Dr. Fred Putnam, Psalms, Lecture 4

This is Dr. Fred Putnam's fourth and final presentation on the book of Psalms. Dr. Putnam.

Welcome back for our fourth session. I'd like to return very briefly to something that I sort of left hanging at the end of the third. And that is the question of a number of Psalms that are quite troubling to Christians. When I was at a large church in Philadelphia, we read through the Psalter responsibly every three years.

And one time I just happened to notice that as we were reading through, we came to the point where we should have read Psalm 137 and we skipped it. And I went to the church secretary and said, why did we skip it? And she said, well, you know, we sing the Gloria Patri after we read the Psalm. And I didn't think we should say, how blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Well, I didn't want to go into a long argument with her, but I think that's sort of the Christian's response to Psalms that call for God to do pretty nasty things to their enemies, like Psalm 35, which asks that the Lord draws up a spear and a battle ax to meet those who pursue the Psalmist or that the Lord's angel drive them on so that their way is dark and slippery and that the Lord basically destroy them. And so, we say, what in the world? How can we pray these things? Well, there've been a lot of responses to that.

Some people have said, very famous people have said these are sub-Christian, Christians shouldn't use them. They're the expression of an earlier age of spirituality. C.S. Lewis was one person who said that.

Other people have said, well, these are really reflections of a kind of a magical world where they believed in sorcery and the words have power and they're going to affect their enemies. Well, kind of all that aside, it is a valid question. If scripture is profitable and good and helpful, useful for us, or maybe a better way to say it is, if it's useful for God, that is a tool for him to use in us, what do we do with Psalms that call for the destruction of our enemies or the Psalmist, the poet's enemies? Well, let me give a couple of, try to do this very quickly, a couple of quick suggestions.

First, I think that these sorts of prayers for the destruction of enemies are not just found in the Psalms. They're found in many passages in scripture, including even Christ himself, Matthew 7.23. He's going to say, depart from me, you evildoers, I never knew you. That is, he's going to consign them to hell.

There are passages in the apostles and the writings of Paul where he certainly says that may they be accursed. Even in the mouths of the souls in heaven, under the altar in Revelation 6, they ask God, how long is it going to be till you avenge our blood? And there they are, they're in heaven, they should be perfect, right? Well, if they're perfect, they're calling out for vengeance. That should raise almost a bigger problem than the presence of imprecations in the psalter.

I think it does show, first of all, that this idea of praying to God for vengeance or retribution on our enemies is biblically ubiquitous. It's everywhere in scripture. We even find it in the Lord's prayer, since the coming of the Lord's kingdom will involve the destruction of those who are not part of that kingdom.

It's a concept that it's very difficult to get away from. Let me suggest a couple of reasons or ways to think about this. One is C.S. Lewis, although he did say that these were expressions of a sub-Christian morality, also said that they show us that the biblical poets took evil a lot more seriously than we tend to.

There are some evils for which we don't pray for a convert, we just pray for the destruction of the evil itself. I think that in our day and age, we need to remember that. When the mantra of our society is that everything is equally valid and there is no real right or wrong, these Psalms say, no, there is wrong.

And when it's wrong, it is so wrong that it's damnable and only worthy of destruction. A second consideration is, in none of these cases do, well, there's one exception, Psalm 41.11, but in all the other so-called imprecatory Psalms, the psalmist never asks for power for himself or for the ability to defeat his enemies or that God will help him do anything to them. He prays, yes, but then he just leaves the results with God.

And in each of those cases, the Psalms end, as we saw earlier, with this expression of confidence and a promise that they will fulfill their vow or praise the Lord in the assembly or something else. A third thing to consider is that when the Lord calls Abraham, he says that he will curse those who treat Abraham lightly, actually, or insult him. In the imprecatory Psalms, the enemies of the psalmist are those who are attacking the psalmist.

In each case, the psalmist protests his innocence and says, they're attacking me without cause. They actually are attacking me without cause. They ask me things I don't know about.

