

“How to Read the Bible For All It’s Worth: The Psalms”
Psalms 121; 137

October 23, 2016

Rev. David Williams

Scripture: Psalms 121; 137

Sermon:

Introduction...

A young university student sat in a science class. The professor began speaking about the Bible. He quoted Psalm 133:3, which reads in part, “It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.” The science professor then explained that we now know that dew does not fall. It forms on grass and other thin objects through condensation. Since dew doesn’t fall, but the Bible says that dew does fall, we can see that the Bible is wrong and we don’t need to read it anymore!

The student, a new Christian, decided that Christianity and science must be incompatible. She chose to never take another science course!

Sound farfetched? It isn’t. That was my aunt’s experience when she went to university many years ago. She was a journalism major, so she didn’t need to take many science classes to begin with, but imagine if she had been a chemistry major!

Or, consider this. Does the earth revolve around the sun? Or does the sun revolve around the earth? I think we all know the earth revolved around the sun; that the sun is the centre of our solar system. But what about Psalm 104:5, “He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.” Doesn’t that mean the earth is stationary? The Bible says the earth is fixed on its foundations and cannot be moved! Isn’t that what this verse means?

That may seem silly to us today, but it wasn’t always this way. This verse was interpreted to mean that the earth does not move in space. Therefore, the sun must rotate around the earth, not the other way around. Who interpreted it that way? Priests and bishops when faced with Galileo and Copernicus’ theories that the sun was the centre of the solar system, not the earth. Do you think they were doing well interpreting and applying Scripture?

Why is it that these two examples seem so odd to us? Why is it that these interpretations are wrong? I think, on an instinctive level, we know that it’s abusing Scripture. We know that the Psalms are poetry and that to force poetry into such a wooden interpretation is wrong. But people do it all the time!

Today we are going to take a look at the Psalms, all of which are poems. We are going to consider a number of factors that will help us to interpret and apply the Psalms well. To begin with, we need to know a few things about Hebrew poetry.

First, **the purpose of (all) poetry is to evoke a response, to create or connect with feelings within us, not just to inform us.** Part of the Psalms role in Scripture is “to touch and kindle in us rather than simply to address us.” [Derek Kidner, *Psalms*, p. 28] As a result, Hebrew poetry uses figurative language along with some other techniques that are clearly identifiable. This is true of all Hebrew poetry, not just that in the Psalms, but also Proverbs, Song of Songs and the poetic parts of the books of the Prophets that we looked at last week.

First, Hebrew poetry uses a lot of synonymous parallels. What does that mean? **One line will highlight, clarify or expand on a previous line.** For instance, Psalm 33:12, “**Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.**” The second line clarifies that the writer is speaking of Israel, not just any nation in general that chooses Yahweh.

Another technique in Hebrew poetry is for one line to be the opposite of the previous line. This is a way of highlighting the first line, for instance, in Hosea 7:14, “They do not cry out to me from their hearts, but wail on their beds.” The “but” tells us this is a contrast. Instead of crying out to God, they just cry.

Whenever we read Hebrew poetry, we need to keep an eye open for this sort of thing in which one line informs our understanding of another line next to it. This aspect of Hebrew poetry is one of the reasons why it translates so well into English. Instead of being based on rhymes or repeated sounds in Hebrew, which would be very difficult to translate and still find similar sounds, Hebrew poetry is built around images and thoughts and often the lines work together to create more vivid images or more vivid thoughts.

This is one aspect of Hebrew poetry in general and it applies to the Psalms. Another thing to consider when reading the Psalms themselves is to read the entire Psalm in one sitting. **Psalms often have an overall structure that sheds light on the meaning of individual lines or sections.** Sometimes this structure has to do with the kind of Psalm it is, that is the use of the Psalm in Israelite worship. Sometimes it's something more artistic. Some Psalms, as well as the section in Proverbs 31 about the woman of noble character, are acrostics. That is, they follow the Hebrew alphabet and for each letter of the alphabet they have a new line or section of lines. Psalm 119 is like this, having an entire stanza for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is why Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the whole Bible! When we were talking about narrative sections of the Bible we spoke of reading entire paragraphs together. When reading the Prophets we talked about reading entire oracles or messages from God together, not just pulling out one or two lines in isolation. In the Psalms, we need to read the entire Psalm as one unit, or at least an entire stanza as one unit.

