

# LESSON 3 The Bible as Literature

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When you talk to someone, you want that person to understand you. So you choose a way to express yourself that will make your ideas clear. In other words, you know that what you say and how you say it work together. Like speech, literature or writing is effective when the writer states his ideas clearly.

The writers of the Bible chose their words and arranged them to fit their purposes. Studying how writers express their ideas will help you in your Bible study. You will be better able to see the main idea in a passage of Scripture and better understand the writer's purpose when you can identify his style or manner of expression.

## ***The Plan***

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- A. Literal and Figurative Language
- B. Organization of Ideas
- C. Styles of Writing

## ***The Goals***

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1. Distinguish between literal and figurative uses of language in the Bible.
2. Identify six ways to organize thoughts.
3. Discuss the main styles of writing used in the Bible.

## **A. LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**

**Goal 1.** Distinguish between literal and figurative uses of language in the Bible.

God wants us to understand the truth that He has revealed to us through His Word. The biblical writers wrote about reality, and, most often, they used language that is literal or factual. Therefore, we can know what the Bible means by accepting the natural meanings of its words. When we read, “Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray” (Luke 6:12), we know that this is literally or actually what He did. When He ordered the fever to leave someone and it left (Luke 4:39), this is the literal truth.

But when we read a passage like, “John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29), we cannot interpret all the words literally. Jesus is not a lamb or animal. He is like a lamb, which in the Old Testament was sacrificed for the sins of the people. Thus, some of the language of the Bible is figurative or symbolic in meaning. It helps to explain a literal truth.

Figurative language is made up of figures of speech. These are words or phrases that help us understand something hard to explain by relating it to something we know about. John gave us a mental picture of Christ as a lamb being offered on an

altar for our sins. This helps us understand Christ's purpose in coming to the world.

Figures of speech help us to understand spiritual things, which we cannot see with our natural eyes. Remember, in Lesson 1 we said Jesus compared himself to life-giving water. He also compared himself to bread, light, and a shepherd. On one occasion He said, “Behold, I come like a thief!” (Revelation 16:15). These examples show us we cannot go too far in comparing Jesus to any one of these things. He is like each thing in a limited way. These figures of speech help us to remember particular truths.

Christ often used figurative language when He talked to His followers. He told them simple stories to help them understand important spiritual truths. In Matthew 18:10–14, Christ tells the story of the lost sheep. In this comparison, He teaches that He is as concerned about each one of us as a shepherd is about a lost sheep.

Some figures of speech are called symbols—words that represent truth about something. The words *light*, *salt*, and *sheep* are symbols of Christians. And in the Lord's Supper, the bread and cup are symbols of Christ's body and blood. They remind us of Christ's death and suffering for our salvation.

## Application

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**1** Identify each statement as being either literal or figurative language. Write in front of each statement the number of the kind of language it matches. Remember not to look up answers before you have marked your own.

- |              |  |                             |
|--------------|--|-----------------------------|
| ... <b>a</b> | Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there is a pool (John 5:2). | 1) Literal<br>2) Figurative |
| ... <b>b</b> | There is the Lamb of God (John 1:29).                        |                             |
| ... <b>c</b> | I am the gate for the sheep (John 10:7).                     |                             |
| ... <b>d</b> | There are other sheep that belong to me (John 10:16).        |                             |

**2** Read the story of the weeds in Matthew 13:24–30 and the explanation of it in verses 36–43. Read the description in the far right column and write in front of each symbol in the left column the number of the description it matches.

- |              |                          |   |
|--------------|--------------------------|---|
| ... <b>a</b> | The sower                | 1) People belonging to the kingdom of God |
| ... <b>b</b> | The enemy                | 2) The Son of Man                         |
| ... <b>c</b> | Good seed                | 3) The devil                              |
| ... <b>d</b> | Weeds                    | 4) People belonging to the evil one       |
| ... <b>e</b> | Wheat and weeds together | 5) The end of the age                     |
| ... <b>f</b> | Weeds gathered up        | 6) The heavenly kingdom                   |
| ... <b>g</b> | Wheat by itself          | 7) The world as it is                     |

## B. ORGANIZATION OF IDEAS

**Goal 2.** Identify six ways to organize thoughts.

When we write, we are careful to organize our ideas. We bring together related ideas to support a main idea and arrange the ideas so that they fit together smoothly. In this section, we will describe several ways writers organize their ideas.