And this is the outworking of the covenantal curse that those who do evil will be confronted by their evil which they have done. And the curses that the psalmist or they're not really curses, they're prayers for judgment, that the psalmist offers to

God are requests that God will be true to his character and that he will maintain the cause of what is right. Because God is, among many other things, a judge.

Also, when we look at a number of these, I'm thinking specifically of Psalm 35 at the moment. It says, malicious witnesses rise up, ask me of things I don't know. They repay me evil for good.

And he says they slander me without cause. Deuteronomy 19 has a very interesting provision. In Deuteronomy 19, at the end of the chapter, we read this.

If someone accuses his brother of a crime or sin that he did not commit, then the accuser will receive the punishment that fits that crime. These people are bringing accusations against the poet. In every case, all of these psalms, there is a verbal accusation of some kind.

Whether we hear it in the poem or not, there's an accusation. They're accusing him. They're accusing him, he says, falsely.

The covenant says false witnesses receive the punishment that the guilty get if they're guilty of that crime. So, he's just saying to the Lord, uphold your covenant. Interesting that he's not even trying to do that himself.

He's not suing them. He's just saying, Lord, be faithful to your word. So I think that in reading the imprecations in the Psalms, these calls for judgment, we need to remember that they are appeals to God as a righteous judge.

God does not change, the nature of his justice does not change, nor the relationship that he has with his people or his relationship with the wicked. Can the people of God pray these prayers? I myself find that a very difficult question because there is so much, often when I'm tempted to pray them, there's too much of my own experience mixed up in me that I want vengeance or something for some wrong that I imagined has been done. But they do seem to be appropriate simply because they're part of the canon.

We don't ignore them or walk away from them. Instead, we say, at times, yes, God, it is appropriate to pray these things because only you can establish the justice that needs to be done. I'd like to turn on to one more main question in thinking about biblical poems and then very briefly look at Psalm 1. That is this question that I mentioned earlier in the second lecture, I believe, about images.

What do we do with these images? Let me read a couple of verses to you. Psalm 18 verse 2, the Lord is my crag and my fortress and my deliverer. My God is my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Bend your ear to me, this is Psalm 31 verses 2 and 3. Rescue me quickly, become a strong crag for me, a stronghold to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Is David worshiping rocks? Probably not. That would make him a lithologist.

We don't really have much of that commended in the Bible. David was certainly never stoned for worshiping rocks. Sorry about the pun.

So, what's going on here? Well, we all know intuitively when someone uses a figure of speech. So, someone says, how are you doing today? Oh, I'm beat. Or I'm dead tired.

Or I could just cry. Well, maybe you could just cry, but you're not dead if you're answering the question. Unless you have the stripes on your back, you probably weren't beat either.

So, we just process those things without even realizing that we're using images, that we're using what are called metaphors. The reason that we do that is that some things, our minds find it challenging to grapple with things that can't, that are extra, outside our senses. That is, we can't touch.

So how do we talk about truth? How do we talk about goodness? Well, it's very difficult to talk about something that's abstract. And pretty soon if you ask a question, what does goodness mean? Try this in a conversation. Pretty soon it will come around to, is this action good? Or is this action bad? Or is this work of art good? Or it will become concrete very quickly because we have trouble grappling with things that we can't touch or see.

Well, one of the things that we can't touch or see is God himself. And so the Bible uses many, many, many, many images for God. And even in Psalm 18 verse two, we have this, all these images, a crag, a fortress, a deliverer, a rock, a refuge, a shield, a horn of salvation, and my stronghold.

My goodness, is this a grocery list, or what's going on? Well, here's a very short and I hope easy way to think about images. We are able to use metaphors to understand things that we can't grasp physically or see because underneath our use of metaphors like rock and fortress and crag is a foundational metaphor that's a lot bigger and that encompasses all those, what we might call literary metaphors on the surface, that is the things in the text. So, what kind of a crag is this? Well, your translation may say rock.

This rock cannot be lifted up or moved or carried or bulldozed. It might be dynamitable. You might be able to blow it up with dynamite, but you can't do anything with it.

