

Solid Ground

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November/December 2013

Quick Summary

- Taking "Literally" Literally
- Literal vs. Lateral
- Reading the Ordinary Way
- Two Thoughts on Metaphor
- The Most Important Thing

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N THIS ISSUE:



There's hardly a question with more theological confusion associated with it than the question, "Do you take the Bible literally?" For faithful Christians wary of any approach that might water down the message, our first impulse is to answer, "Yes." We want to be faithful to the fundamental doctrine of Biblical inerrancy and authority. But now we face a challenge. Is everything in Scripture literally true? In this issue of *Solid Ground*, I answer that question. I detail precisely how to clear up the taking-the-Bible-literally confusion while upholding the authority of God's inerrant Word. I also provide key concepts to help you understand Scripture more accurately. And you might be surprised how easy it is.

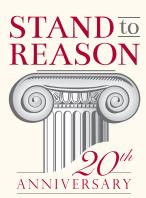
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Clear-thinking Christianity

November 1, 2013

Dear Friend,

There's hardly a question with more theological confusion associated with it than the question, "Do you take the Bible literally?"

For faithful Christians wary of any approach that might water down the message, our first impulse is to answer, "Yes." We want to be faithful to the fundamental doctrine of Biblical inerrancy and authority. But now we face a challenge. Is everything in Scripture literally true?

Of course, this is not what we mean. Virtually no writing is completely literal.

Sports pages, for example, are filled with reliable facts and figures, yet no one is tempted to think that a football team was *literally* "crushed," "mangled," "mutilated," "pounded," "stomped," "shredded," or "devoured." Figures of speech abound. The same is true with the Bible.

No, we mean something else when we say we take the Bible literally. But what exactly is it?

In this issue of *Solid Ground*, I answer that question. I detail precisely how to clear up the taking-the-Bible-literally confusion while upholding the authority of God's inerrant Word. I also provide key concepts to help you understand Scripture more accurately, no matter what level of education you have.

And you might be surprised how easy it is.

Our mission—no, our passion—at Stand to Reason is to help you develop as a Christian Ambassador who can handle the Word of God carefully, communicate its knowledge clearly, and defend it graciously.

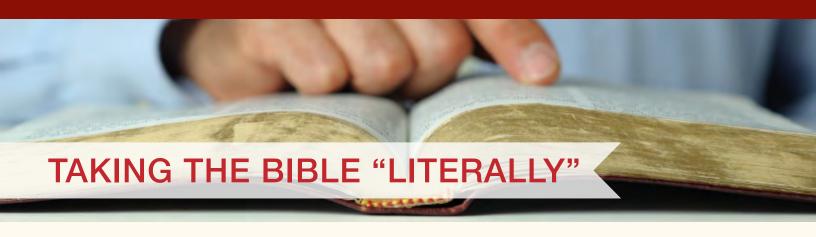
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I look forward to hearing from you—and thank you for your commitment to our work. It continues to vield eternal dividends.

In His debt and yours,

Kouhl

Greg Koukl



By Greg Koukl

I never like the question, "Do you take the Bible literally?" It comes up with some frequency, and it deserves a response. But I think it's an ambiguous—and, therefore, confusing—question, making it awkward to answer.

Clearly, even those of us with a high <u>view of</u> <u>Scripture</u> don't take *everything* literally. Jesus is the "door," but He's not made of wood. We are the "branches," but we're not sprouting leaves.

On the other hand, we do take *seriously* accounts others find fanciful and far-fetched: a man made from mud (Adam), loaves and fishes miraculously multiplied, vivified corpses rising from graves, etc.

A short "yes" or "no" response to the "Do you take the Bible literally?" question, then, would <u>not be helpful</u>. Neither answer gives the full picture. In fact, I think it's the wrong question since frequently something else is driving the query.

Taking "Literally" Literally

Let's start with a definition. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, the word "literal" means "taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory, free from exaggeration or distortion." Why do people balk at this common-sense notion when it comes to the Bible or, more precisely, certain passages in the Bible?

Let's face it, even non-Christians read the Bible in its "usual or most basic sense" most of the time on points that are not controversial. They readily take statements like "love your neighbor as yourself" or "remember the poor" at face value. When citing Jesus' directive, "Do not judge," they're not deterred by the challenge, "You don't take the Bible literally, do you?"

