

Dr. Fred Putnam: Psalms Lecture 4

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Welcome back for our fourth session. I'd like to return very briefly to something 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 responsively 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, we sing the Glory 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 draw up a spear and a battle axe to meet those who pursue the psalmist or that the Lord's angel to drive them on so that their way is dark and slippery, and that the Lord basically destroy them. So we say, "What in the world?" or "How can we pray these things?" Well, there have been a lot of responses to that. Some people – very famous people – have said these are sub-Christian; Christians shouldn't use them. They are the expression of an earlier age of spirituality; C.S. Lewis was one person who said that. Other people have said, "Well, these are reflections of kind of a magical world, where they believed in sorcery and the words have power and they're going to affect their enemies."

Well, all that aside, it is a valid question: if Scripture is profitable and good and helpful and 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's, the poet's, enemies. Well, let me give a couple of – I'm trying 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 evil-doers, I never knew you" – that is, he's going to consign them to hell. There are passages in the Apostles and in the writings of Paul where he certainly says that, "may they be accursed," and even in the mouths of the souls in heaven, under the altar in Revelations 6, they ask God, "How long is it going to be until 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. So it's a concept that is 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 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 – that there are some evils for which we don't pray for; we just pray for the destruction of the evil itself. I think 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. In these Psalms they know 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 that in none of these cases do, with 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 the promise that they will fulfill their vow or praise the Lord in the assembly or something else.

The third thing to consider is that when the Lord calls Abraham, he says that he will curse those who treat Abraham lightly, actually, or insultingly. And, in the

imprecatory Psalms, the enemies of the psalmist are those who are attacking the psalmist. In each case, the psalmist protests his innocence, says “they’re attacking me without cause, they’re asking 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. The curses that the psalmist – they aren’t 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, which says, “Malicious witnesses rise up, ask me of things I don’t know, they repay me evil for good,” and he says, “They attack, they slander me without cause.”

Deuteronomy 19 has 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 which 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 gets if they’re guilty of that crime. So he’s just saying to the Lord, “Uphold your covenant.” Interesting that he’s not 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. And 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. And can the people of God pray these prayers? I myself find that a very difficult question because so 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 imagine has been done. But, they do seem to be appropriate simply because they’re part of the canon. We don’t ignore them and 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 to one more main question in thinking about biblical poems, and then very briefly look at Psalm 1. That is this question – I mentioned it earlier in the second lecture, I believe, about images. How do we – 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 worshipping rocks? Probably not; that would make him a litholatrast and we don’t really have much of that commended in the Bible. David was certainly never stoned for worshipping 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. And 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.” And the reason that we do that is that our minds find it challenging to grapple with things that are 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?” 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. So the Bible uses many, many, many images for God. And even in Psalm 18, verse 2, we have 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're 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 might say a rock; this rock cannot be lifted up or moved, or carried or bulldozed. It might be dynamite-able – 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 is talking about. If you're up on top of one of those, you're safe. You know, 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 of one another, 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 was where David was, you see that Saul would have had to send men from all the way around this long steep valley, but 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. And you certainly couldn't climb up here carrying a bow, and some arrows, and a spear, and a javelin, and sword and a shield, you'd never make it. They'd just roll a couple rocks down on you and that would be the end. So David is over on 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 it's a pretty heavy weapon) can't reach, and it's night so nobody can shoot or throw anyway. So he doesn't have to worry. And then it says that 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 it's the same thing when he talks about a fortress; it's not really a fortress in the sense of a crusader castle, it's a fortified place. A place that's a natural place of defense that's been built up, maybe he had rocks to fill in the cracks or the one pass. 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 is 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. So only when you're out in front of a 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. God is also, he says, "my stronghold" – "my citadel," some translations might say. Well, you see, what all of 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 we can think of God as a safe place, now all of the sudden David can use any word that notes a safe place: a cliff, a crag, a fortress, a strong hold, 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 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 a weaned child? Because a child needs 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 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 we'll have to know what kind of rock we're talking about, and then how is God like that kind of rock? Trustworthy, safe, dependable – 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 are 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 sky scraper with different levels, but the metaphor, that's the foundation. I used to watch in Philadelphia when they were building some of 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 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 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 from back when it was a French fort. Well, the metaphor then is something we need to think about in terms of not only 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, *at least*, one in four women in that church has been abused?