Instead, it's a very high place. If you've ever seen pictures of the Dead Sea Scrolls and you see how steep those wadis are, those valleys are, well, that's what David's talking about. If you're up on top of one of those, you're safe.

When David stole the water jar and the spear from Saul, it says he went across the way and then he and Saul were shouting back and forth to each other. And you think, wait a second, if they're in shouting distance, why doesn't Saul just send a little group of guys around to sneak up on David? Because if you ever look at those pictures from the wilderness of Judea, which is where David was, you see that he would had to send men way from all the way around this long steep valley. The walls of the valley are far too steep to climb.

The only way they could get into the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found was by ropes from above. They couldn't climb up. You couldn't climb up.

And you certainly couldn't climb up if you're carrying a bow and some arrows and a spear and a javelin and a sword and a shield. You'd never make it. They'd just roll a couple of rocks down on you and that would be the end.

So, David is over on the top of this rock. He's perfectly safe. Saul can't get to him.

He's far enough away that a javelin, which has a fairly short range because there's a pretty heavy weapon, a javelin can't reach. And it's at night so nobody can shoot anyway or throw anyway. So, he doesn't have to worry.

And then it says when Saul did try to go to get him, David and his men slipped away. They just went off onto another crag. Well, that's what he's talking about.

And the same thing when he talks about a fortress. It's a fort. It's not really a fortress in the sense of a, don't think of a crusader castle.

It's a fortified place, a place that's a natural place of defense that's been built up. Maybe had rocks to fill in the cracks or the, you know, the one pass. It's been, its protective level has been enhanced to use military language.

So that now it's a true place of refuge, which is in fact what he says, my God is my rock in whom I take refuge. Another kind of rock. This time we're talking about a cliff.

And if you're on top of the cliff, nobody's going to go up after you. They can't get to you. And even a shield, if you're behind a shield, you're safe.

It's only when you're out in front of the shield or beside the shield or your shield bearer drops the shield. That's when you're in trouble. Or if you're too tall and your head sticks up like Goliath, you're also in trouble.

And God is also, he says, my stronghold, my citadel, some translations might say. Well, you see what all those have in common is this really cool idea that God is a safe place. Now we'd even say God is the safe place or the safest place or something like that.

But you see, that is like a foundation. And because that's true, because of God, we can think of God as a safe place. Now, all of a sudden, David can use any word that denotes a safe place, a cliff, a crag, a fortress, a stronghold, it doesn't matter, a shield even.

In fact, we find the same image, very different, but the same foundational metaphor in Psalm 131, when the Psalmist talks about creeping into being a weaned child sitting on its mother's lap. It's a safe place. What is your mother's lap? We think a weaned child, why would a weaned child? Because the child wants milk.

No, it's weaned, it doesn't need milk. It's there not for food, but for comfort or protection or snuggling or whatever else. It's not being, it's the same foundational image.

So, when we look at metaphors, we want to ask ourselves, what's lying underneath this? See, for a long time, it was popular to think of metaphors in these terms. God is my rock. How is God like a rock? Well, first of all, I have to know what kind of rock we're talking about.

And then how is God like that kind of rock? Trustworthy, safe, dependable, etc. Okay, those things are all true. But you see, what happens when we begin thinking in terms of foundational metaphors, is now we see that all these individual statements are not individual statements at all.

They're branches of a tree that come out of a root and the root is what holds the whole thing together. They're the stories of a skyscraper with different levels. But the metaphor, the foundation, that's the foundation.

I used to watch in Philadelphia when they were building some of the tallest, what are now the tallest skyscrapers. And it was amazing how far down they had to build and how many hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these giant concrete trucks went down and just dumped their concrete and then went back up for more. It was an unending procession.

Well, if you have that kind of foundation, you can build almost anything on top of it. And that's what happens. We have this idea that God is a place.

Very strange to us because in our culture, of course, we think of God as a person. But think about biblical times. You never knew when the Amalekites might come across the hill and attack your home and destroy you or destroy everything you had and take you and your family for slaves.