No, when critics agree with the point of a passage, they take the words in their ordinary and customary sense. They naturally understand that language works a certain way in everyday communication, and it never occurs to them to think otherwise.

Unless, of course, the details of the text trouble them for some reason.

What of the opening chapters of Genesis? Is this a straightforward account describing historical events the way they actually happened? Were Adam and Eve real people, the first human beings? Was Adam created from dust? Did Eve really come from Adam's rib? Did Jonah actually survive three days in the belly of a great fish? Did a virgin really have a baby? Such claims seem so fanciful to many people it's hard for them to take the statements at face value.

Other times, the critic simply does not like what he reads. He abandons the "literal" approach when he comes across something in the text that offends his own philosophical, theological, or moral sensibilities. Jesus the only way of salvation? No way. Homosexuality a sin? Please. A "loving" God sending anyone to the eternal torture of Hell? Not a chance.

Notice the objection with these teachings is not based on some ambiguity making alternate interpretations plausible, since the Scripture affirms these truths with the same clarity as "love your

neighbor." No, these verses simply offend. Suddenly, the critic becomes a skeptic and sniffs, "You don't take the Bible *literally*, do you?"

This subtle double standard,

This subtle double standard, I think, is usually at the heart of the taking-the-Bible-literally challenge.
Sometimes the ruse is hard to unrayel.

An example might be helpful here.



Literal vs. Lateral

In the Law of Moses, homosexual activity was punishable by death (Lev. 18:22-23) and (20:13). Therefore (the charge goes), any Christian who takes the Bible literally must advocate the execution of homosexuals.

Of course, the strategy with this move is obvious: If we don't promote executing homosexuals, we can't legitimately condemn their behavior, since both details are in the Bible. If we don't take the Bible literally in the first case, we shouldn't in the second case, either. That's being inconsistent.

How do we escape the horns of this dilemma? By using care and precision with our definitions, that's how.

Here's our first question: When Moses wrote the Law, did he expect the Jewish people to take those regulations literally? If you're not sure how to answer, let me ask it another way. When an ordinance is passed in your local state (California, in my case), do you think the legislators intend its citizens to understand the words of the regulations "in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory, free from exaggeration or distortion"?

Of course they do. Legal codes are not written in figurative language allowing each citizen to get creative with the meaning. The same would be true for the Mosaic Law. Moses meant it the way he wrote it.

JUST BECAUSE A BIBLICAL COMMAND IS INTENDED TO BE UNDERSTOOD LITERALLY, DOES NOT MEAN IT IS INTENDED TO BE APPLIED LATERALLY.

But now, it seems, we're stuck on the other horn of the dilemma. To be consistent, shouldn't we currently campaign for the death penalty for homosexuals? For that matter, aren't we obliged to promote execution for disobedient children and Sabbath-breakers, both capital crimes under the Law?

The simple answer is no. Here's why. Just because a biblical command is intended to be understood literally, does not mean it is intended to be applied laterally, that is, universally across the board to all peoples at all times in all places. Consider this situation. Jesus told Peter to cast his net in deep water (Luke 5:4). That's exactly what Peter did because he took Jesus' command literally, in its

ordinary sense. He had no reason to think otherwise. However, because Jesus' command to Peter was *literal* does not mean the same command applies *laterally* to everyone else. *We're* not obliged to cast nets into deep water just because Peter was.

Here's another way of looking at it. No matter what state you live in, the California legal codes are to be *read* literally, but don't have *lateral* application to all states. They only apply to those in California.

In the same way, the words of the Mosaic Law, like those of all laws, are to be taken at face value by anyone who reads them. Yet only those under its jurisdiction are obliged to obey its precepts.

The Jews in the theocracy were expected to obey the legal code God gave them, including the prohibition of and punishment for homosexuality. It was not the legal code God gave to gentiles, however. Therefore, even if the words of the Mosaic Law are to be taken literally by those under the jurisdiction of that code, this does not mean that in our current circumstances we are governed by the details of the provisions of that Law.

A clarification is necessary here. Am I saying that nothing written in the Mosaic Law is ever applicable to Christians or other gentiles or that there are no



universal moral obligations that humanity shares with the Jews of Moses' time. No, I'm not saying that.