Now, 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. The Bible says God is your Father, you have got to live with it.” Or “God is a king” – that's another that father figure – or “God is a judge.” And they don't want anything to do with that. What if we said instead: “Okay, ‘God is 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”? 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, that 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, 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 one narrow slot, you 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 the place. But you never can see the whole room; even if you add them up, you will never 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 wrote down every metaphor for God, you would not even begin to exhaust the metaphorical possibilities for who the Lord is.

The psalmists delight in exploring that. So they're not just going to talk about God as a Judge. Psalm 98, you know, 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's done. Verses 1-3 of Psalm 98 tell us to do so, because of what God's going to do as a Judge.

You say, "Now wait a second, that's not all God's going to do." Yes, He's also going to be a Savior. He's going to be a Deliverer. He's going to be everything the Bible says about Him and so 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 symphony of safety. And part of his purpose is to overwhelm us with the idea that God is safer than anything, anything you can imagine.

Well, there are lots of metaphors we can think about, and not just about God. There are lots of metaphors about people: we're dust, we're plants. Think about all verses

like Psalm 90 where 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.

You know what’s true of plants? Plants grow, they become fruitful, 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 and in 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 the second is that 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 sprout very quickly and in a week or two they’re gone completely. You wouldn’t even know they had 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 day is also metaphorical for life.

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 talks about death as sleep, for example, 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; sleep is what death is! See, what is death? We can’t describe it; we don’t know what it is. We know 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. You understand I’m not talking theologically here, okay?

So then, 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 a resurrection. It’s a new day. And, in fact, we find out from Revelation it’s a new kind of day when there aren’t going to be any more nights.

So, a little bit of church history trivia. The Greek buried their dead in necropoloi, or cities of the dead. Necros means dead. Polis means city--cities of the dead. Christians started burying their dead, and an early church father, I think it was Tertullian, I've never been able to trace this quote, or this ascription, who said, "Christians do not bury their dead in necropoloi. Christians bury their dead in chimateria," 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, taken over from Greek--not a necropolis.

You see, the metaphor of life as a day and death as sleep is like the "Big Dig" in Boston, a tunnel under the city which, when it's finished, nobody will ever know it's there while 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 these. 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 this together looking closely at a text. Psalm 1 starts off, very famously, "Blessed is the man that does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the seat of the scorners, or sit in the seat of scoffers." Let me suggest this. These three statements 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're always the same form of the verb, in fact, but different verbs, obviously. And I think that there is, in this case – when we think about the metaphor that's involved, in verse 1 – there's actually a slight mistranslation. There's a noun in the third line that's usually translated "seat." It's a noun, *moshav*, that is from a verb, *yashav*, which does often mean "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 "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 1? 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 where 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 maps and look for an online map, but we usually do it by looking up maps and asking people if they've 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, that sinners go. 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 – it 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 foundational metaphors like "life is a journey" is that 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, "Oh, 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 – I 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 when they think they are; that is, a metaphor that is used so often we don't realize it's a metaphor any more – 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 6, verse 6 ends this way, or the poem ends this way: "The Lord 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 end reflects the metaphor at the beginning. It's an inclusion, 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 that 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. Okay, I know that's a smart Aleck statement, sorry.

Verse 2 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: he marks – that is, there's a separation between verses 1 and 2 that occurs in actually three different ways: one way is just the content of the words, what we might call their semantic value there; if you go look up in the dictionary the words "wicked," "sinners" and "scoffers" and "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 the English translation, there's no verb there and that's true in line A of verse 2. So we have three clauses in verse 1 with identical verbs, and no verb in verse 2. 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 2, that's a different conjugation of the verb – it's a different kind, a different form of the verb, so that verse 2 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 that 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 the reason it’s translated “meditate” is that it seems to have the idea of saying something to oneself or saying something under one’s breath. But then we come to verse 3.

