

How Can You Take the Bible Literally?

Michael Allen

Confronting Christianity / Apologetics

I don't know how many of you knew this, but Naomi and I used to have a band. It started as a duo, and eventually grew to a trio, I would play guitar, Naomi would sing, and our friend played keys with us. We recorded an album and one of the songs on the album was a story about somebody who we care for, deeply. This person was in an unhealthy relationship, and we wrote a song because, as artists, why confront somebody with your feelings when you can write a song about it, instead? The song was called "Heroin for my Heart". And while the idea of writing a song with a drug reference might make some of you uncomfortable, the name came from a lyric in the chorus: "I'm addicted to you, you're heroin for my heart".

Most people when they hear a lyric like this understand that it's a metaphor. It's something that is true, but not literal. It's true in the sense that this relationship was fundamentally addictive. It's not literal in the sense that the person wasn't actually being injected with a drug, much less injected directly into the heart. We are able to make space for artists and poets and writers to speak about literal things in metaphorical ways, and we understand that depending on the situation depending on the conversation at hand sometimes a metaphor actually increases and aids communication.

Some of you may remember a few years back when the Oxford dictionary added an update to the definition of the adverb "literally". From the Oxford dictionary I present the following definition, labeled as "colloquial", or common use:

"Literally: used to indicate that some (frequently conventional) metaphorical or hyperbolic expression is to be taken in the strongest *admissible sense*: 'virtually, as good as'; (also) 'completely, utterly, absolutely'."

I remember when this happened, and I was literally appalled.

I wasn't really, I am actually a fan of updating the word, perhaps since I myself am prone to bouts of intense over-dramaticism and hyperbolic wordplay. But I

think my favorite bit in the added definition is a little subheading in fine print, just under the definition:

“Now one of the most common uses, although often considered irregular in standard English since it reverses the original sense of *literally* (‘not figuratively or metaphorically’).”

Congratulations, English speakers, we managed to use a word incorrectly for so *long* the dictionaries needed to redefine it.

Now, when talking about something like the Bible this idea of the writing being metaphorical or poetic can make some people uncomfortable. It can make Christians uncomfortable because there’s this unspoken expectation that Holy Scripture is as completely, literally, true as possible. It can make non-Christians uncomfortable because they aren’t going to have the same level of understanding, or study, or equipping to learn what parts are supposed to be metaphor versus what parts are supposed to be taken very literally, *and* they often feel we are using circular reasoning in relation to our claims that the Word of God is authoritative and true. Additionally, non-literal writing adds difficulty for us as we study, trying to discern for ourselves what is to be taken hyper literally versus what is not. All this is assuming that the person in question even wants to understand!

So, we’re going to dig into this question of “how can you take the Bible literally”, and this is a *big* topic. Part of the reason this is such a big topic of conversation is because this question gets broken into multiple specific points of contention with the literal reading of scripture. Dr. McLaughlin breaks this question into multiple points, and thus, so shall we. Today will be a broad level overview of Biblical understanding and interpretation, and then the next several weeks will cover the questions: “hasn’t science disproved Christianity”, “doesn’t Christianity denigrate women”, “Isn’t Christianity homophobic”, and “doesn’t the Bible condone slavery”, which all have key components in Biblical interpretation and outworking.

I want to start with a very simple point: Crosspoint, and Christians in general, believes that scripture is the divinely inspired Word of God. In fact, this is so central to our church, that it’s the very first point in our statement of faith: “We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it

has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.” My prayer is that our actions are such that this does not come as a surprise to anyone.

Now, the stickier question: if we believe the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, does that mean we take the Bible literally? Here’s my one and only point today, and it might make some of you squirm, but hear me out: Christians don’t take the Bible *literally*, we take the Bible *truthfully*.

How can I say that? Well let’s take a look!

2 Peter 1:16–21 ESV

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Okay so in 2 Peter, we see a few things happening. Peter is offering here a rebuttal to a school of thought that was becoming prevalent in the church to which he was writing regarding the second coming and the resurrection of the body of believers. But in doing so, he’s reminding his audience, and thus us, that Peter was an eyewitness to the transfiguration we read about in the Gospels. He witnessed the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ and heard as God the Father proclaimed Jesus as His son.

Peter continues to say that this was a completion, a “full confirmation”, of the “prophetic word”, which are the OT scriptures. And because those prophecies were seen fulfilled, he’s warning the church he’s writing to about paying attention to the Word. Now, many people argue that this is circular reasoning. They say, well your scriptures are saying they themselves prove...themselves! But we don’t use circular reasoning as Christians.

We don't *only* believe in God or the truth of scripture because the Bible says so. We believe in God and the truth of scripture because the Bible says so *and* we see it playing out in the lives of those around us. This was a model shown to us in these early writings of the church, but it continues even today. It's why we ask people to share their testimonies when they get baptized, or when we're gathered for Men's Breakfast.

2 Timothy 3:16 ESV

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

If we believe that scripture shows us what to expect from God and His Word to us, and then we witness that work in people's lives, of course we'd start to take it seriously, and take it as truth, right?