Though Moses gave legal statutes for Jews under the theocracy, that Law in some cases still reflects moral universals that have application for those outside the nation of Israel. Yes, we can glean wisdom and moral guidance from the Law of Moses for our own legal codes, but there are limits. Working out those details is a different discussion, however.1

The question here is not whether we *take* the Mosaic Law literally, but whether we are now under that legal code. We are not. That law was meant for Jews living under a theocracy defined by their unique covenant with God. Simply because a directive appears in the Mosaic Law does not, by that fact alone, make it obligatory for those living outside of Israel's commonwealth.

Americans are a mixture of peoples in a representative republic governed by a different set of decrees than the Jews under Moses. We are not obliged to obey everything that came down from Sinai. Just because it was commanded of the Nation of Israel does not necessarily mean it is commanded of us. If anyone thinks otherwise, he is duty-bound to take his net and cast it into deep water.

That confusion aside, we're still faced with our original question: When do we take the Bible literally?

Reading the Ordinary Way

Here's how I would lay the groundwork for an answer. If I'm asked if I take the Bible literally, I would say I think that's the wrong question. I'd say instead that I take the Bible in its ordinary sense, that is, I try to take the things recorded there with the <u>precision</u> I think the writer intended.

I realize this reply might also be a bit ambiguous, but here, I think, that's a strength. Hopefully, my comment will prompt a request for clarification. This is exactly what I want. I'd clarify by countering with a question: "Do you read the sports page literally?"

If I asked you this question, I think you'd pause because there is a sense in which everyone reads the sports page in a straightforward way. Certain factual information is part of every story in that section. However, you wouldn't take everything written in a woodenly literal way that ignores the conventions of the craft.

"Literally?" you might respond. "That depends. If the writer seems to be stating a fact—like a score, a location, a player's name, a description of the plays leading to a touchdown—then I'd take that as literal. If he seems to be using a figure of speech, then I'd read his statement that way, figuratively, not literally."

Exactly. Sportswriters use a particular style to communicate the details of athletic contests clearly. They choose precise (and sometimes imaginative) words and phrases to convey a solid sense of the particulars in an entertaining way.

Sportswriters routinely use words like "annihilated," "crushed," "mangled," "mutilated," "stomped," and "pounded," yet no one speculates about literal meanings. Readers don't scratch their heads wondering if cannibalism was involved when they read "the Anaheim Angels devoured the St. Louis Cardinals."

We recognize such constructions as figures of speech used to communicate in colorful ways events that actually ("literally") took place. In fact, we never give those details a second thought because we understand how language works.

When a writer seems to be communicating facts in a straightforward fashion, we read them as such. When we encounter obvious figures of speech, we take them that way, too.

That's the normal way to read the sports page. It's also the normal—and responsible—way to read any work, including the Bible. Always ask, "What is this writer trying to communicate?" This is exactly what I'm after when I say, "I take the Bible in its ordinary sense."

Of course, someone may differ with the clear point the Bible is making. Fair enough. There's





TrueU: Who Is Jesus? DVD *NEW*

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For over 2,000 years, people everywhere have continued to grapple with the all-important question, "Who is Jesus?"

The answer is available, but is often clouded by misunderstanding and mistruth. Unfortunately, this is especially the case on today's college campuses, where facts are regularly blurred in the name of tolerance and pluralism.

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Included is an expanded 96-page full-color booklet with discussion questions and visual aids, as well as a leader's discussion guide in PDF with guestions and exercises to enhance your group study experience.



Never Read a Bible Verse: Case Studies *NEW*

Gregory Koukl, Two Audio CDs with PDF Booklet (CD313) \$9.95

Also available as an MP3 download

For years, Greg has taught that the single most important practical skill a Christian can learn is to "never read a Bible verse"--that is, to never read a single Bible verse in isolation from its context. In order to unlock the meaning of a particular passage of Scripture, one must always read at least a paragraph of the surrounding material. Unfortunately, our inattention as Christians to this contextual consideration has resulted in some serious misunderstandings of key Bible verses. In an attempt to address some of this confusion, Greg has taken to the radio airwaves to apply his trademark hermeneutic principle to some specific passages, providing a model for how Christians should approach such challenges. These radio commentaries are now available here in a single collection.