You never knew when the Arabians or the tribes of the East might come or the Ammonites or the Moabites or anybody else. So, places of safety were very important, crucial to them. Not so crucial to us, especially in the United States, we don't live in fortified cities.

In fact, we don't even have city walls anywhere except I think the only one in North America is Quebec City. At least that's the only one I know of. And that's only the old part when it was back when it was a French fort.

Well, the metaphor then is something we need to think about in terms not only of what the words mean but what it might have meant in their culture. And then what underlies that? Because getting to the underlying thing is what gives it meaning for us as well. You see, let me extend that a little bit.

Think of our culture. Did you know that in any gathering of people like a church, probably at least one in four women in that church had been abused? Now, and many times by a parent figure, a father or a stepfather. Now, we may be tempted to say, somebody like that may say, you know, I just can't think of God as my father.

Sorry. I don't want to hear this. And I've read counselors who have said that's tough.

They have to get over it. That's what the Bible says. God is your father.

You have to live with it. Or God is a king. And that's another father figure, authority figure.

God is a judge. And they just, they don't want anything to do with that. What if we said instead, okay, God as a father is only one window into who God is.

That's only one metaphor. It's not a literal statement. God's not a literal father like your physical father was.

No, that's a window that gives us a picture of some aspects of who God is. How about this? God is a safe place. Well, those people who need a safe place, there are some people who need a safe place a lot more than they need a father.

And it may be that as they come to know God as the place to whom they can go and be safe, someday they will also come to the place, to the position of being able to say that God is also their father or their king or Lord or judge. Because the Bible uses

images like these in order to help us grasp what we can't understand. If you think of this, a metaphor is like a window, but unlike a normal window, you can't walk up to it and stick your head through and look all over the room.

You can only look in from one position through a little narrow slot. And through that narrow slot, you only get a very limited view of the room. Well, some rooms have five or six windows, so you can see slices of the room all over, but you can never see the whole room.

Even if you add them all up, you don't see the whole room. And think about this, God is an infinite room. So therefore, all the metaphors in the Bible, if you read from Genesis to Revelation and write down every metaphor for God, you would not even begin to exhaust the metaphorical possibilities for who the Lord is.

And the psalmist delights in exploring that. So, they're not just going to talk about God as a judge. Psalm 98, I said earlier in the first lecture that that's what joy to the world is based on.

What is the whole point of Psalm 98? That God comes as a judge. He's going to judge the world. So, what happens? Creation responds by applauding, by worshiping, and singing.

And we're called to respond by worshiping and singing. Because of what God has done, yes, verses one through three of Psalm 98, but because of what God is going to do as a judge. You say, wait a second, but that's not all God's going to do.

He's also going to be a Savior. That's right. He is going to be a Savior.

He's going to be a deliverer. He's going to be everything the Bible says about him and much more than that, beyond our wildest dreams. But that is one thing that he will be, that he is now, that he will be, just as he's also a safe place.

And so, because that's true, David can play with all the kinds of safe places that he's known about. And he can list them all in this, almost this, this symphony of safety. And his purpose, part of his purpose is to overwhelm us with the idea that God is safer than anything, anything, anything you can imagine.

Well, we can think about it, there are lots of metaphors that are not just about God. I mean, there are lots of metaphors about people. We're dust, we're plants.

Think about all the verses like Psalm 90, where he says, the Psalm Moses says that, in the morning, they're like grass that sprouts anew. In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew. Toward evening it fades and withers away.

People are plants. That's another metaphor. God is a safe place.

People are plants. People are other things too. But people are plants.

And you know what's true of plants? Plants grow, they become fruitful, they stop being fruitful, they die, they rot. Hey, sounds like a person, doesn't it? In fact, when he talks about that image of people as plants, as grass that grows up in the morning, the evening it withers, he's actually combining two different fundamental foundational metaphors. One is that life is a day, sunrise to sunset, that's all you get.