I did a workout program a few years ago, and it was a beast. The program instructions said if I ate a certain way and followed their schedule of workouts, I would drop fat and gain muscle. As I followed the directions, wouldn't you know, I dropped fat and gained muscle. Is that circular reasoning to say that the workout program actually delivered on its promises? No! Yet people struggle with understanding the same process related to scripture.

There's a fundamental misunderstanding that's often occurring when someone asks how we can take the Bible literally. What's assumed is that in order to take the Bible *truthfully*, we have to take every word in it as literally as possible. But to do so is actually to disregard how God is communicating truth! So, hear me, and hear me clearly: there is no Christian who takes the Bible literally, word for word. It doesn't exist. Nobody can do that because it flies in the face of communication. Imagery, satire, drama, hyperbole, narrative, poetry, law, apocalyptic literature, all of these and more are found in scripture, and we read them all slightly differently. Jesus regularly spoke in parables (simple stories used to illustrate truth), and even called himself a gate, a shepherd, a bridegroom, a vine, and light. Others in scripture call Jesus a lion, and in other places he's called a lamb. These are all very clearly metaphors, symbolic of a deep truth.

God leans *into* the medium of writing for communication, not away from. God isn't saying "Oh, well they want to sing me songs, so I guess I'll try and get my point across to them through poetic metaphor."

The metaphors and symbolism convey truth in a deeper and more meaningful way than simply stating truth as a series of logic proofs or bullet point list of facts. I've heard it said that Bible stands for "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth", and while I totally get that idea, the Bible isn't *just* a training manual for life. It's a love story between the God of the universe and us. We have to read scripture *within the context of how it was intended to be read*. Let's look at a silly and safe example of [Psalm 62](#).

Psalm 62:2 ESV

He alone is my rock and my salvation,

my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

This is a song that was written to praise God, and the writer is saying that God is a rock and is a fortified building. Why don't we read that as an inherent contradiction? Because we understand the *truth* that's being conveyed, right? I'm not trying to be facetious here, but the question of "how can you take the Bible literally" often becomes a throwaway attempt to discredit believers. I've had conversations with friends before where I explain the reason I don't condone sex outside of marriage: I believe that scripture shows us that sex is intended for inside the sanctity of a marriage, and we will actually live more fulfilling and complete lives if we follow scripture. One of the most common responses I get, and maybe you've gotten this or seen this online: "oh, so do you avoid wearing clothes of mixed fiber, too", or some other verse pulled from the old civil law. Maybe it's the shellfish law. Now obviously, they know that I *don't* avoid mixed fibers; and their approach is understandable, because they don't approach scripture the same way believers are supposed to. They're referencing [Leviticus 19](#) and/or [Deuteronomy 22](#), part of Israel's civil code, and not something that is binding for Christians today.

Then they follow up with something like, "aren't you just cherry-picking what you take literally for your own benefit, to impose your own morality on others."

The first several times this happened, I found myself dumbstruck, unsure how to respond to such a line of questioning. It seemed perfectly reasonable, especially when I was a relatively new believer. But here's where they are missing the mark, they *are* pulling those verses out of the context in which they are written. Those verses exist inside *legal* literature that were written *to* an Ancient Near

East culture, in a different language, with a different set of social and cultural realities. We have to start with understanding what these documents were intended for, not because that demonstrates their humanness, but because God leans *into* these types of written communication in order to make Himself *easier* to understand. Our God communicates *truth* through His word.

At the conclusion of the 2 Peter verses, it says “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The words of scripture were written *by* men, but the words are *God-breathed*.

Maybe you’ve heard someone say, “well, I really like what Jesus had to say, so I read *those* parts of the Bible, but the Old Testament is outdated and unnecessary.” But this is inherently contradictory, because in the limited documentation we have of Jesus’ life for his 3 years of ministry, he quotes the Old Testament 76 times. That’s direct quoting; it doesn’t include when he’s alluding or referencing the Old Testament. Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi. You know who took the Old Testament seriously, as God’s written truth? Jesus. So, if you like what Jesus had to say, then you should like the Old Testament as well.

So, here’s the meat of the question: how do we know what scripture is trying to say? If we take the Bible truthfully, and that we should read it as it’s meant to be read, what do I mean by that?

There are hundreds of types of *literature* present in scripture. Just like us, when we read different works, we should approach these different types of literature as they are intended to be approached. You wouldn’t interpret the content of a Stephen King novel the same way you would CS Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, which is a non-fiction work, and you wouldn’t have the same expectations of a biography on George Washington as you would a book about prayer by John Piper. The type of content present in all of those examples is filtered through your brain in *different ways*. This is why, for those who read novels, you have genres that are more your favorite than others.

God leverages the added depth of literature styles to increase the fullness of His communication to us. We’re moving into fall. Let’s say you take an evening stroll. Which of these descriptors is filled with more *meaning*? “I took a walk last

night in the chilly weather. The sun was shining red, and there wasn't a cloud in sight."

