

Dr. Fred Putnam, Psalms, Session 4, Metaphors and Justice in the Book of Psalms, 6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're going to dive into some of the most violent, frankly, shocking passages in the Bible. And in the process, we're going to discover a kind of hidden poetic code that just might unlock their true meaning.

So let's kick things off with a story. There was a church that was reading through the Psalms, but when they got to this verse right here from Psalm 137, they just skipped it. The church secretary, she just couldn't bring herself to read such a brutal line and then follow it up with a prayer of praise.

And I mean, you look at those words, can you blame her? So yeah, that brings up a really tough question. One that has bothered readers for centuries, including some pretty famous thinkers like C.S. Lewis. Are these just angry sub-Christian rants that we should probably just ignore? Or is there something deeper going on here? Well, these violent prayers have a name.

They're called imprecatory Psalms. And get this, they aren't just one-off weird verses. They show up all throughout the Psalms, in the writings of the apostles, and even in the book of Revelation, where you have souls in heaven, literally crying out for vengeance.

So this is not some fringe idea. It's a theme that's actually woven all through the biblical text. So this is where we kind of have to shift our thinking.

What seems like just a vicious call for personal revenge is actually something way more sophisticated. It's an appeal for divine justice. These prayers aren't throwing morality out the window.

No, they're demanding that God be true to his own character as a righteous God. So to help us get our heads around this, the theologian Dr. Fred Putnam offers a really helpful three-part framework to make sense of what's happening in these incredibly difficult prayers. Okay, first off, these prayers take evil way more seriously than we usually do.

They're basically saying that some things are so profoundly wrong, they deserve to be destroyed. Second, and this is key, the poets leave the results entirely in God's hands. And third, they appeal directly to God's own nature, to his character as a righteous judge.

Okay, so here's the absolute kicker. In almost every single one of these Psalms, the writers protest their own innocence. They say they're being attacked for no reason, and they never ask for the power to take revenge themselves.

Instead, what they're doing is handing the whole messy situation over to God, asking him to be the ultimate judge and to be faithful to the promises he already made. Okay, so maybe the why is starting to make a bit more sense, but the how can be a whole other puzzle.

Because the Psalms are poetry, and they are filled with this dense, layered imagery that really forces us to dig deeper than just what's on the surface.

Just take a look at Psalm 18. I mean, what's going on here? Is the author just, you know, making a list of every defensive thing he can imagine? A crag, a fortress, a rock, a shield? What's the connection? Well, this isn't just a random list of metaphors. It's more like a symphony built around one single powerful idea.

To figure that out, we have to look behind the individual images and find the one concept that holds them all together. What is the one big idea that unites all these different objects in the exact same thought? And the key, the thing that unlocks this whole puzzle, is something called a foundational metaphor. This is the invisible logic that so much of biblical poetry is actually built on.

Picture a massive skyscraper. You can't see the foundation from the street, right? But that invisible structure is holding up the entire building. Or think of it like the root system of a giant tree.

It gives life and structure to all the branches you actually can see. So for all those images back in Psalm 18- the crag, the fortress, the shield, the root- that foundational metaphor is stunningly simple and powerful. God is a safe place.

And once you get that, all the surface-level metaphors just click right into place. So yeah, God is like a rock, but not just any rock on the ground. Think of a high, steep cliff, a crag.

When you're up there, your enemies just can't get to you. You are safe. And he's also like a fortress, you know, a place that's been specifically built up and reinforced to make it an even more secure refuge.

And this is what's so brilliant about it. Even something totally different like a shield fits perfectly. Why? Because if you are behind a shield, you are safe.

Every single one of these images flows from that one foundational truth. All right, now let's take this idea and apply it to another really famous psalm, Psalm 1. It turns out this psalm is built around two totally distinct foundational metaphors that switch right in the middle of the psalm. Pay close attention to the verbs here.

Walk, stand, and sit. Or maybe a better translation is to settle down. These are all words about movement, position, and ultimately destination.

So the first foundational metaphor is one we use all the time. Life is a journey. The path you choose determines where you end up.

So you don't want to walk with the wicked because you don't want to end up standing around with sinners. And you definitely don't want to permanently settle down with those who scoff. But then, bam, the poem just completely switches gears.

It moves from the language of a journey to a totally different world of images. The person isn't a traveler anymore. Now they're like a tree.

And that brings us to the second foundational metaphor. People are like plants. They can be fragile and temporary, like grass that just withers in a day.

Or they can be strong and fruitful, like a tree with deep, healthy roots. And this is where the details get really cool. See, the original Hebrew words suggest this tree was actually transplanted.

And it's not planted by a natural river, but by man-made irrigation canals. That implies intentional, deliberate care. So there's an even deeper metaphor at work here.

The Lord is a gardener who moves his people to the perfect spot to make sure they thrive. So what's the big takeaway? It's that poetry isn't just pretty words. It's a whole different mode of communication.

It's an invitation that says, hey, slow down, think about this, reflect, imagine. And it asks us to look for those hidden structures, those foundational metaphors that are holding the whole thing together. And you know, this whole way of thinking isn't just for dusty old poems.

We all use foundational metaphors every single day, and we often don't even realize it. You know, life is a journey, or argument is war, or time is money. It makes you wonder, right? What are the invisible metaphors, the hidden stories that are shaping how you see the world every single day?