We need to also remember that the Psalms were originally meant to be sung. They have a musical quality to them. This is why sometimes they are repetitive. Also, it means that they use figurative language to convey ideas. While the Psalms contain doctrine, they communicate it in a different way than narrative or law sections of Scripture.

A great example from more recent times would be our hymns and other Christian worship songs. Consider the great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." This is not saying that God is made of stone or that he is a building like a castle! This is musical imagery designed to inspire us in a different way than a doctrinal statement or theological treatise.

This was the mistake being made in both examples I used earlier. When Psalm 104 says that God made the foundations of the earth and they shall never be moved it is using imagery. It is not speaking of geology or astronomy. It is just talking about the fact that God made the earth and made it well. Similarly, when Psalm 133 speaks of dew it is not reporting the weather or talking about the physics of dew. Rather, it is using an image to convey the thorough and refreshing nature of God's blessings.

For all of these reasons, the use of imagery, formal structures to the Psalms and techniques of Hebrew poetry in which lines shape our understanding of other lines, we need to think in terms of entire Psalms at once, not just isolated verses. God's purpose was to inspire the whole Psalm, not just 1 or 2 lines, so don't cut out one or two lines and read them in isolation! [Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 218]

Text

With these ideas in hand, let's actually do some work in the Psalms themselves. Please turn with me to Psalm 121. You may be more familiar with this song than you realize because it's been set to modern music in the past few decades.

Now, turn with me to Psalm 137. You may be familiar with this Psalm because of its controversial and startling language. If not, hold on to your seats! We're going to study this Psalm in a bit more detail in a few minutes. Let your mind ponder it while we look at Psalm 121 for a while first.

Psalm 121

Psalm 121 is what is called a "song of ascent." That is, it is a pilgrimage song about ascending the hill up to Jerusalem. [NIV Study Bible, p. 931; Kidner, p. 431] This is one of many different types of Psalm. Other kinds of Psalms include laments, thanksgiving songs, hymns of praise, songs that talk about God's salvation history for Israel, songs of celebration which may talk about covenant renewal or the enthronement of a new king, wisdom Psalms that speak of how to make wise decisions and live a godly life, songs of trust and, finally, "imprecatory Psalms" or Psalms of cursing ones enemies! That's what Psalm 137 is about, while also being a Psalm of lament over the fall of Jerusalem.

If you want to know more about these types of Psalms, please refer to the text book we're using, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. There's a really good chapter on the Psalms with explanations of each type of Psalm, but we don't have time to go into all the details this morning.

Knowing that a particular Psalm was meant to be sung at the enthronement of a king vs a thanksgiving song or hymn of praise helps us understand the meaning of the Psalm as a whole. This puts appropriate boundaries on what any individual line or lines might be trying to say. Thus Psalm 104, talking about dew falling, is a Psalm

of praise to God and about hope for restoration. [Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, p. 141] It is not a Psalm about creation, or science or ecology.

Psalm 121, which we just read, is a Psalm of trust. It is about putting ones trust in the Lord for safety, in particular on a journey to Jerusalem, but also on the journey of life. This overarching purpose of the Psalm helps us understand it and gives boundaries on what individual lines mean.

Let's work through this Psalm in a bit of detail. Please open your Bible again to this Psalm. The first two lines work together as a sort of call and answer. It may be that in practice this Psalm would be sung by a group of pilgrims and some would sing one part and the other would respond. Or, perhaps it is intended to be an internal dialogue for one person. Maybe it could be used as both!

But the Psalm opens with the image of lifting up ones eyes and seeing hills our mountains. The question is asked, "Where will my help come from?" When we read this, we think of the Psalmist being inspired by the majesty of the mountains, but I don't think that's accurate at all. **The speaker in the Psalm is actually afraid and looking for help**, wondering where help will come from because the mountains are often dangerous places. They may hide robbers, or wild animals. Remember, this is a pilgrimage song, a traveller's song. It is a song of trust in times of trouble.

