**Figurative Language in the Bible**

Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; 2:1-3; Revelation 20:1-7

Introductory thoughts:

* God has chosen to reveal Himself to mankind
* God has used the medium of language for His revelation
* God desires to actually, clearly communicate truth about Himself, the condition of mankind, His redemptive plan, the beginning of all things and the end of all things
* In order to clearly communicate (God’s side) and understand (our side) a normal, grammatical-historical approach to biblical interpretation MUST be taken

1. The Bible makes frequent use of figurative language

* Figurative language is used in the Bible just as any other piece of literature would use it
* Figurative language is used in great variety including metaphors, similes, analogies, parables, symbolism, hyperbole, types, personification, anthropomorphism or other figures of speech

**Isaiah 64:8** But now, O LORD, thou art our father; **we are the clay**, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.

**Psalms 23:1** The **LORD is my shepherd**; I shall not want.

John 6:35 And Jesus said unto them, **I am the bread** of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

**Matthew 5:13** Ye are the **salt of the earth**: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

**Judges 6:5** For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came **as grasshoppers** for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it.

**Matthew 13:44** Again, the kingdom of heaven is **like unto treasure** hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

**Matthew 23:24** Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and **swallow a camel**.

**Matthew 18:21-22** Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? (22) Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, **Until seventy times seven**.

**Matthew 5:29** And if thy right eye offend thee, **pluck it out**, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

**Genesis 4:10** And he said, What hast thou done? the **voice of thy brother's blood** crieth unto me from the ground.

**Psalms 77:16** The waters **saw thee**, O God, the waters saw thee; **they were afraid**: the depths also were troubled.

**Isaiah 24:23** Then the **moon shall be confounded**, and the **sun ashamed**, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.

* Figurative language is used across many genres in Scripture including narratives, didactic sections, poetry, and prophecy
* The existence of figurative language does not require an allegorical approach to biblical interpretation
* Figurative language in Scripture should be understood and interpreted just as it would in any other literature
* Figurative language is a tool used to embellish and adorn the normal use of language and to communicate abstract ideas

1. The first problem is how to determine IF figurative language is being used.

Three questions to ask: (Christ’s Prophetic Plan – Matthew Waymeyer)

* Does it possess a degree of a absurdity when taken literally?
* Does it possess a degree of clarity when taken symbolically?
* Does it fall into an established category of symbolic language?

**Isaiah 55:12** For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the **trees of the field shall clap their hands**.

Literal interpretation:

Symbolic interpretation:

Category:

**Revelation 20:1-7** – 1,000 years

Literal interpretation:

Symbolic interpretation:

Category:

What about 2 Peter 3:8?

**2 Peter 3:8** But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that **one day** is with the Lord **as a thousand years**, and a **thousand years as one day**.

1. The second problem is how to determine the meaning of figurative language

* By default a literal meaning should be assumed in a given text or passage
* If the literal meaning is absurd or inconsistent, then a figurative meaning may be pursued
* In most cases, a figurative meaning will be indicated or obvious in the text
* The purpose of figurative language is to communicate some literal truth
* Determining the literal truth of figurative passages requires careful analysis of:
  + The language employed,
  + The immediate, textual context
  + The author’s own explanation
  + The parallel passages
  + The historical, cultural context
  + The clear, doctrinal truths connected to the passage in question

“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.” David L. Cooper