

Metaphors and Justice in the Book of Psalms

Author: Dr. Fred Putnam | Session 4

AI Podcast Audio Overview

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Hey, everyone, welcome to another Deep Dive. This time we're taking a look at the book of Psalms, some of the tougher passages. We're working with the lecture notes here from Dr. Fred Putnam, and he's really a scholar of ancient poetry and, of course, scripture.

So he's got some interesting insights into some of the more challenging verses that we might find in Psalms, and how those verses can reveal a deeper understanding of faith and the human experience as a whole. So get ready to explore some intriguing questions, like: How can we reconcile those violent images that we find in the Psalms with a loving God? Yeah, that's a tough one. Are there secret meanings behind those metaphors? And what can we learn about life and death and faith from the way that the Psalms use imagery, like journeys on planets, even sleep? Oh, wow.

Yeah, Dr. Putnam really encourages us not to shy away from the difficult stuff. He says it's in those uncomfortable spots where we often find the most profound insights. Okay, so let's jump right in with one of those uncomfortable spots then.

All right. Dr. Putnam talks about something called imprecatory Psalms. Okay.

Now, these are Psalms where the writer seems to be asking God to punish their enemies. I don't know about you, but those are kind of hard to stomach sometimes. Oh, yeah.

How do we reconcile those verses with the image of a merciful God? Yeah, you're hitting on a tension that a lot of people feel. And Dr. Putnam acknowledges that discomfort right away. Okay.

But he makes a compelling argument. All right. He says if we're troubled by these verses in the Psalms, we have to wrestle with the fact that similar ideas about God's judgment appear in the Gospels, in Paul's letters, even Revelation.

Oh. He's pushing us to think about how this concept fits within the whole story of the Bible. So he's saying these ideas aren't just isolated to the Psalms.

Right. They're woven throughout Scripture. Exactly.

That makes this even more complex. It does. But is he saying we should just accept those calls for vengeance? He digs into the context to understand what the Psalmists were really getting at.

He points out that in many of these imprecatory Psalms, the writer isn't actually seeking personal revenge or asking God to defeat their enemies. Instead, they're declaring their innocence. They claim they are being falsely accused and are appealing to God to uphold his covenant.

They believed in a God who would ultimately right the wrongs. So it's less about wanting harm to come to others and more about trusting God to be the ultimate judge. Right.

That's a really different way to look at it. Yeah. But I've got to admit, it's still a tough concept.

It's challenging for sure. Yeah. Dr. Putnam reminds us that interpreting these passages requires careful consideration of the historical context, the literary forms, and the overall message of Scripture.

It's not about simplistic readings, but about engaging with the text on multiple levels. Okay. So let's move to something a little less intense.

Okay. Sure. Dr. Putnam spends a lot of time on the use of metaphors.

Right. He uses Psalm 18.2 as an example. There's a whole cascade of images used to describe God: crag, fortress, rock, refuge, shield, horn of salvation, stronghold.

Wow. It's like an epic list of superpowers. Right.

What's the takeaway for us? Dr. Putnam introduces this fascinating idea of foundational metaphors. Okay. He suggests that all those individual metaphors- rock, fortress, shield- are actually branching out from a deeper core idea: God as a safe place.

So the point isn't just to find clever comparisons. Right. But understanding that consistent theme.

It's about grasping the essence of what the psalmist is trying to convey about God's character. Exactly. That makes sense.

And to really grasp this, we need to think about the geographical and cultural context. Okay. Imagine the landscape of ancient Israel, the steep valleys, the towering cliffs.

Those natural formations offered real refuge from enemies and danger. So words like rock and fortress wouldn't have been mere abstractions for the psalmist's audience. They evoked a visceral sense of security.

Right. I'm starting to see it. For people living with the constant threat of invasion, those images would have been incredibly powerful, almost tangible.

It's like they could feel the safety those words represented. Exactly. Wow.

And for us today, even though our enemies might look different, that core human need for security and protection remains. Yeah. And that's what makes these metaphors so timeless and powerful.