Verse 3 gives us the outcome of verses 1 and 2, 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 will be like a tree firmly planted, 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 and 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 could also to 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: “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, notice this: the person who doesn’t do those things – doesn’t live the wrong life journey – in verse 1, but who meditates in Yahweh’s law and teaching in verse 2, has been transplanted into a place prepared for it so that it will grow, so that it will be safe from the changes in 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, 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 – if its leaves wither, the tree is going to die. That's what it means in this culture, so saying, "its leaf doesn't wither" means the tree is not going to die, because it's been provided for. So the act – now, the act, then, of meditating on what the Lord has said has the effect of transplanting a person into a place that is made so that they will live.

By the way, there is another foundational metaphor under there, and that is that the Lord is a gardener. Right? That is all over the place too, right? Israel is a vine. Read the book of Ezekiel; how many times did the Lord plant a vine, plant a piece of a cedar tree? Does it sound familiar at all that Jesus talks about himself as the vine, and what is the Father going to do? Every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit... So, the image that underlies all – you see, that's what I find really exciting about thinking in terms of foundational metaphors, rather than specific metaphors – because the foundational metaphor suddenly lets you see way through the whole of Scripture, and show you all these things that you kind of feel instinctively – "Oh, they are somehow related." They are related! They are related! They are 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 is an even deeper foundational metaphor under "God is a gardener," and that is, that God is a person, because gardeners are people. So that goes into, and 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 am not going to argue or talk about the theology of that for now, because that is really not the purpose at the moment. You notice that in all these lectures,

I am really talking about trying to understand the Psalm, before trying to theologize or apply it. If our theology and our application don't rise out of a sympathetic understanding of the text, and in poetry, really a self-conscious delight, I think, in the text itself, even the way it is saying things, and appreciation, I think we are apt to misapply and mis-theologize, because we haven't really wrestled with what it is saying – we have sort of taken away an impression. So, you sort of go back to T. S. Elliot's balancing act.

But here in verse 3 it is 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 if 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 kind of 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 know that I am cheating, but Hebrew does it by changing the vowel. Hebrew changes the function of the verb by changing the vowels and adding letters in 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. And 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 is another kind of discontinuity that is, I admit, invisible in English, and very obvious in Hebrew. That break, between verses 3 and 4, is intentional and deliberate. It is actually built into the 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 the wind to drive it on you, because it is sticky and itchy. If you've ever stood behind a wheat combine you

know just what it's like. And then he said, "The wicked won't stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous." And here, you see, we have to guess a little bit; we don't really know. By using the word "stand," does he actually mean to stand up? Does that mean if you are innocent you stood up in court? At least what he is saying is that he is 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 of this, we come back to this picture: the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes. Again, in Hebrew this verse is another of those chiasms. It says, "For he knows, the Lord, knowing the way of the righteous, the way of the wicked perishes." So the verb and in fact what is so cool, this is almost inexpressible, the verb form that he uses at the beginning of verse 6 is a participle, which sounds like this: "OEI." Those are the vowels, "OEI," "UREIA." The verb that he uses at the end is the verb that says "TOVEID," same vowels, not a participle though. So why does he use a participle? In fact, that is only the second participle he has used in the whole psalm – in fact, it is the only participle that is used as a verb in the whole psalm. Why does he use a participle there instead of the imperfect or something else that he could have used, and which he does use in the last verse? Is there some difference in the way that God is knowing and the perishing, or is it that he wanted the sound to be the same? That could be wrong; I am on shaky ground here because you know the vowels were added much later, but at least we ought to think about that. It is so carefully arranged that there seems to be – it seems we have to say that there is some purpose to it.

Well let me close, I have about 2 minutes, let me close by saying this: I had intended, thought I would 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 am not going to read it to you. That poem is by William Butler Yeats. There are some others by Gerard Manly Hopkins, another wonderful Christian poet in the 19th century that I have read it many, many, many times, in order to try to understand them. Here is 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 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 have been talking about – parallelism, structures, and genre, I just can't remember."

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, read it out loud every day, two or three times a day for a month, or a week if you don't have the patience. And then start making notes every time you see, "Oh, this word sounds like that word." Use colored pencils, start drawing lines, 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 about three years reading on and off before I finally began to understand it, and actually only then when I had 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 centre 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 conviction, 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 sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel 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 Yates.

Transcribed by: Libbi Wilson, Caitlin Crosby, Nathan Margolis, Dieter Ekstrom,
Ken Fitzmaurice and edited by Emily McAdam
Edited by Ted Hildebrandt