

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #88:
“I’VE TOLD YOU A THOUSAND TIMES, DON’T EXAGGERATE!”
By John Temples

Have you ever said:

- “I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse!”
- “It’s raining cats and dogs.”
- “This suitcase weighs a ton.”
- There’s enough food on this plate to feed an army.”
- “This is the worst day of my life--nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen.”

If so, you were guilty of exaggeration. Actually, we exaggerate all the time. (And yes, that statement is an exaggeration.)

To exaggerate means “to hype, overstate, overdraw, stretch, oversell, embellish, make a mountain out of a molehill, make much ado about nothing.” Exaggeration is verbal overkill. We exaggerate to emphasize a point, to be funny, or to make our statement colorful and memorable. Or maybe we do it simply out of habit!

The technical term for exaggeration is *hyperbole* (pronounced high-per’-bow-lee”). Both mean a stretching of the truth; but the difference is a matter of degree. When you exaggerate, you are stretching things a bit, but it COULD be true. On the other hand, when you use hyperbole, you expect your audience to understand that you are deliberately making an outlandish, impossible claim purely for the sake of literary effect.

Even the Bible contains exaggeration and/or hyperbole. Here’s an example, from John 21:25--”And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that *even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*” And listen to this colorful statement from 2 Chronicles 1:15: “Also [Solomon] *made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones*, and he made cedars as abundant as the sycamores which are in the lowland.” And notice how powerful this poetic and prophetic picture of the suffering of Christ is: “But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men and despised of the people. All those who see me laugh me to scorn....I am poured out like water, and

all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clings to my jaws; you have brought me to the dust of death” (Psalms 22:6,7,14-16).

To be a well-rounded Bible student, and to avoid drawing mistaken conclusions from some Bible passages, it is vital that you take exaggeration and hyperbole into account.

How can we identify exaggeration or hyperbole in the Bible? If a statement cannot be literally true in the way it reads, or to the degree it reads, it is exaggeration or hyperbole. We know that a statement is figurative and exaggerated when the literal interpretation violates our common sense logic and observation of how things generally operate. And if a Biblical statement, taken literally, contradicts other plain Scriptures, it could be exaggeration or hyperbole.

Sometimes exaggeration is harmless and amusing, as in the saying, “I’ve told you a thousand times--don’t exaggerate!” In 1 Samuel 1, we read of a couple named Elkanah and Hannah. Hannah was barren and wept often because she had no children. 1 Samuel 1:8 says, “Then Elkanah her husband said to her, ‘Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved? *Am I not better to you than ten sons?*’” (Now there is a man who had absolutely no trouble with low self-esteem.)

The Jews used exaggeration or hyperbole extensively. Here is part of the spies’ description of the Promised Land: “The cities are great and *fortified up to heaven*” (Deuteronomy 1:28). Genesis 41:49 says, “Joseph gathered very much grain, *as the sand of the sea*, until he stopped counting, *for it was immeasurable.*”

Even God Himself used exaggeration for emphasis or to make a deep impression. He told Abraham that his descendants would be as numberless as the grains of dust on all the earth (Genesis 13:16). Jesus also used exaggeration. He said in Matthew 11:23 that the city of Capernaum had been “*exalted unto heaven.*” Luke 9:25 is classic hyperbole: “For what profit is it to a man *if he gains the whole world*, and is himself destroyed or lost?”

And it wasn't just the Jews that used exaggeration; many other Middle Eastern people did and still do. One writer spoke of a visit he had with a friend who lived in Syria. His friend was not home when he arrived, but he left a note for his guest. It read: "You have extremely honored me by coming into my abode. I am not worthy of it. The house is yours; you may burn it if you wish. My children are also at your disposal; I would sacrifice them all for your pleasure." We Westerners might be shocked and repulsed by such grandiose language, but that was just the Syrian host's way of saying, "I'm glad you're here; make yourself at home."

Yes, exaggeration can liven up a conversation and even be amusing; but it can also be negative, destructive, and discouraging. How disheartening it must have been to the Israelites as they stood at the edge of the Promised Land when "...the men who had gone up with [Caleb] said, 'We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.' And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants), and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight'" (Numbers 13:31-33).

Elijah fled from Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19). He went and hid in a cave at Mount Sinai for forty days, eating nothing. God came to him and asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah? So he said, I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. *I alone am left*; and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:9,10).

This is the danger of the dark side of exaggeration: we habitually make things seem worse than they really are. Basil Overton wrote in the April 2000 issue of *The World Evangelist*: "Several years ago, a brother wrote in a journal of which he was the editor, that he was as sure as he could be of anything that a majority of the whole brotherhood had already apostatized in heart and that there was nothing anyone could do to get them back to the Lord. I talked with this brother about what he had written. I told him his statement was reckless. I told him he was actually saying he knew the hearts of the whole brotherhood."

On the one hand, we ought not to stick our heads in the sand and say nothing destructive is going on in the church. The church is losing members. There are problems and false teaching and apathy within the kingdom. On the other hand, we should not throw up our hands in despair and say, "The church is doomed, and I am the only one left." (Remember Elijah?) The Lord told us two things we ought always to keep in mind: (1) "My word will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35), and (2) "Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

So be on the lookout for exaggeration or hyperbole when you read God's word, and interpret accordingly. And watch out that your own speech is not overly negative, that you do not discourage others or yourself. Constantly sing the old Western song "Home On The Range" to yourself: "Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play; where *seldom is heard a discouraging word*, and the skies are not cloudy all day."

Remember that it is human nature to perceive situations and circumstances as either much better or much worse than they really are. Watch out for "never" or "always" or "everybody" or "nobody" statements out of your mouth. They are almost always distorted and destructive exaggeration. --John Temples