Ancient Words: Reflections on the Reliability and Proper Use of Scripture Gregory Koukl, 110 pages (BK361) \$10.76

"Did God really say...?" It's the oldest temptation in human history, one that targets the authority of God's Word at its very foundation. Its modern rephrasing takes many different forms, both in academia and in popular culture: Are the New Testament documents reliable? Have ancient biblical books been lost or suppressed by the early church? Are the words of the Bible just flawed human inventions? These questions introduce doubt at the point of contact between God and man, undermining the Christian's confidence in the words of Scripture.

In this timely collection of essays, Greg Koukl carefully and lucidly addresses each of these issues, providing both solid evidence for the reliability of Scripture and a clear roadmap for how it should be read and applied. His wellreasoned responses to these popular challenges to biblical authority will help reinforce the Christian's confidence in this trustworthy book.







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nothing dishonest about disagreement. Or they might think some Christian is mistaken on its meaning. Misinterpretation is always possible. Conjuring up some meaning that has little to do with the words the writer used, though, is not a legitimate alternative.

If someone disagrees with the obvious sense of a passage, ask them for the reasons they think the text should be an exception to the otherwise sound "ordinary sense" rule. Their answer will tell you if their challenge is intellectually honest, or if they're just trying to dismiss biblical claims they simply don't like.

ALWAYS ASK, "WHAT IS THIS WRITER TRYING TO COMMUNICATE?" THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I'M AFTER WHEN I SAY, "I TAKE THE BIBLE IN ITS ORDINARY SENSE."

Two Thoughts on Metaphor

Reading any writing the ordinary way requires we understand two points about figurative speech, both implicit in the concept of metaphor.

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines metaphor as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable...a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else." So, metaphors take one meaning of a word and then creatively leverage it into another meaning to make an impact on a reader.

Here is the first point to be clear on: All metaphors (or other forms of figurative writing) rely *first* on literal definitions *before* they can be of any use as figures of speech.

All words must first be understood in their "usual or most basic sense" before they can be used metaphorically. We find, for example, the word "shepherd" prominently featured in the 23rd Psalm. Do you see that we must first understand the literal meaning of "shepherd" before the phrase "the Lord is my shepherd" has any figurative power?

This point is critical for <u>accurate biblical</u> <u>interpretation</u>. Here's why.

Sometimes we attempt to solve interpretive problems by digging through a Bible dictionary. This can be a helpful place to start, but since all figurative language trades in some way on dictionary definitions, the dictionary is not the final word. It can never tell you what *use* a specific writer is *making* of any particular word

Strictly speaking, since no word is a metaphor in itself, words cannot be used metaphorically unless they're embedded in a context. Therefore, it makes no sense to ask of a solitary word, "Is the word meant literally?" because the word standing on its own gives no indication.

Dictionaries by definition can only deal with words in isolation. Other things—context, genre, flow of thought, etc.—determine if the word's literal sense is being applied in a non-literal way, symbolically "regarded as representative" of something else.

FIRST, LITERAL DEFINITIONS MUST BE IN PLACE FIRST BEFORE A WORD CAN BE USED FIGURATIVELY.

Take two sentences, "The sunshine streamed through my window," and, "Sweetheart, you're a ray of sunshine to me this morning." Sunshine's literal *meaning* is the same in each case. However, it is *used* literally in the first sentence, but metaphorically in the second. Further, unless my wife understands the literal meaning of "sunshine," she will never understand the compliment I'm offering her in a poetic sort of way.



So first, literal definitions must be in place first before a word can be used figuratively. Second, metaphors are always meant to *clarify*, not *obscure*.²

There's a sense in which figurative speech drives an author's meaning home in ways that words taken in the ordinary way could never do. "All good allegory," C.S. Lewis notes, "exists not to hide, but to reveal, to make the inner world more palpable by giving it an (imagined) concrete embodiment."³

Figurative speech communicates literal truth in a more precise and powerful way than ordinary language can on its own. The strictly literal comment, "Honey, your presence makes me feel good today" doesn't pack the punch that the "sunshine" figure provides. The metaphor makes my precise point more powerfully than "words in their usual or most basic sense" could accomplish.

...EVEN WHEN METAPHOR IS IN PLAY, SOME LITERAL MESSAGE IS ALWAYS INTENDED.