And people are plants. Now we could talk about, you know, the kinds of plants in Israel that would grow up after a flash flood, they grow up and they sprout very quickly. And in a week or two, they're gone completely.

You wouldn't even know they've been there. They grow, they blossom, they get pollinated, they die. Well, yes, that's what he's talking about.

The day there is metaphorical, but the day is also a metaphor for life. So, think about this. If life is a day and at the end of the day we go to sleep, then maybe death is sleep.

So, when the Bible says, talks about death as sleep, Jesus talking about Lazarus in John 11, or Paul talking about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, they're not trying to soften the effects of death. That is what death is in order to see what is death. We can't describe it.

We don't know what it is. All we know is what it's not. It's not life, right? Life stops, you're dead.

Okay. Now what? Well, we can't say anything more about it. So, the metaphor of death as sleep gives us a handle, an experience that we can tie to something that we can't experience.

Well, you understand I'm not talking theologically here. So then if life is a day and, sorry to point my finger, if life is a day and if death is sleep, when we go to sleep at night, you and I expect to wake up the next morning and the next morning then waking up is resurrection. It's a new day.

And in fact, we find out from Revelation, that it's a new kind of day when there aren't going to be more nights. So, a little bit of church history trivia. The Greeks buried their dead in Necropolis, the cities of the dead, Necros dead, Paulus city, cities of the dead.

Christians started burying their dead. An early church father, I have never been able to trace this quote or this description, said, Christians do not bury their dead in Necropolis. Christians bury their dead in cemeteries, that is barracks, because Christians are soldiers who merely sleep waiting for the trumpet of their general, the Lord himself, to call them to battle.

And that's why Christians are buried in cemeteries, same word just taken over from Greek, not in Necropolis. You see the metaphor of life as a day, death is sleep, is like the big dig in Boston, a tunnel that's under the city, which when it's finished, nobody will ever know it's there walking around on the surface. It's like the giant foundation of a huge skyscraper that's completely invisible, but without it, the skyscraper crumbles.

The whole Bible is filled with those. Believe me, I could talk about them for hours and days, but I'm going to move on. I'd like to look briefly at Psalm 1. Psalm 1, I know is a very familiar Psalm, and I'm only going to be able to point out a few things, but I want to show you what some of this begins to look like when we put together this looking closely at a text.

Psalm 1 starts off very famously, Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the seat of scorners, or sit in the seat of scoffers. Let me suggest this. Those three sentences are parallel in English, they're parallel in Hebrew as well.

There's a little bit of chiasm going on there, but basically they're parallel. They all use the same form of the verb, in fact, different verbs, obviously. And I think that there is in this case, when we think about the metaphor that's involved in verse one, there's actually a slight mistranslation.

There's a noun in the third line that's usually translated seat. It's a noun, moshav comes from a verb, yashav, which often means to sit down. But the interesting thing about the noun is that only once or twice does it mean seat.

Almost every time it occurs in the Bible, it means a place where people live. And it's usually translated as dwelling or dwellings. And the verb that's translated sit can also mean to dwell or settle or inhabit.

Settle down. So, what's going on in verse one? Maybe what he's talking about is this. Maybe the metaphor is life is a journey and where you end up depends on where you start out.

So how do you start your journey? If you're going to take a trip tomorrow to a place where you've never been, you usually do it by, well, I guess today you go to Google and look for an online map, but we usually do it by looking up maps or asking people,

have you ever been to Scranton or wherever it might be? And what's the best way to get there? Well, look where this person starts or doesn't start. He doesn't start by going to the wicked and asking for their advice. That's what counsel is, advice.

He doesn't start there. And because he doesn't start out with that kind of counsel on his journey, he doesn't end up moving along the path or the way of sinners that sinners go. And when he gets to the place where he's going to settle down, he is not settling in a place inhabited by scoffers.

Now you could ask, is that really that important? I mean, what's the difference between settling down and sitting? Well, I think that sitting obviates the point of the metaphor, and blunts the metaphor. And that instead the metaphor that life is a journey reminds us that we are on a journey. You know, the reason for a foundational metaphor like life is a journey is you and I can't conceive of life, our lives.

