

Dear Aebi: *How can you tell if a passage is to be understood figuratively or if it means just what it says on the surface?*



Context is the major factor, but one must use common sense as well, in determining whether a word or statement is to be understood as literal or figurative. The use of figurative language is a whole separate aspect of the study of Scripture interpretation. Context includes the immediate context and the remote context. To determine the *immediate context*, ask (1) What is said or stated, by whom, to whom, and when? (2) What is being discussed or taught in the passage; what is its purpose? (3) What statements in the immediate context limit or define the passage's meaning?

The *remote or broader context* is brought into the discussion by asking (1) What is said elsewhere in that Bible book on the subject of the passage in question? (2) What is said elsewhere in the New Testament on the subject of the passage? (3) What Biblical principles, Old Testament or New Testament, apply to the subject of the passage? Remember that a rule of context is that a passage may never mean what it never meant: the historical intent of the passage when it was originally written is vitally important. Of course, the principle embodied in a passage may be applied to similar situations encountered in modern life.

The literal or face-value meaning of a word or statement is to be used unless there is good reason for understanding it figuratively. Generally speaking, all words should be **understood literally unless** a reason exists to apply a word figuratively. (1) The context may show a word to be figurative, as in Matthew 26:27, where "cup" is used figuratively to mean its contents, the fruit of the vine. (2) A word must be figurative when the literal meaning is illogical or impossible, as in Matthew 20:22-23; 1 Corinthians 3:2; and Psalm 58:3. (3) If the literal meaning makes it contradict other Scriptures, it should be understood to be figurative. In John 11:26, Jesus said, "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die," which cannot literally mean physical death or it would contradict Hebrews 9:27, which says it is appointed for man to die once. (4) Where taking a word literally requires actions that are wrong or forbids actions that are good; thus Matthew 5:29-30 (plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand) is not to be taken literally. (5) Some words are said by the author to be figurative; John 2:18-22; 7:37-39; and Galatians 4:24 are examples of this. (6) A word is figurative when the definite is put for the indefinite; "day" in Hebrews 3:8 is used figuratively to mean 40 years. (7) When it is said in mockery or sarcasm, as the Jews did in Acts 2:13 when they said the apostles were intoxicated on fresh grape juice ("new wine"), it is figurative. These principles and others will be found in such books as *Hermeneutics* by D. R. Dungan and *Principles of Interpretation* by Clinton Lockhart.

By applying these principles, which are mainly just common sense, we can readily see that when Jesus said in John 15:1-4 that God was God is the vinedresser, that Jesus himself was the vine, and that the disciples were the branches, he was speaking figuratively. We know that Jesus was not literally a grape vine and that disciples are not literal grapevine branches, and that God is not literally a vinegrower or grape farmer. The context in John 15:1-16 shows clearly that Jesus was speaking allegorically (figuratively) to describe the relationship we as disciples have with Christ, God, and each other.

The simplest, most logical, and most direct approach to the context will be found to be the best in most cases. To use common sense will usually guide us in understand the difference between literal and figurative in Scripture as in other writing and communication. "He drove the ball through the pitcher, the second baseman, and the shortstop, and he made it around first and second, only to die on third" is obviously not to be taken literally. However, to understand it figuratively requires some knowledge of the baseball context, and so it is with passages of Scripture.

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