

Psalms: What is Poetry?

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Session 2

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Welcome to another Deep Dive. We've got some fascinating stuff to dig into this time around about poetry in the Bible. You've sent us some really interesting material, including some excerpts from a lecture by Dr. Fred Putnam on the Psalms.

Seems like you really want to go deeper than just reading them. Yeah. You know, to actually unlock the secrets of the Psalms as poetry.

Yeah, that's a great goal. And Dr. Putnam's lecture is a fantastic place to start. He really gets into what makes the Psalms so unique and powerful.

Well, he starts off by asking this really basic question: what is poetry anyway? Right. And I have to admit, I thought I knew the answer to that. But Dr. Putnam really makes you think twice.

He does. He points out that defining poetry can be surprisingly difficult. Like, is it about how it makes you feel when you read it? Or is it about the author's intention when they are writing it? Or is it something about the actual words themselves, the language? Yeah, that's interesting.

Well, he argues that poetry is really all about compressed language, manipulated language. Every single word is super carefully chosen, like for its sound, for all the things it makes you think of, and you know, how it impacts you. He has this great example where he compares inviting someone to your place versus your castle versus your hovel.

I mean, each word creates a totally different image. Absolutely. It's not just about, like, giving you information.

It's about evoking feelings and experiences. I mean, think about Psalm 23, you know, where David describes God as a shepherd. Yeah.

I mean, just that one word, shepherd, is packed with meaning. It's just protection, guidance, provision, all these ideas wrapped up in a single word. That's a really good point.

Yeah. And it makes you realize that even a single word in a poem can be so powerful. But I have to say, I'm still struggling a little bit with this idea of poetry.

But their ancient religious text, it's not exactly Shakespeare, right? So how can we think of them in the same category? I totally get where you're coming from. But Dr. Putnam argues that actually both English poetry and biblical poetry share some of the same fundamental things. They both use imagery, compressed language, and wordplay to, you know, really hit home their message.

Yeah. Well, he points to Judges 4 and 5 in the Bible, which offer two different accounts of the same battle. One is prose, just straight-up storytelling, and the other is in poetic song.

It's like, you know, watching a documentary and then seeing a movie about the same event. Totally. They're both telling the truth, but they do it in such different ways.

They each highlight different aspects of the story. Absolutely. And that's really the key here.

Like the poetic account, it doesn't contradict the prose. It just zooms in on different moments and emotions and creates this much more powerful experience for the reader or the listener. Yeah.

Well, he actually reads excerpts from both accounts in the lecture, and the contrast is just striking. Like the prose account in Judges 4, it just lays out the facts: who fought whom, where it happened, and who won. But Judges 5, the song, is full of vivid imagery and emotion.

It talks about the stars fighting from the sky, the earth trembling, and even the enemy general's mother anxiously waiting for him to come home. Oh, wow. Which isn't even mentioned in the prose version at all.

That's amazing. It shows you how powerful poetry can be. You know, it's not just about recounting facts, but about transporting you into the heart of the experience.

So it's not that one is more true than the other. It's just that poetry and prose have different strengths. Yeah.

Right. They each communicate truth in a different way. Exactly.

And that's crucial to keep in mind when we're approaching the Psalms. If we go in expecting them to be like a history textbook, well, we're going to miss so much of what makes them special. So if we accept that the Psalms are poetry, does that change how we should actually read them? Oh, absolutely.

It means we need to pay attention not just to what they say, but to how they say it. We need to notice the specific words, the images, the patterns, the structure, all the things that poets use to create meaning. Well, Dr. Putnam talks about some techniques from the poet Molly Peacock, like actually making a list of the nouns, verbs, and images in a psalm in the order that they appear.

Yeah. It seems like a really practical way to kind of dig deeper into the psalm. It really is.

It forces you to slow down and pay close attention to the details. OK, but here's my big question. Why would God choose poetry for such a large chunk of the Bible? I mean, if it's not just about communicating information clearly, what's the point? That is a great question.

And it suggests that poetry is actually uniquely suited to communicating certain kinds of truth, truths that resonate with us on an emotional and experiential level. So it's not just about knowing something in your head, but about feeling it in your heart. Exactly.

It's about engaging with truth on a whole different level. OK, I'm starting to get it. The songs are poetry, and that means they're meant to be experienced, not just analyzed.

But where do we go from here? How do we actually start putting this into practice? Well, Dr. Putnam has some really helpful thoughts about this. He talks about an experiment where people were asked to read a poem out loud and then read a normal paragraph out loud. I think I read about that, too.

Didn't they find that people like to change their voices when they were reading the poetry? Yeah. And even their posture. They spoke more slowly and with more inflection.

And they even sat up straighter. It's like our whole being changes when we realize we're reading poetry.

That's so interesting. So how do we apply that to reading the Psalms then? Well, it means we need to approach them with that same kind of attention, you know, like that same awareness that we're dealing with something really special. We shouldn't just like skim them for information.

You know, we should really immerse ourselves in them, read them out loud, listen to the rhythm of the words, pay attention to the images they evoke. So we've been talking a lot about individual songs, but Dr. Putnam also talks about the context of the whole book. Right.