I think there's an even deeper meaning behind the mountains too. As one of my professors pointed out in a class on the Psalms, **the mountains were where people worshipped idols**. They were considered the strongholds of pagan gods, places of power or "high places." When we read a few lines down, the Psalmist refers to God as the "maker of heaven and earth." I think this is a contrast to the pagan gods that would be worshipped in the mountains.

So, contrary to looking up at the mountains and being inspired by their beauty and majesty, this Psalm is about looking up at the mountains and being afraid, wondering where help will come from. In response to this fear, the song speaks of our help coming from God, Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth, the one who made those mountains and who is more powerful than the pagan gods worshipped there. "My help comes from you, LORD..." in contrast to coming from pagan gods or idols. Frequently Israel got in trouble precisely because they did not look to God for help! Instead, they looked to foreign gods by worshiping idols or even foreign military powers like Egypt or Assyria to help them when they were in trouble.

Verse 3 is actually in the form of a prayer or request, "May he not let your foot stumble, may the one who watches over you not slumber." Verse 4 then becomes an answer to that request, "The one who watches over Israel will neither sleep nor slumber." You may recall in 1 Kings 18, when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and Ashera and they had their contest to see whose god would answer with fire, Elijah mocked the pagan prophets asking if perhaps Baal had fallen asleep and needed to be woken up!

Now, interestingly, verse 5 moves from the general to the particular. In verse 5 the blessing of the nation Israel is applied to the individual, "The Lord [who in verse 4 watches over all of Israel] watches over you!" The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The image of a shade was a common one in Israel. It meant protection. Literally, it is a reference to shade from the burning Middle Eastern sun, but figuratively it referred to a king who was responsible to protect his people. [NIV Study Bible, p. 805]

Verse 6 is an example of parallelism we talked about earlier. It expands or clarifies what it means to be a shade. The sun and moon will not hurt you. While on the one hand, this is drawing on the image of a shade from the sun, remember too that pagan religions also worship the sun and moon. If we are right about the mountains being the sites of pagan worship being the source of the image in v 1, then this may also be a reference to pagan gods. Even if the Psalm is not being that specific, this is another Hebrew technique. The idea is to **name 2 opposites, the sun and moon, and use them as "book ends" to refer to everything in between**. The sun and moon are an opposite pair like day and night. Nothing will harm you from the sun to the moon and everything in between! [Kidner, p. 432]

This is used again in verse 8 "coming and going" to refer to all of the journey. The beginning and end of the journey, the coming and going, includes all of what happens in between. This is both for a physical journey, like a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival, or figuratively to mean all of life's journeys. [Kidner, p. 432]

Essentially, verses 7-8 mean that God will keep you from all evil throughout your life. This does not mean we will have a comfortable life! But it does mean we will have a "well-armed" life. God will protect us from the

evil that comes our way, not necessarily lead us along a path completely free of evil trials or attacks. [Kidner, p. 432]

How do we use this Psalm? How can we apply it today? First, **this Psalm teaches us to trust God!** It teaches us to look to God for help and protection instead of looking to earthly sources of aid. We are often tempted to look to things other than God for help, and then only turn to God when everything else fails. This Psalm teaches us to trust in God from the beginning.

It also teaches us about God's character. God is the protector of those who trust him. He doesn't fall asleep, he doesn't miss out on things because he is distracted. He is trustworthy and powerful both. He created the heavens and the earth. He can look after us too!

It gives us words with which to relate to God. This is God's word for us, but it is actually about our words to God! Many people wonder about how to pray, how to do it right. Or they worry that they are doing it wrong. The Psalms are a collection of works many of which are prayers or can be used as prayers to God. The beauty of many of the Psalms is that they are general enough that we can adopt the words ourselves and use them as our own prayers, whether of thanksgiving or cries for help or lament over bad things that are happening to us. Either way, if we take the time to understand the whole Psalm, so we know what the whole thing is saying, we can adopt the words and use them ourselves, maybe with a tweak here or there, but by and large they provide words for us to use in our worship and prayer life too.

Psalm 137

I mentioned a moment ago and earlier that there are a number of Psalms that are laments. That is, they are Psalms of sadness and crying out to God. In fact, laments form the largest category of Psalms! [Fee and Stuart, p. 220] **The laments help us deal with the problem of evil in the world.** Why do bad things happen to good or innocent people? Why do bad people seem to flourish? Where is God when bad things happen?

