

What Does Literal Mean?

by Fred DeRuvo – Study-Grow-Know Ministries

I have to admit that I was slightly frustrated. Does being literal mean that every word, phrase, or sentence should to be taken literally as it is written, or does it mean that every word, phrase or sentence should be taken literally as it is *actually meant*? I had thought that it was self-explanatory, but apparently not. In fact, it has certainly seemed that more and more folks lately are bringing the charge that where the study of the Bible is concerned, it appears to them that literalists are not really literalists at all. Literalists are seen as merely picking and choosing, in order to advance their intended goal of reading *into* Scripture what they want to get *out* of Scripture.

Literal or Actual?

This whole subject got me thinking about language in general and how people are even able to understand one another in conversation. Do we take one another literally during discussion, or do we strive to understand what the person actually means, in spite of the fact that figures of speech are used?

The first thing I needed to figure out was the meaning of the term ‘literal.’ I headed to the dictionary and found this definition from MacMillan’s Dictionary:

1. Following the exact words: *the student prepared a literal translation of the German poem.*
2. Based on or following exactly; not figurative or metaphorical: *the literal sense of the word.*
3. Having a tendency to regard what is said in an exact and unimaginative manner: *a literal person.*
4. Factual; unexaggerated: *a literal description.*
5. Of, relating to, or expressed by letters¹

I then looked up the word ‘literalism’ in the same dictionary and read this: *adherence to the exact meaning in a translation or interpretation*². When I thought about it then, the definition for ‘literalism’ was close to the mark. Did the word “literal” throw everyone for a loop? Maybe it was time for a new word. But stopping to consider it, why would the word “literal” throw people off?

The Literalness of Being Literal

Somehow, in some way over the past decades, people have gotten the erroneous impression that taking the Bible literally means that every word is taken only in its most

¹ Simon & Schuster, *MacMillan Dictionary* (New York: 1981), p 597

² *Ibid*, p 597

literal sense and cannot possibly have any other meaning. Therefore, metaphors, similes, and all manner of figures of speech are completely ignored. So, if somewhere in the biblical text it states that “Jacob was so hungry, he could have eaten an elephant,” then it is assumed that the Literalist would be forced to take those words exactly how they are stated, as opposed to what they actually mean. This can best be termed as having a *legalistic approach* to Scripture.

If this was the case, then the same rule would apply not just to the Bible, but to everyday conversation and other written forms of literature as well. Yet it is clear that this is not the case. People (even those labeled Literalists) do not force artificial meaning onto something just because they are Literalists.

Getting to the Meaning

When studying the Bible, my goal is to determine the actual meaning in the text that is being studied. The key then seems to be in the meaning, not in the word, phrase, or sentence itself. The words, phrases, and sentences *point* to or *provide* the possibility of meaning, but meaning is not solely determined by those words, phrases, or sentences. There are other things involved that help define the actual meaning.

That last statement may sound odd, but give it a chance to sink in. Here is an example that may help. When two people are having a discussion, they are able to understand one another because there is a mutual appreciation and comprehension of the language they are using in that conversation. Two people who do not speak the same language while trying to communicate would have an extremely difficult time at best. Their communication would likely degrade into hand signals and a lot of pointing.

The reality of communication then, or conversation, has more to do with the fact that people gain the same *meaning* from the words they use even if they both do not use the same words to describe the same thing. As long as each person has a strong sense of what the other person is attempting to communicate, then conversation can actually take place.

Communication is slowed or halted completely when one or both individuals fail to comprehend what the other is saying, and that usually happens when one or both of the individuals cannot gain the meaning that is meant from what the other person says. Maybe it would be best to look more in depth at this, so head with me to the next chapter.

Since the Bible is the focal point of this particular book, it would be beneficial to use examples from God’s Word to help define and understand what is meant when referring to how one gains the literal sense of meaning from the text.

In the second chapter of the gospel of John, we see something occurring in the life of Jesus that got the notice of the locals, and it was designed for just that purpose.

Alone or Together?

First, let us consider the events that led up to the situation in question. Jesus had just attended the wedding at Cana, where He had turned water into wine. After this, He traveled to Capernaum and stayed a few days with His mother and brothers. Since the Passover Feast was coming up, Jesus then headed to Jerusalem. The text clearly says “...Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” (John 2:13b) Please note that it does not say that the disciples went with Him. More on that in a minute.

Upon arriving, He went to the Temple as most Jews would have done. The text then describes for us the situation that took place just after He arrived at the Temple. *“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”* (John 2:14-17 ESV)

So far, we have Jesus arriving in Jerusalem and the Temple specifically. Upon entering the Temple area, He is upset to see that it has essentially become a ‘den of thieves’ because of all the buying and selling that was going on. Jesus is upset enough to decide to do something about it, so He makes a whip of cords, and drives them all out, overturning their tables as He does so.

Before we move on to the main point, it would be helpful to comment on one or two specifics here in order to illustrate the nature of taking the text literally.

We see that Jesus is in Cana with His disciples. The text then reveals that Jesus heads to Capernaum and stays with His mother and brothers. The next step is that Jesus heads to Jerusalem. There is no mention of His disciples until after He chases the money changers out of the Temple area. We then note that after He accuses the money changers of turning His Father’s house into a ‘house of trade,’ the disciples are present.

If I am to take the text literally, I would have to say that Jesus went to Capernaum and Jerusalem by Himself, completely alone. However, it could be that since Jesus was, in effect, the Leader, John chose only to mention Him as going to Capernaum and then onto Jerusalem. It is very possible that the disciples accompanied Him to both places. The other alternative is that they met Jesus there and He did in fact travel alone to Capernaum and then to Jerusalem