Or this:

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

This is a poem by T.E. Hulme, cleverly called "Autumn". Which conveyed a deeper meaning? They both said the same thing, but I'd argue that the poem allows us to consider the emotional interaction of the author with the autumn evening. The first statements were just presenting information, the poem presents information emotionally. Our God has emotions towards us. Simply presenting His letter to us with information doesn't convey the deep *truth* of God's love for us. For you.

Psalm 51:10 ESV

Create in me a clean heart, O God,

and renew a right spirit within me.

One of my favorite symbolic metaphors in scripture. How can you take the Bible literally? is an incomplete question. I take the Bible literally *as it was intended to be taken*. I take the Bible *truthfully*.

Now, listen, when somebody throws this question at you, don't respond in frustration. I do more often than I'd like to admit, because it can get exhausting to hear this thrown out, and it often feels like an attack when someone asks. But part of what we, as leaders, want to equip you for is to have these conversations well, and in such a way that honors God.

Proverbs 15:1-2 ESV

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.

1 Peter 3:15 ESV

but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

Often when people are asking this question of you, they are *either* genuinely curious, or they're trying to convince you that taking the Bible literally is wrong or silly or dumb, and responding in anger or frustration gives them a self-justification to be harsh and angry right back. Isn't that just human nature when someone we're talking to gets agitated? Gently respond, turn the question back on them, ask some probing questions to better understand what they're seeking to understand. "What do you mean by taking the Bible literally?" Often when you do that, you'll find they're actually wrestling with one of the questions we'll be talking about in the coming weeks, or some other *specific* point of frustration with scripture.

It's also possible that the person asking you is a believer. Maybe they're going through a season of deconstruction or questioning, maybe they're a newer believer, maybe they've just never gotten a good answer and they need a book like this to learn how to converse about it. I remember a few years back, I was driving to church, or to work, and I saw this bumper sticker on the car in front of me from a local church. It had the name of the church, and then it said "where we take the Bible seriously, not literally". While I understand what they're trying to rebel against, I find that it stirs up more division than it creates unity, because it's degrading believers who would say they take the Bible literally. Because if we take the Bible seriously, we take it literally when it's meant to be taken literally. We take the Bible truthfully.

Dr. McLaughlin references a significant disagreement between the Roman Catholic doctrine and Protestant doctrine that I find helpful for understanding the challenge this question of literalness poses internally for the body of believers - namely that we don't always *know* if something is meant to be literal or not. She talks about when Jesus is breaking the bread and blessing the wine during the Last Supper, which Jeff blessed us by reading last week during our communion meditation; and the difference between those beliefs is a question of whether the bread is literally becoming the body of Jesus and the wine is literally becoming the blood of Jesus, in a process known as transubstantiation.

The Roman Catholics adhere to this belief. Protestants believe that was a metaphor, a symbolic act, not a literal statement.

We need to understand that when we say we take the Bible literally, it means we take it *truthfully*. Truth isn't always literal, sometimes it's metaphorical, or symbolic. So, we must consider scripture within the context in which it was written, at the time it was written, because God leans *into* this medium of communication, not away from it. Not to mention that when you factor in translation and what can get lost, we end up with multiple English translations that sometimes use different words for the same concept. That's why our statement of faith says, "without error in the original manuscripts".

Did you know that in the early church, around the year 200 (AD), you were *required* to do *three years* of schooling with a teacher from the church in order to become a baptized member. You would have lessons once a week outside the regular weekly church service. If they took off four weeks a year, this is 144 hours of learning as a *starting point*.

Or during the Lenten season, around the 300s, we know of catechesis that lasted 3 hours a day, six days a week, for those seven weeks heading up to Easter. And then Easter was a day filled with baptisms, the symbolic representation of the resurrection of the believer into the life provided by the resurrection of Jesus. That's 126 hours of study.

Sometimes I wish there were better opportunities to learn how to address these types of subject matters for the church. [Ephesians 4](#) talks of us growing in our knowledge of the Son of God to maturity, that our unity would be strengthened. Because we often mistake dogma and clarity for revelation, but there is a lot of gray in the world, and even in scripture. That can make us uncomfortable as believers, and can be confusing to those outside the body of believers. It's natural that we would desire clarity, and in an effort to achieve that clarity, we would want to lean into as literal of a reading of scripture as we could in every situation. The problem is we aren't called to clarity, we are called to peace.

[1 Corinthians 14:33](#) (ESV)

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

Notice, the opposite of confusion isn't clarity, or certainty. The opposite of confusion is *peace*. It's not wrong to seek clarity, but we may not get it. We are

promised peace, though. So how can we take the Bible literally? We take it literally because we believe the trinitarian God communicates His revelation to us through His son, and the Holy Spirit guided the hands of the authors of scripture as written in the original languages, and also guided the decisions of the church leaders who were determining canonization. We take it literally because we see the truths declared in it being lived out through the church. We take it literally in the way of that addendum to the Oxford dictionary, in “the most admissible sense”, which simply means we approach each writing of scripture the way it was intended to be approached, as God leans into communicating with us, not away from it. How can we take the Bible literally? By taking it truthfully.