It's like the psalmist is saying, no matter how bad things get, I can always find shelter in God. And that message really resonates across cultures and time. Yes, it does.

It's comforting, actually. Yes, it is. And Dr. Putnam highlights another recurring theme that's really thought-provoking.

Okay. People as plants. Okay.

It pops up all over the Psalms. Right. Sometimes people are fragile like grass.

Other times they're strong and fruitful like a tree. That's a cool contrast. Yeah.

Like the psalmist is saying we're both vulnerable and capable of incredible growth. What's fascinating is that Dr. Putnam connects this to another image. Yeah.

God as a gardener. This points back to that safe place idea again. Yes.

So not only does God offer refuge, but he also actively nurtures our growth. Exactly. It's like he's tending to our souls.

He absolutely connects those ideas. To see how this all works together, Dr. Putnam takes us deeper into Psalm 1, which really showcases how metaphors, structure, and word choices create deeper levels of meaning. Okay.

Now we're getting to the good stuff. I'm ready to break down Psalm 1 and see how it all comes together. Let's do it.

All right. So we're diving into Psalm 1. Okay. Dr. Putnam calls this a classic example of how the Psalms use metaphors and structure to layer in deeper meaning.

Right. What are we looking for here? Remember that idea of people as plants? Yeah. It comes back strong in Psalm 1, but this time there's a twist.

Okay. Dr. Putnam points out how the Psalmist contrasts the fate of the righteous with the wicked using that same plant imagery, but with a striking difference. Okay.

I'm intrigued. Break it down for me. The righteous are compared to a tree planted by streams of water, strong and fruitful, but the wicked, they're likened to chaff, the worthless husk of grain that gets blown away by the wind.

Wow. That's a pretty harsh comparison. Yeah.

You can almost feel the difference. Right? One image is all about stability and abundance, while the other is about being totally powerless and forgotten. Exactly.

And Dr. Putnam says it's not even about physical strength versus weakness, but about spiritual grounding. Okay. The righteous, with their roots in God's Word, stand firm even when things get rough.

But the wicked, lacking that foundation, are easily swayed and ultimately swept away by life's challenges. This makes me think about how we handle tough times. It's like the Psalm is saying that if we're rooted in something solid, we can weather any storm.

Yeah. But if we're not grounded, we're going to get tossed around. That's a pretty relevant message even today.

Absolutely. And Dr. Putnam is careful to point out that this contrast isn't about judging individuals. He emphasizes how the Psalm doesn't say that the wicked will be punished, but rather that their way perishes.

No. It's a subtle difference, but important. So it's not about God actively condemning people.

It's more about the natural consequences of the paths we choose. If we reject God's guidance, we're essentially setting ourselves up for failure. It's like setting out on a journey without a map or supplies.

That's a great analogy. And this idea is reinforced in the last verse. Right.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. It's a powerful statement about the importance of aligning our lives with God's will. So it's not about earning God's favor or avoiding punishment.

Right. It's about choosing to walk in step with him, trusting in his guidance. I'm starting to see how these metaphors work on so many different levels.

Dr. Putnam even points out the intricate structure of that final verse. It's a chiasm, which is this literary device where the words and phrases mirror each other to create balance and emphasis. Oh, wow.

He says the Psalmist is using every tool at their disposal to drive home the message. He also talked about the life is a journey metaphor that runs through Psalm 1. Yes. What stood out to you about that? There are all these little details about choosing the right path, avoiding bad influences, and meditating on God's law for guidance.

Dr. Putnam highlights how the Psalm shifts from describing what the righteous don't do to what they do. It goes from avoiding negative influences to actively embracing the positive. It's like the Psalmist is giving us a step-by-step guide, right? Avoid the bad stuff, embrace the good stuff, and you'll flourish.

And then to really illustrate this connection between our actions and the results, the Psalmist uses that powerful image of the tree planted by streams of water. And Dr. Putnam digs even deeper into the specific word choices. Okay.