We can think of events. We can think of hopes and aspirations and disappointments. We can think of accomplishments perhaps, but we can't really conceive of our life as a thing.

My life, your life. So instead, we talk about life as a journey. We use it all the time.

We say, O, he took a real detour or that job was a dead end. Or she just hit a speed bump in her path. Or where do you hope to end up? What's your goal? How are you going to get there? The idea that life is a journey is so foundational to our way of thinking that we don't even realize it's a metaphor.

In fact, oftentimes, if you read a book on poetry, which I highly recommend, highly commend the idea of reading something that helps us read poems better. But if you read a book on poetry, they'll talk about dead metaphors. But in fact, metaphors aren't dead.

That is a metaphor that's used so often that we don't even realize it's a metaphor anymore. That means it's not dead. It's just submerged.

And the more dead it appears, the more important it is to the way that we think. Until the most basic ones are metaphors that we're not even aware of using. And I think that's what's happening in verse one.

And the reason I think that is because if you look at verse six, verse six ends this way, or the poem ends this way, for Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes or is perishing or will perish. He's talking about a path of life. He's not just talking about a manner of life, but the actual path on which we walk.

And so the metaphor at the beginning, at the end, reflects the metaphor at the beginning. It's an inclusio, just like we saw with Psalm 113, but a very different kind, isn't it? It's not the same words. It's just the same picture.

It's the same foundational metaphor. But then he does something very interesting in Psalm 1. He switches, changes what he does. Now, I'm going to mix some Hebrew stuff in here.

Sorry about that. It's just kind of the way it goes. Does this mean you can't understand Psalms if you don't know Hebrew? Well, you can understand them, but I promise you don't appreciate them the same way.

So, you have life left. There's time to study. And if you think you can't do it, there are all sorts of little three and four-year-olds running around Jerusalem who speak Hebrew fluently.

If they can do it at three and four, you can do it as an adult. I know that's a smart aleck statement. Sorry.

Verse two says, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night. Now, what's striking here is that he turns from what the person doesn't do to what the person does. And he does it in two different ways.

There's a separation between verses one and two that occurs in actually three different ways. One way is just the content of the words, what we might call their semantic value. If you go look up the words in the dictionary, the difference between wicked, sinners, and scoffers in the law of the Lord, there's a big difference there.

Well, in Hebrew, very often when you see the verb is or was or something like that in your English translation, there's no verb there. And that's true here in line A of verse two. So, we have three clauses in verse one with identical verbs, and no verb in verse two.

That should say, whoa, there's a change. Remember we talked about discontinuity, there's a break. And then when we find the verb delights in the second half of verse two, that's a different conjugation of the verb.

It's a different kind of different form of the verb. So verse two is set off grammatically as well as by its content. Now you might also think, well, how am I supposed to know that in English? You're right, you can't know all of it in English.

Some of these things are visible, some are invisible, and some of them depend on the translation you're looking at. Different translations bring out different points. So he

does tell us what this person does is to meditate or mutter or repeat or mumble or something like that.

Kind of an interesting word again to translate. But it seems the reason it's translated meditate is it seems to have the idea of saying something to oneself or saying something under one's breath. But then we come to verse three.

And verse three gives us the outcome of verses one and two. And it does it in a very interesting way by means of a metaphor. And the foundational metaphor here is that people are plants.

Only this time, he doesn't just call us grass, he says that that person is a tree. And he's not just a tree. And again, here's some translation.

It says you'd be like a tree firmly planted in this translation by streams of water. Interesting thing. The verb that's translated firmly planted only occurs a few times in the Bible.

Almost every time it refers to taking a piece of a plant, moving it, and planting it somewhere else, or what we would call transplanting. That is deliberately moving a tree from one place to another so that it will grow. The second interesting thing about this sentence, this clause, is that the word translated streams, or you might have channels or something, is a word that usually is translated canal or it could also be translated ditch.