He uses this great analogy of a mosaic. Each individual psalm might be beautiful on its own, but when you see them all together, it's like this incredible picture emerges. Yeah, it makes sense.

I mean, you have songs of lament, psalms of praise, psalms of Thanksgiving. They cover the whole range of human emotion. Exactly.

And by reading them all together, we get a much more complete picture of what our relationship with God is really like. You know, the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows. We see how even in the midst of suffering, there's always that thread of hope.

It's like that line from Psalm 30: weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Yes, such a powerful line. And it takes on even more meaning when you think about it in the context of the whole psalm and the whole book.

Dr. Putnam also mentions that the songs were originally meant to be sung, not just read silently. Exactly. And singing engages different parts of our brain.

It deepens that emotional connection to the words and makes them more memorable. Think about it: we all have songs that just stay with us, you know, songs we connect to on a deep level, even if we don't totally understand all the words. That's so true.

I definitely have some psalms that I find myself seeing or humming during the day. There you go. And you don't need to be in some fancy church setting with a choir to sing the psalms.

Let them become part of your everyday life melodies that flow from your soul. So we've talked about approaching the psalms as poetry, understanding them in context and even

singing them. Is there anything else we should be paying attention to? Well, Dr. Putnam talks a lot about imagery in the psalms, and for good reason.

I mean, they're full of vivid images: mountains, rivers, valleys, storms, shepherds, warriors. They aren't just there for decoration. They actually carry symbolic meaning.

You mean like how a shepherd represents God's care and protection? Exactly. Or a mountain symbolizing strength and stability. These images add so much richness and depth to the text.

He suggests making an image map of a psalm to really understand how all those images are working together, like making a visual representation of the poem. It's a fantastic way to see the connections between different parts of the psalm and to notice patterns in the imagery. Okay, so we're starting to build a toolkit for understanding biblical poetry.

We're approaching it as poetry. We're thinking about context. We're singing it, and we're paying attention to imagery.

Anything else? Well, Dr. Putnam reminds us that the psalms are carefully structured literary works. They aren't just random collections of words and images. Each psalm has its own internal logic and organization.

He compares it to a house, you know, with a foundation, walls, a roof, rooms. Each part has a purpose, and they all work together to make a unified whole. So we need to be paying attention to the structure of the psalm, just like we pay attention to the layout of a house.

But how do we do that? Where do we even begin? Well, Dr. Putnam suggests looking for certain words or phrases that signal transitions, like but, therefore, or nevertheless. They can show you a shift in direction or thought. And you can also look for words or ideas that are repeated that can help you identify the central themes.

So it's kind of like being a detective, you know, looking for clues to unlock the psalm's hidden structure and meaning. Exactly. And as we start to put those clues together, we can move beyond just a surface reading and get a much deeper understanding of what the poet was trying to say.

Wow. It's amazing how much more there is to the psalms when you start to think of them as poetry. I'm seeing all this stuff I never even noticed before.

Yeah, that's the cool thing about deep dives like this, right? It's not just about learning new information. It's about, like, changing how we see and understand things. Well, speaking of which, I think it's time to bring this back to our listener.

You know, they sent us these sources because they wanted to unlock the secrets of the psalms as poetry. So we've covered a lot of ground, everything from, like, what poetry even IS, to specific tools for looking at the psalms. What are some of the big takeaways you hope our listeners walk away with? Well, I really hope they have a new appreciation for the psalms as poetry.

We've talked about how that changes how we read them, how it opens up all these layers of meaning and emotional depth. We've given them some practical tools, right, like those techniques from Molly Peacock and Dr. Putnam's suggestions about structure. But it's not enough to just know this stuff, is it? No way.

Knowledge is only good if you use it. So my challenge to our listener is to actually take these tools and use them. Pick a psalm, maybe one that's really meaningful to you, and really spend some time with it.

Read it out loud, maybe even sing it. Pay attention to the imagery, the structure, the words. See what you discover.

And remember, there's no one right way to do this. It's about being open to the experience of the psalm. Yeah.

Letting it speak to you personally. Exactly. Letting go of trying to analyze everything and just letting the words wash over you and seeing what resonates with you, what moves you, what challenges you.

I keep thinking back to that experiment Dr. Putnam talked about. Even just knowing that you're reading poetry can change your whole mindset. How you sit, how you sound, how much you pay attention.

Yeah. It's like you flipped a switch in your brain and said, okay, it's time to really focus on something important that's happening here. We've talked about the technical side of biblical poetry.

But at the end of the day, the psalms are about our connection with God. They're an invitation to pour our hearts out to him, to ask for his guidance, to find comfort in his presence. So true.

And I think seeing them as poetry helps us connect with that truth in a much deeper way. It's not just about understanding the words; it's about feeling them in your heart. Yeah.

So as we wrap up this deep dive, I hope you, our listener, feel like you have what you need to experience the psalms in a whole new way. Yeah. Go beyond just reading them.

Really experience them, embrace them, and let them change you. That's it for our deep dive into the world of biblical poetry. We'll leave you with this final thought.

The next time you open your Bible to the psalms, take a deep breath, clear your mind, and get ready to meet God and the beauty and power of his poetry. Until next time, keep exploring, keep learning, and keep diving deep.