1. **Repetition.** The writer uses the same or similar terms over and over. In 2 Corinthians 8:1–15, the idea of Christian giving is developed through repeated ideas of generosity.
2. **Progression.** The writer creates a forward movement by adding detail after detail, as we do when we tell a story. The story about Philip in Acts 8:26–40 shows progression. The Spirit spoke to Philip to go to a certain road. Then He led Philip to a certain man to share the Good News about Jesus. After the man accepted Christ and Philip baptized him, the Spirit took Philip away.
3. **Climax.** The writer leads up to a high point in a progression of details. In Philippians 3:10 Paul tells us what true

righteousness is: “To know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” Verses 1–9 lead to this climax.

4. **Contrast and Comparison.** For contrast, the writer brings together two opposites to emphasize their good and evil or light and darkness. Psalm 1 contrasts godly men who are planted like trees, bearing fruit, with evil men who are like straw being blown away. Notice in this contrast the use of comparison: “the wicked . . . are like chaff that the wind blows away” (v. 4). For comparison, the writer brings together two things to emphasize their similarity.
5. **Main Points.** The writer uses turning points in a progression of ideas. These points are necessary to the particular outcome of a story or to the meaning of a passage. In the book of Esther, one of the main points is Queen Esther’s winning the king’s favor when she approaches him uninvited. Without his favor she could not have fulfilled her plan to help protect the lives of her people.
6. **Reasons and Results.** The writer arranges ideas to show the relationship between a certain result and the reasons for it. He may begin with either the result or the reasons. In Colossians 1:3, Paul tells the church that he gives thanks to God for them. This is a result. In verse 4 he gives the reason: “We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.” Then he repeats this idea in verses 8 and 9, beginning with the reason and ending with the result. Sometimes we combine two or more of these ways to organize our ideas. In 1 Corinthians 1:3–4, 8–9, Paul used reasons and results and repetition to make his meaning clear to us.

## Application

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**3** Read each Scripture and decide which way of organizing listed in the right column was used to make clear the main idea. You may use a description more than once.

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|---|------------------------|
| ... <b>a)</b> Galatians 6:7–9, the idea of reaping what we plant                                  | 1) Repetition          |
|   | 2) Reasons and results |
| ... <b>b)</b> Ephesians 2:14–18, the idea of Christ uniting Jews and Gentiles in peace            | 3) Contrast            |
|   | 4) Progression         |
| ... <b>c)</b> 1 Kings 17:8–24, the idea that Elijah’s obedience made him a man of God             | 5) Main points         |
| ... <b>d)</b> Judges 6:11–40, the idea that Gideon’s response to God’s call brings about changes  |                        |
| ... <b>e)</b> 2 Chronicles 1:7–12, the idea that because Solomon did something, God did something |                        |
| ... <b>f)</b> Ephesians 4:17–32, the idea of what new life in Christ involves                     |                        |

## C. STYLES OF WRITING

**Goal 3.** Discuss the main styles of writing used in the Bible.

### History

The Bible is the history of God’s dealings with humankind. Thus, it is a written story of what happened in the lives of certain people. The Holy Spirit guided the writers to choose certain events to share with us. As we read about them, we can build up our faith through learning from their struggles and victories.

For example, when we read about the task God called Gideon to do and Gideon’s struggle with fear, we can learn to

reverence God and conquer our fears of other people and of failure. (See Judges 6 and 7.) The greatest story is of Christ himself. By following His example, we can live in obedience to God's will.

History is found throughout the Bible. The historical books are Joshua through Esther in the Old Testament and Matthew through Acts in the New Testament. Genesis through Deuteronomy are a mixture of history and prophecy.

## Prophecy

In Bible history, God used prophets to speak directly to the people for Him. The prophets declared God's will and purpose. They proclaimed truth for immediate fulfillment and predicted truth for future fulfillment. Some prophecies are not fulfilled yet. They predict events that will happen in the end times. The books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation contain many of these.

It is helpful to study first the prophecies that are already fulfilled and explained in the New Testament. Acts, for example, refers to the fulfillment of several Old Testament prophecies. These include the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, Christ's suffering and rejection, the enslavement of the children of Israel in Egypt, Christ's resurrection, salvation for Gentiles, and the hardness of men's hearts toward understanding the gospel.