Remember, even when metaphor is in play, *some literal message is always intended*. Hell may not have literal flames⁴, but the reality is at least as gruesome, ergo the figure.

Once again, it's always right to ask, "What is the *precise meaning* the writer is trying to communicate with his colorful language?" But how do we do that? Here I have a suggestion.

The Most Important Thing

If there was one bit of wisdom, one rule of thumb, one useful tip I could offer to help you solve the riddle of Scriptural meaning, it's this: Never read a Bible verse. That's right, never read a Bible verse. Instead, always read a paragraph—at least.

On the radio I use this simple rule to help me answer the majority of Bible questions I'm asked, even when I'm not familiar with the particular passage. When I quickly survey the paragraph containing the verse in question, the larger context almost always provides the information I need to help me understand what's going on.

This works because of a basic rule of all communication: Meaning flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units. The key to the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph, not just from the <u>individual words</u>.

Here's how it works. First, get the big picture. Look at the broader context of the book. What type of writing is it—history, poetry, proverb, letter? Different genres have different rules for reading them.

A Piece of My Mind

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Next, stand back from the verse and look for breaks in the passage that identify major units of thought. Then ask yourself, "What in this paragraph or group of paragraphs gives any clue to the meaning of the verse in question? In general, what idea is being developed? What is the flow of thought?"

With the larger context now in view, you can narrow your focus and speculate on the meaning of the verse itself. When you come up with something that seems right, sum it up in your own words. Finally—and this step is critical— see if your paraphrase—your summary—makes sense when inserted in place of the verse in the passage.

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I call this "the paraphrase principle." Replace the text in question with your paraphrase and see if the passage still makes sense in light of the larger context. Is it intelligible when inserted back into the paragraph? Does it dovetail naturally with the bigger picture? If it doesn't, you know you're on the wrong track.

This technique will immediately weed out interpretations that are obviously erroneous. It's not a foolproof *positive* test for accuracy since some faulty interpretations could still be coherent in the context. However, it is a reliable *negative* test, quickly eliminating alternatives that don't fit the flow of thought.

If you will begin to do these two things—read the context carefully and apply the paraphrase principle—you will radically improve the accuracy of your interpretations. Remember, meaning always flows from the larger units to the smaller units. Without the bigger picture, you'll likely be lost.

Don't forget the rule: Never read a Bible verse. Always read a paragraph at least if you want to be confident you're getting the right meaning of the verse.

Do I take the Bible literally? I try to take it at its plain meaning unless I have some good reason to do otherwise. This is the basic rule we apply to everything we read: novels, newspapers, periodicals, and poems. I don't see why the Bible should be any different.

Endnotes

9

- ¹ For the record, I think the immorality of homosexuality is one of those universals since, among other reasons, it's identified in the New Testament as wrong irrespective of the Mosaic Law (e.g., Rom. 1:27).
- 2 The exception to the generalization would be the parables Jesus told His disciples so that they would understand the meaning, but the crowds listening in would not. Mark $4{:}10$
- ³ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, "Afterword to Third Edition," (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 208.
- ⁴ In more than one instance, Jesus described Hell as "outer darkness" (e.g., Matt. 8:12) and literal flames give light.

Putting This Solid Ground into Action

- If someone disagrees with the obvious sense
 of a passage, ask them for the reasons they
 think the text should be an exception to the
 otherwise sound "ordinary sense" rule.
- Keep in mind that literal does not always translate laterally, that is universally across the board.
- Don't forget the rule: Never read a Bible verse. Always read a paragraph at least.
- Remember the paraphrase principle. It will help weed out interpretations that are obviously wrong.



Stand to Reason Speakers Near You



Greg Koukl

November

- 1 Pinnacle Forum of Greater Chicago Contact
- 2 Gracepointe Church, Naperville, IL Men's Breakfast 7 a.m. Topic: "Evil, Suffering, and the Goodness of God" Contact
- 3 Vail Christian Church, Tucson, AZ Contact
- 8-10 Biola Apologetics Conference at Cathedral of Faith, San Jose Contact
- 15-16 Caring Pregnancy Center, Mason City, IA Contact
- 17 Clear Lake Evangelical Free Church, Clear Lake, IA Contact
- 23 Reasonable Faith in an Uncertain World Conference, Fulton, MD Contact



Brett Kunkle

November

10 Rancho Del Rey, Carlsbad, CA Time: 10am Topic: "Why I Am a Christian" Contact

To get information about inviting an STR speaker to your church, email Dawnielle@str.org for Alan, Brett or Jim, or Melinda@str.org for Greg.