It's a stream used for irrigation. That is, it's not a natural stream. It's not a brook or a creek or something like that.

There really aren't that many of those in Israel anyway. It's a deliberately dug trench that is put where it is, made where it is, in order to water plants. Now, that suggests something.

And then he goes on, I should say, he goes on, it yields its fruit in its season, its leaf doesn't wither. So he extends the metaphor by telling us about this tree. Well, why does it yield its fruit in its season? Because it's cared for.

See, you notice this. The person who doesn't do those things doesn't live the wrong life journey in verse one, but who meditates in Yahweh's law in teaching in verse two, has been transplanted into a place prepared for it so that it will grow so that it will be safe from the changes and vicissitudes of weather. In fact, when it's there, it will yield its fruit at the right time, and its leaves won't wither.

Now see, there's a bit of a cultural thing. In North America, at least, apple trees lose their leaves every fall. So do peach trees and I guess tangerine trees and things like that too.

But if you're talking about other kinds of trees, like some citrus trees that grow in the tropics or a more tropical zone, or you're talking about most of the fruit trees of Canaan, Israel, and Palestine, they stay green all year round. They don't drop their leaves. So, when he says its leaf does not wither, it doesn't mean that winter never comes.

It means that it has enough water that it doesn't wither. If its leaves wither, the tree's going to die. That's what it means in this culture.

So, saying its leaf doesn't wither means the tree's not going to die because it's been provided for. So, the act of meditating on what the Lord has said has the effect of transplanting a person into a place made so that they will live. By the way, there's another foundational metaphor under there, and that is the Lord is a gardener.

That's all over the place too, right? Israel's a vine, read the book of Ezekiel. How many times does the Lord plant a vine and plant a piece of a cedar tree? Does it sound familiar at all that Jesus talking about himself as the vine and what is the Father going to do? Every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit will... So, the image just underlies all. You see, that's what I found really exciting about thinking in terms of foundational metaphors rather than specific metaphors.

Because the foundational metaphor suddenly lets you see a way through the whole of Scripture and show how all these things that you kind of feel instinctively, oh, they're somehow related, they are related. They are related. They're related by this foundation that lies underneath and that even makes it possible to speak in those ways.

And by the way, just incidentally, there's an even deeper foundational metaphor under God as a gardener, and that is that God is a person because gardeners are people, right? So, and that goes into, plays out into all sorts of other roles as well. God is king, God is judge, God is ruler, God is warrior, God is all sorts of things. Well, let's move on a bit in Psalm 1. In verse 3, it says this, in whatever he does, he prospers.

Now, I'm not going to argue, or talk about the theology of that for a moment, because that's really not the purpose at the moment. You notice that in all these lectures, I'm really talking about trying to understand the Psalm before trying to theologize or apply it. If our theology and if our application doesn't rise out of a sympathetic understanding of the text and in poetry, really a self-conscious delight, I think, in the text itself, that is even the way it's saying things, an appreciation.

I think we're apt to misapply and mistheologize because we haven't really wrestled with what it's saying. We've sort of taken away an impression. Let's go back to T.S. Eliot's balancing act.

But here in verse 3, very interesting, Hebrew has a whole bunch of ways of making verbs. I don't know how to explain this quickly, but in English we use helping verbs. So, we can say, John threw the ball to Bill, or the ball was thrown to Bill by John.

So, we want to make something passive, was thrown. We take the verb to be and stick a form of it in front of the other verb. That's real crude, but that's kind of the idea.

Hebrew doesn't do that. Instead, they change the vowels a little bit. We do that a bit in English.

So, we say run versus ran or swim versus swam. We change the vowel, but we do it to change the verb tense. Hebrew does it, and this is very unfair.

So, if you know Hebrew, you'll know that I'm cheating. But Hebrew does it by changing the vowel. Hebrew changes the function of the verb by changing the vowels and adding letters on the front and the back.

Well, all of the verbs in Psalm 1 except one are the same, what we call stem. That is, they have the same basic pattern of vowels. The exception is this verb at the end of verse 3. The reason and its name don't really matter.