The Hebrew word for planted suggests that this isn't a tree that just happened to grow there. Right. It was intentionally transplanted to a place where it would thrive.

And streams don't refer to some random river. Right. It's talking about man-made canals carefully cultivated to provide water.

So it's not just about being near any water source. It's about being in an environment intentionally designed for growth. Exactly.

It's like God is saying, I've prepared this special place for you, a place where you can truly flourish. And when we immerse ourselves in His Word and align our lives with His, will we

become like that tree, deeply rooted, nourished, and fruitful? It's a powerful picture of God's care and His desire to see us thrive. Okay.

This is blowing my mind. We've gone from talking about vengeance and chaff to carefully cultivated gardens and flourishing trees. It's amazing how much depth and beauty we can find in just a few verses when we start paying attention to the details.

And that's exactly what Dr. Putnam wants us to do: engage with the text on multiple levels, to consider the historical context, the metaphors, the structure. He even suggests taking a very hands-on approach. Oh, really? Like writing out the psalm, reading it aloud multiple times a day, making note of connections and patterns.

It's like becoming a detective, searching for clues to unlock a deeper meaning. It reminds me of something Dr. Putnam mentioned earlier, something about a poem that took him years to fully understand. Oh, yes.

He shared a personal story about struggling with a poem by Yeats, a really complex work that took him a lot of time and effort to really grasp. Really? He brings this up because he wants us to approach the Psalms, and really all of Scripture, with that same kind of patience and wonder. Okay, you've got me hooked.

What was this mysterious poem that stumped even a brilliant scholar like Dr. Putnam? And what's the connection to how we should be reading the Psalms? It was *The Second Coming* by William Butler Yeats. Dr. Putnam said it's this really dense, symbolic work that deals with societal collapse and spiritual crisis, trying to find meaning in a world that feels like it's falling apart. Whoa, heavy stuff.

And he said we need to bring that same kind of patience and focus to the Psalms, not just trying to get a quick, inspirational message, but really wrestling with the ideas. Exactly. He says the fact that we have poetry in Scripture, especially in the Psalms, is an invitation to slow down, to savor the words and images.

It's not about speed reading or trying to extract a quick moral lesson. It's about letting the text work on us, letting it resonate in our hearts and minds. That makes so much sense.

It's like if you gulp down a gourmet meal. You miss all the subtle flavors. But if you take your time and savor each bite, the experience is completely different.

That's a great analogy. Dr. Putnam even suggests some practical steps like writing out the poem by hand, reading it aloud multiple times a day, and taking notes on what you notice. It's about being an active participant, not just a passive consumer.

So it's like becoming a detective of the text, searching for clues, piecing together the deeper meaning. You know, that reminds me of something you said earlier about the Psalms tapping into that fundamental human need for security. But it's not just about feeling safe, right? It's also about finding meaning and purpose, especially in a world that can feel chaotic.

You're right. It's all connected. Dr. Putnam argues that God speaks to us through poetry because it can convey these complex truths in ways that plain language sometimes can't.

Poetry requires us to use our imagination to engage emotionally, to really wrestle with the ideas. So it's not just about understanding the words on an intellectual level. It's about experiencing them, letting them impact us on a deeper level.

That's pretty profound. And I think that's Dr. Putnam's biggest takeaway. The Psalms aren't just ancient relics.

They're living words that can still speak to us today if we're willing to listen. This has been such an eye-opening deep dive. So as we wrap up, I want to leave our listeners with a challenge.

Pick a Psalm that speaks to you, maybe one we discussed or a brand new one, and really try this approach. Yes. Read it slowly, savor the language.

Notice the metaphors and structure. Pay attention to how it makes you feel. Let it challenge you.

We've talked about how the Psalms deal with some really big themes. Justice, security, our place in the world. But they also offer guidance, comfort, and even moments of joy.

There's something in there for everyone, no matter what you're going through. And as you spend time with these ancient poems, you might be surprised by how relevant they still are, how much they can speak to your own life and experiences. So keep exploring, keep diving deeper.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the Book of Psalms.