Some of the laments are individual, "Why is this happening to me?" and some are corporate, "Why is this happening to us?" In either case, the laments have some consistent themes if you read the whole Psalm. Every lament speaks of trust in or loyalty to God. The laments remind us that God is ultimately still in control even if present circumstances make it seem otherwise. Laments also trust God to eventually bring justice.

Sometimes, in expressing horror at injustice, laments call down curses on those guilty of the injustice. Many of these calls for revenge are a request for justice on the scale of the veil that has been done! [NIV Study Bible, p. 795] In the Psalms in particular, but also throughout the OT, the Hebrew word translated "hate" doesn't just mean to despise a person. Hate in the OT often refers to an unwillingness to accept or put up with something, hate means to utterly reject something. [Fee and Stuart, p. 230] So to hate evil means to reject it completely. To hate injustice means to be completely unwilling to put up with it. This shapes the curses we find in the Bible because, although they do not necessarily use the word "hate," we can understand that the person giving the curse is not willing to put up with injustice, he or they are utterly rejecting the wrong that is being done.

Let's take a closer look at one of these laments, Psalm 137. This is a corporate or group lament. The opening verse gives us some historical context. This Psalm was written after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Jews were carried into exile.

The 12 lines in Hebrew are grouped into 3 sets of 4 lines each. Verses 1-3 are about remembering sorrow and torment. Verses 4-6 are an oath of continued loyalty and commitment to Jerusalem, the place where God dwells. Verses 7-9 are a call for retribution, a call for justice against Edom and Babylon.

If you read about the fall of Jerusalem, the Edomites who were neighbours of Israel and descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, should have come to the aid of Judah against the Babylonians. Instead, they cheered the Babylonians on and helped sack Jerusalem when it was conquered.

In verses 1-3 the song says, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." Sitting was a posture of mourning. [NIV Study Bible, p. 940] Often in the OT we read of kings who are repenting, turning back to God, and they dress in sack cloth, put ashes on their head and sit in a heap of ashes. This is to express their deep sorrow.

Zion was another name for Jerusalem.

The Psalm goes on to say that they hung their harps on the trees, refusing to play or sing. Why? Because the Babylonians who had captured them were taunting them to sing songs about how great Zion was. This was a

mockery in light of the fall of Zion. Interestingly, archaeologists have unearthed a relief sculpture on a wall in an ancient Assyrian palace showing 3 POWs playing harps while being marched along by a soldier! [Kidner, p. 459] So it appears that it was a common practice, at least among some cultures, to force captives to sing their cultural songs of victory and greatness while they were marched along as slaves!

In verses 4-6, instead of despairing that God had abandoned them, instead of giving in to their captors, the Judeans in this song defiantly refuse to sing! They say, “Let my hand forget its skill, let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I forget you Zion.” This is a reference to their musical skill- if I forget Zion, if I lose faith, then let my hands and mouth forget how to make music so that I still cannot sing for my captors the Babylonians.

Finally, verses 7-9 contain the cry for justice. “Remember, O Lord” is a legal or judicial phrase. They are bringing to God the evidence of terrible harm that has been done. They ask God to remember what the Edomites did. They ask God to carry out destruction against Babylon.

It’s interesting that God had already foretold his destruction of Babylon. We don’t know our OT very well, so it would be lost on most of us, but in Jeremiah 50-51, Jeremiah prophesies that God will destroy Babylon and will punish Edom for their role in Jerusalem’s destruction. Obadiah is a prophesy against Edom for their failure to help Judah. Isaiah 13:47 also speaks of God’s plan for judgement on Babylon.

So this Psalm is not calling for the destruction of Babylon in isolation. The Psalmist seems to remember the prophesies already given about God’s plans to destroy Babylon. In fact, Jeremiah 51:56 contains a number of words that the Psalmist copies in verse 8! [Kidner, p. 460] So this is not only a cry for justice against Babylon, but it is also a cry for God to be faithful to carry out his previous prophesies!