The point is we have one verb that stands out from all the rest by virtue of its form. And that verb happens to come at the end of the first section of the Psalm, which has been describing this blessed man. That's another kind of discontinuity that is, I admit, invisible in English, very obvious in Hebrew.

That break shows us that the break between verses 3 and 4, what we know is verses 3 and 4, is intentional, and deliberate. It's actually built into the very fabric of the grammar of the Psalm, the poem itself. Well, then the poet goes on and he again picks up the idea that people are plants by talking about the wicked as chaff, the other kind of plant, the thing that you don't care about.

You want the wind to drive it away. You don't want it to drive on you because it's sticky and itchy. If you've ever stood behind a wheat combine, you know just what it's like.

And then he says, the wicked won't stand in the judgment or sinners in the assembly of the righteous. And here you see, we have to guess a little bit. We don't really know.

Does that mean that, is he using the word stand? Does he actually mean to stand up? Does that mean if you're innocent, you stood up in court? But at least what he's saying is he's switching metaphors now to say that there is a judge, maybe God is a judge, and maybe people are the accused. And then at the end, as I said, we come back to this picture, the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes. And again, in Hebrew, this verse is another one of those chiasms.

It says, for he knows the Lord, the way of the righteous, the way of the wicked perishes. So the verb, the verb, and in fact, what is so cool, this is almost inexpressible. The verb form that he uses at the beginning of verse six is a participle, which sounds like this, oe.

Okay, those are the vowels, oe. Yodea. The verb that he uses at the end is the verb that says tovade, same vowels, not a participle though.

So why does he use a participle? In fact, that's only the second participle he's used in the whole psalm. In fact, it's the only predicate participle, that is the only participle used as a verb in the whole psalm. Why does he use a participle there instead of an imperfect or something else that he could have used and which he does use at the last verse? Is there some difference in between the way God's knowing and the perishing? Or is it that he wanted the sound to be the same? I have to be real, I'm on shaky ground here because, you know, the vowels are added much later.

But at least we ought to think about that. It's so carefully arranged. I think we have to say there's some purpose to it.

Well, let me close. I have about two minutes. Let me close by saying this.

I had intended, I thought I'd have a little more time, but I had intended to read a poem to you and then tell you that I spent three years thinking about this poem before I began to understand it. I'm not going to read it to you. That poem was by William Butler Yeats.

There are some others by Gerard Manley Hopkins, another wonderful Christian poet of the 19th century that I have read many, many, many times in order to try to understand them. Here's a question. What is the role of patience in understanding the Bible? The presence of poetry says, slow down, think, reflect, imagine.

God communicates with us this way because he knows, first of all, that it's just a better way to communicate some ideas. Secondly, it's a better way to communicate

with some people. But he also knows that to communicate in this way is for our good.

That it forces us to spend time thinking. That is, in the long run, you may say, well, I can't remember all these things you've been talking about, parallelism, structures, and genre. I just can't.

Okay. Don't worry about any of it. Just do this.

Write out the poem on a sheet of paper with a blank line between every line and then just look at it, and read it out loud every day, two or three times a day for a month. That's a week if you don't have the patience. And then start making notes.

Every time you say, oh, this word sounds like that word, use colored pencils, start drawing lines, and start seeing connections. And what will happen is that you will see that the beauty of the text is the beauty also of its message. That's the blessing, the great blessing, of being privileged to read and study and seek to understand the word of God.

Thank you. This is a poem that I have spent, I spent about three years reading on and off before I finally began to understand it. And actually only then when I'd memorized it, I don't have it in memory anymore.

The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats. Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart.

The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.

The best lack all resolution while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Surely some revelation is at hand. Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming. Hardly are those words out when a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi troubles my sight. Somewhere in the sands of the desert, a shape with a lion's body and the head of a man, a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun is moving its slow thighs while all about it are real shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again. But now I know that twenty centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle. And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. William Butler Yeats.