Although the meaning of some prophecy is hard to understand because it contains many symbols, we need to study it to get a clearer picture of God's plan for us. The last 17 books of the Old Testament, the book of Psalms, and Revelation contain important passages of prophecy.

## Poetry

Poetry is writing that uses patterns in lines and rhythm to express deep emotion. While history tells of actual events or what man does, poetry reveals what man thinks and how he feels—happy, sad, despairing, or joyful. Poetry uses much

figurative language. It cannot be interpreted literally in the way history is. So, when we read Job, the poetic books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, and the other poetic passages scattered throughout the Bible, we need to watch for the use of figurative language.

To give rhythm to their ideas, the Hebrew writers often related two lines of thought to each other. This is called parallelism. The relation could be repetition. In Psalm 5, the meaning of the first line, “Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing,” is repeated in the next line, “Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray” (vv. 1–2). The next two lines repeat each other, and the method is continued throughout the passage.

#### **PARALLELISM**

Give ear to my words

Listen to my cry

#### **CONTRAST**

Two lines may be related by contrast: “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up” (Proverbs 12:25). Or, two lines may be related by adding one thought to another to help explain it. This method is used in Job 36:21, which begins, “Beware of turning to evil.” The next line adds to the meaning.

The main ideas of the poetic books are about emotions. Job describes human suffering. Psalms guides us in worship to God. Proverbs shows our need for wisdom to carry on practical, everyday affairs. Ecclesiastes shows a negative view of life, full of doubt. Song of Songs expresses marital love.

## **Letters**

Letters are easy to identify. They begin with a greeting, have a main message, and close with a farewell greeting. The main body of the letter may be concerned with answering questions mentioned in someone else’s letter. Thus, it is good



to remember that a letter is a response to specific needs. It does not offer complete teaching on any topic.

The apostle Paul wrote 13 of the New Testament letters, called epistles. Several other men wrote the other 8 letters. When we study all these letters and compare their teaching, we receive guidelines for our faith and new life in Christ.

## ***Application***

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**4** Read each of these Scriptures and write which style of writing is used in each one.

- ... **a)** Philippians 1:1–2            1) History
- ... **b)** Zephaniah 1:14–18        2) Prophecy
- ... **c)** Psalm 91                        3) Poetry
- ... **d)** 1 Corinthians 5:9–11      4) Letter
- ... **e)** 2 Samuel 7:18–28
- ... **f)** Job 36:22–26
- ... **g)** Acts 2:1–13
- ... **h)** Revelation 4:1–11



## Check Your Answers

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- 1** **a** 1) Literal  
**b** 2) Figurative  
**c** 2) Figurative  
**d** 2) Figurative
- In **c**) and **d**) Jesus is referring to Christians as sheep.
- 3** **a** 3) Contrast; the harvest of death is contrasted with the harvest of life.  
**b** 1) Repetition; similar terms such as “Christ himself,” “with his own body,” “He abolished,” “by his death,” “by means of the cross Christ came and preached,” “through Christ.”  
**c** 4) and 5) Progression and Main points; Elijah obeyed God, depends on God at each point in this sequence of events, and at the end the widow recognizes him as God’s servant.  
**d** 5) Main points; God gave Gideon three signs which together created a turning point.  
**e** 2) Reasons and results; Solomon prayed for wisdom and knowledge which pleased God who, as a result, gave this and much more.  
**f** 3) Contrast; old life of evil, lying and anger is contrasted with new life or new desires and new way of thinking, truth, and calm.
- 2** **a** 2) The Son of Man  
**b** 3) The devil  
**c** 1) People belonging to the kingdom of God  
**d** 4) People belonging to the evil one  
**e** 7) The world as it is  
**f** 5) The end of the age  
**g** 6) The heavenly kingdom

- 4 a 4)** Letter; this is the greeting at the beginning of a letter.
- b 2)** Prophecy; this predicts future events in the end times.
- c 2)** Prophecy and 3) Poetry; this has a pattern of lines and parallelism and it proclaims God's truth.
- d 4)** Letter; this is a response to specific people about a problem they have.
- e 1)** History; this is a record of what happened to King David.
- f 3)** Poetry; this has a pattern of lines and parallelism.
- g 1)** History; this is a record of what happened on the Day of Pentecost.
- h 2)** Prophecy; this is a vision or a prediction of future events.