But what about that last line about babies? Isn’t that going too far? Well, it depends. **One aspect of the curses in the Psalms is that they are usually a call for justice in proportion to the injustice that has been done.** Quite frankly, I don’t think the Psalmist came up with this line in isolation. I think this is included and the emphasis needs to be on “your.” That is, “Happy... are those who dash *your* babies heads against the rocks” in contrast to when you dashed *our* babies heads against the rocks! War is terrible and cruel. The Bible doesn’t shy away from that or try to sweep it under the rug!

The curse says, “Happy is he who repays you...” This is not necessarily a reference to “glee” or “laughing joy.” Rather, happiness is the quality of a life well lived. Happy is related to being blessed by God. The Psalmist is saying, “blessed is” or “to be congratulated is he who carries out justice on you Babylon, for the injustice you have done... including but not limited to the slaughter of our babies!” And I think we would agree, to a degree at least, that we are to congratulate those who succeed in removing a vicious predator from the international stage. [NIV Study Bible, p. 940] Babylon was a violent, vicious military super power. When the Medes and Persians arrived a number of years later, they conquered Babylon and ultimately it was this group that allowed Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem!

So how are we to make use of this Psalm today? Is it ok for us to pray that our enemies have their babies heads smashed in? No. I don’t think so. So how do we make use of this Psalm?

One thing we can learn from the curses in the Psalms is that they allow us to express and feel anger without doing anger. **The curses in the Psalms bring our anger to God.** That is, we vent our anger to God without seeking vengeance ourselves. The curses in the Psalms are always addressed to God asking God to fix the problem. Never does the speaker in the Psalms attempt to carry out the revenge himself.

While we may be shocked by the passion of these curses, it is a reflection on the peaceful age and country in which we live more than a commentary on the Psalms. How should Christians respond to the Holocaust? How should we respond to child abuse? How should we respond to abortion even? We should be horrified by these things. We should be kindled to anger about these things! Injustice needs to make us fiery and angry! But in our anger, we must not sin. In our anger we must come to God and entrust the final solution of justice or revenge to him!

When King David was faced with injustice, he got angry even when the injustice helped him out! This was the case with the death of Saul and the death of Absalom. David hated injustice! And yet he refused to take justice into his own hands. He always turned it over to God. And that is what we see in the Psalms that call for curses on the unjust. The Psalms are a process through which we can turn over our need for justice and revenge to

God.

Perhaps you recall a few weeks ago we were doing a series on the Lord's Prayer. When we got to that difficult request that God forgive us as we forgive others we talked about forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean saying "it's ok." Forgiveness does not deny that an injustice has been done. Rather, when we forgive people for injustice, for wrong doing, we are forgiving the person, not the deed. When we forgive people we do not give up on fighting the system or systems that perpetuate injustice. When we forgive people it means that when we finally do see an end to unjust systems we can work for reconciliation with people instead of using the new system to perpetrate new injustices or new oppression on the old oppressors. When an oppressed people are freed and the systems of oppression are broken, what makes the difference as to whether or not the newly freed people turn on their old oppressions and take revenge, oppressing them in return, is whether or not the formerly oppressed people have forgiven the people who oppressed them. **Forgiveness is what breaks the cycle of oppression and oppressive systems.** But that forgiveness does not turn a blind eye or ignore the systems that support and contribute to oppression. Those systems can still be torn down even when the people using them or benefiting from them have been forgiven.

So, like all the Psalms, even the curses in Psalms give us words to express our emotions to God. They give us words to relate to God, while modelling for us the trust we must put in God to deal with injustice. By praying to God about these things, by bringing the injustice to God for satisfaction, we ensure that we do not sin in our anger. Yes, it is ok to be angry at injustice! But in your anger, come to God asking him to sort it out and ask him to vindicate you. That is what these Psalms teach.

The Psalms give us words for our feelings, whether those are feelings of anger, joy, fear or thanksgiving. They give us words for relating to God. But to understand those words, we need to read the entire Psalm, not just isolated verses. God inspired the entire Psalm, not just the lines we like. And his message to us comes from the entire Psalm, not just a few verses. And they communicate God's message to us with vivid words and images to help us express ourselves in ways that cautious literalism cannot do. [Kidner, p. 27]

The Psalms guide us in worship, our response to God. They help us know how to relate to God in practical ways that take into account the whole array of human emotions. They teach us to focus on what God has done in the past so that we can put our trust in him for our future. Amen.