible with the precision I think the writer intended.***" This basically means, I am not a slave to a woodenly literal interpretation.

To take just one example, this principle allows for estimation of numbers (like in 1 & 2 Chronicles and 1 & 2 Kings). Our newspapers use round numbers all the time and we don't charge them with inaccuracies. Take the phrase, "Over a million people showed up at the presidential inauguration." Let's say the actual number was 1,233,017. But the writer in the Washington post was using the linguistic convention of estimation. So I can take her literally according to the precision she intended. Moreover, this is also helpful to remember when it comes to issues related to Science. The Bible is not a science textbook, but it does speak accurately about our world to the level of precision intended by the writers.

Second, when we come to the Bible, we need to remember to ***play by the rules***. Every game has rules and the game of language is no different. It is fascinating how often people forget to do this. Really smart people who are critical of the Bible like New Atheist Christopher Hitchens (cf. *God is not Great*), take great care to read Shakespeare, Harry Potter or the sports page according to the rules of that particular genre (e.g., poetry, fiction, narrative etc.), but then throw all that out the window when it comes to the Bible.

The Bible contains all sorts of linguistic conventions like poetry, historical narrative, figures of speech, hyperbole, metaphor, etc. People are certainly free to disagree with what the Biblical claim is at the end of the day, but let's at least do our best to allow the text to speak for itself according to how the author intended. This will take some more work and time, but it is the only fair way to proceed.

Third, I like Timothy Keller's advice to both practicing Christians and those exploring Christianity for the first time, when they come across an offensive, troubling, or confusing text: "***I counsel them...to slow down and try out several different perspectives on the issues that trouble them. That way they can continue to read, learn, and profit from the Bible even***

as they continue to wrestle with some of its concepts.” This is where a good bible commentary can help. But we need to be careful here as well. When the Bible is accurately understood, we ought to find Scripture troubling or even offensive to us at times precisely because we are in the process of conforming our lives to what is taught in the Bible, not the Bible to what we find comfortable in our lives. So if we read the Bible and never feel challenged to examine our hearts and actions, then odds are we are deceiving ourselves. The good news is that this learning process involves, grace, community, time, and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Fourthly, **sometimes the Bible does not teach what it appears to teach.** A classic illustration of this pertains to the issue of Slavery.¹ God does not think slavery is a good thing. And as we grow in our understanding of the biblical text, cultural background, the reality of life in a messed-up world due to sin, as well as the trajectory from the times of the Old Testament to the present of slavery being challenged, reformed, and ultimately abolished by Christian teaching and principles, then we will see that the Bible does not endorse slavery as a good thing. But again, to see this takes effort and study to understand (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). A 5-second skimming of a passage like Colossians 3:22 will not yield an accurate interpretation of this issue.

Fifthly and similar to the previous observation, the **Bible does not necessarily endorse what it accurately records.** The Bible records many things that it does not endorse—though it describes those situations accurately. One example of this is the fact that the Bible records people lying, but it does not endorse lying or think it is a good idea. Some things are prescribed in Scripture, while others are merely accurately described.

Finally, when you are having conversations with others or if you are wrestling with questions about the Bible yourself, **be sure to keep the main point of the Bible in view—Jesus.** Maybe you have struggles concerning a giant whale swallowing Jonah for three days before vomiting him out again. The good news is about Jesus Christ—what he claimed and what he did for us (not that really big fish can eat people).² Investigate the Jesus issue first and then work your way out to less central issues. Because, “if Jesus is the Son of God, then we have to take his teaching seriously, including his confidence in the authority of the whole Bible...If He is not who He says he is, why should we care what the Bible says about anything else?”³

There is no other book like the Bible. It is God’s Word to His people. But we will not automatically or fully understand it by magic. Howard Hendricks, who has taught people to study the Bible for over 50 years now, observes “Scripture does not yield its fruit to the lazy. Like any other discipline of life, Bible study pays in proportion to how much of an investment you make. The greater investment, the greater the reward.” That is why the Apostle Paul gave his protégé Timothy—and by extension anyone who would become a Christ-follower in the centuries after—a charge to “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15 cf. 3:16-17). May we all take that challenge to heart.

Resources for Interpreting the Bible in its Cultural Context and Applying it in Today’s World:

- *Journey into God’s Word: Your Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible* by J. Scott Duvall J. Daniel Hays (2008).
- *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Set* edited by Clinton E. Arnold. 4 volumes. (2002)
- *The Apologetics Study Bible*, published by B&H (2007)
- *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* by Lee Strobel (also on DVD)
- Bible.org - www.bible.org

¹ Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 171-78.

² The point in Jonah is not that great big fish naturally swallows grown men for three days before regurgitating them. We shouldn’t be looking for whale in the ocean that can *naturally* do this. Rather, the point is that God can and does work *supernaturally* to bring about His purposes.

³ Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 113.