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Question 52 - Can we read and understand the Bible in a literal sense?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

52. Can we read and understand the Bible in a literal sense?

It not only can be done, but must be done if we are to correctly understand its message.

- A. The meaning of the term *literal*. This is simply to say the scriptures may be read as one would read a current newspaper, in the normal, basic, customary, and socially accepted way.
- B. The misuse of the term *literal*. There are two opposing and erroneous concepts regarding the literal interpretation of the Bible.
 1. *The error of letterism*. This exact and unyielding approach would impose an unnatural meaning on the scriptural words. For example, Jesus' statement in John 10:9, "I am the door," would have us believe the Savior was describing Himself as a wooden structure of some sort with hinges, brass door knob, etc. To the contrary however, we all understand He was simply stating He alone is the entrance to heaven. This was His intended meaning and we accept His words literally. Two examples will serve to illustrate how we express ourselves in similar fashion today:
 - a. A sign in front of a post office reads:
"Join the U. S. Marines! They now serve their country in the four corners of the earth."
 - b. A weather announcer informs us the sun will rise at 6:15 a.m. tomorrow morning and set promptly at 7:45 p.m.

Question: Can we understand both the sign and the announcement in a literal way, knowing the earth does not have four corners, nor does the sun actually rise and set? The answer is a definite *yes*, for we know the intended meaning in both cases.

2. *The error of allegorism*. This approach, the opposite to that of letterism, seeks to find some hidden, "deeper" and mystical meaning behind the literal text. Bernard Ramon offers two examples of this:

"In history, for example, when we read of Paul Revere's famous ride, we take it as such, and not as conscience riding to the rescue of virtue at the approach of temptation.

"Many sermons have been preached on losing Jesus at the temple. Jesus (as the interpretation goes) is our Savior; the Temple is the place of communion; we, the people in the pew, are Jesus' parents; the trip home is our daily life; the failure to see if Jesus is in the caravan is our sin of assuming that Jesus is always with us apart from the spiritual exercises of the soul. Although soul-touching sermons are preached following such

interpretation the method is absurd from the perspective of a sensible hermeneutics. Such treatment of Scripture borders on trifling." (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. W. A. Wilde Co. Boston. 1956, pp. 93, 103)