Alan Shlemon

November

1-2 Christian Worldview Alliance, Petaluma, CA Topic: "Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion:, "Same Sex Marriage and the Future of Family" Contact



J. Warner Wallace

November

- 1-2 Living Oaks Community Church, Thousand Oaks, Time: 6:30pm, 9am & 1pm Topics: "Cold Case Christianity" Contact 3 Capistrano Valley Christian School, San Juan Capistrano, CA Time: 7pm Topic: "Making a Case for the Value of Christian Education" Contact
- 6-8 ACSI HS Leadership Conference, Twin Rocks, Oregon Topic: Abortion, Same Sex Marriage and Social Justice Contact 13 Ratio Christi San Jose State, San Jose, CA Time: TBD Topic: TBD Contact

December

- 2 Ratio Christi NC State, Raleigh, NC Time: 7:30pm Topic: "Cold Case Reliability of the Gospels" Contact
- 3 Cross-Examined Fundraiser, Charlotte, NC Time: TBD Topic: TBD Contact

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Silly-Putty Bible Study

By Greg Koukl

21st Century kids have cell phones, DVD players, and Xboxes. When I was a kid we had simpler delights. One was a handful of malleable goo that could be pulled, twisted, or distorted into any shape imaginable. It was called Silly Putty®.

Sadly, many Christians use their Bibles like Silly Putty®. Just add the Spirit and the Bible becomes putty in their hands, able to be molded into almost anything at all. Rather than approaching the Scripture as a treasure of truth for all Christians, some Evangelicals have the dangerous habit of searching the text for a personal "promise" or "word" of guidance from the Spirit that is unrelated to the text's original meaning.

Often, the results turn out to be silly. Other times, they are dangerous. Regardless of the outcome, this practice is always a bad habit. Here's how it often looks.

Instead of studying to find the objective meaning of a passage and then making personal application of that scriptural truth to their lives, many Christians read the Bible looking for verses or isolated phrases the Spirit "impresses" on them with personal messages that are foreign to the context.

For example, a Christian woman who has been praying for her family's conversion stumbles upon Acts 16 during her quiet time. Her eyes settle on Paul's response to the Philippian jailer who asked, "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved," Paul answered, then added "you and your household" (v. 29-31).

Encouraged by these words, the woman begins to claim the "promise" that her own household will be saved, with the justification that "The Holy Spirit gave me this verse."

Why would she use that particular wording to describe what she experienced? Because in the normal, natural understanding of that passage, the verse wasn't "hers" to begin with.

Rather, she believes that, under the Spirit's influence, there was a mystical transformation that took place causing the meanings of the words to change just for



her, conveying a private message not intended by the original author (Luke, in this case) and not intended for anyone else. It was a private message from God just for her incorporating the words of the biblical text, but not previously in those words.

Notice, her confidence is not based on the objective meaning of the passage, but on the unique subjective meaning given to her by the Spirit in the moment.

I—or any other Christian, for that matter—could not claim that verse for myself unless the Holy Spirit "gave" the verse to me, as well.

Experiences like these are powerful because they seem intensely personal. But there's a problem: Acts 16:31 is not her promise. It's the Philippian jailer's promise, if a promise at all. Using the passage as she has done is an abuse of God's Word. It's also deeply relativistic.

Relativism is the defining characteristic of the age, and has influenced the church in subtle yet profound ways. When an objective claim (a verse) communicates completely different meanings ("truths") to different subjects (people), that's relativism. Since truth is not in the objective meaning of the words, but in the personal, subjective experience of the reader—in this case, an experience allegedly caused by the Holy Spirit—a personal prompting can be "true for me, but not for you." Since there are different experiences for different people, there are different "truths" for each.

Let me speak plainly: There is no biblical justification for finding private, personal messages in texts originally intended by God to mean something else. This approach is the wrong way to read the Bible. One reason I know this is because of what the Bible teaches about itself.

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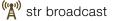


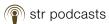
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