Do we take the Bible literally?

August 1st, 2017

Have you ever heard this question? I remember hearing this on some TV interviews when some agnostic host seeks to push a Christian into a corner. ***“Do you take the Bible literally?”*** When the guest tries to answer but hesitates because regardless if they are conscious of it or not he knows that they are being put between a rock and a hard place. But the question remains – *do we believe in the Bible literally?*

In order to answer that question you must remember that this is not a “yes” or “no” question even if people try and force you to say “yes” or “no”. Here is why.

**Do we believe the Bible literally?** - Rules of Interpretation

The word “literally” can be understood in a couple of different ways. For example when I apply the rules of interpretation to understand the meaning of any text from the Bible I would tell you that I use “*a* ***literal****, grammatical, historical, contextual interpretation of the Bible*”. But when I say literal I mean that I take the normal, literal way that the author intended us to understand what he wrote. But the author may use a different genre than another writer; or he may use figurative language, or hyperbole or some other form of writing that is not intended to be taken “literally”. But it also means that I have to understand the context because the meaning of words is always determined by the context. If you take the English word “bank” and use it in a number of different contexts you have a different meaning. e.g. if I told you I am taking money to put in the bank, you would have a picture in your mind as to a building with people in it who take or give money out to people who have accounts with that bank. But if I was standing in the middle of a basketball court and someone made a bet with me that I would miss a shot, I could make them a promise that I will make it and say “you can take that to the bank” I would not mean take it to an institution that takes money I would be making a guarantee that I will make this shot. If I told you that I was going to “bank” the ball off the backboard while standing in the middle of a basketball court then the word “bank” has a very different meaning again.

**Do we believe the Bible literally?** – Context

Context is everything. Normally you get someone asking a silly question “do you believe that we should not boil a goat’s kid in its mother’s milk” (Deut. 14:21). This question is ridiculous because it shows complete ignorance to the Old Covenant with Israel vs. the New Covenant Christ has made with us. These questions are meant to be a “trap game” because if you say no we don’t do that then they conclude that you do not take the Bible literally so why should anyone else. If you say “yes” then they will ask why you are ignoring so much of what the Bible says. Historically, while some commands God gave Israel are unique to the culture they lived in, we need to understand the larger reason why God made these kinds of requirements in the first place. In such instances we discover that God is telling Israel they are to be holy, something that is also true in the New Testament but the expression of holiness in our culture may look differently than how holiness expressed itself in the Old Testament.

So we do take the Bible literally but that does not mean that we are bound by just the words. We must understand the Scriptures in their historical context, the context of writing, the grammar used. The goal is always to understand what the author intended when he wrote what he wrote.