

Welcome

Good morning Catalyst! My name is Tim Basselin, and I'm on the preaching team here. And today we're going to talk about poetry.

So... let's just be honest. Let's start with some confession. At some point, most of us have all given up on poetry. Maybe as a sophomore in HS, you had that one really cool, laid back English teacher, and you also had that one person you thought you loved but had never talked to, and maybe for a few weeks there, you thought, maybe.... Maybe poetry will give words to all my feelings. I'll put in the work. I'll understand it. And I'll figure out how to make all these extra feelings inside sound beautiful, even elegant!

And then you found out the person you loved was actually a jerk, and you saw your English teacher left your school in the middle of the year to play the futures on the stock market. And you decided to re-evaluate your life, and that was the last time you put any effort into poetry.

Well. I have some bad news, today we're gonna have to deal with it. Ok, one more bad news before we start having a positive attitude here: Poetry is actually about 27% of the Bible. More than a quarter of the Bible.

Ok.. I need you all to take a deep breath and try to think positive with me. Maybe, if God allowed a quarter of the Bible to be poetry... maybe it's significant. And MAYBE God will help us understand how to think about it.

Alright. It's time to rip off the bandaid. Let's read a poem.

This is by Billy Collins, a poet laureate, and professor of English. It's called "Introduction to Poetry"

I ask them to take a poem

and hold it up to the light

like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem

and watch him probe his way out,

*or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.*

*I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.*

*But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.*

So if we were in an English class, we'd have some obligatory silence right here, as is necessary after reading any poem. And then, of course, we'd ask, what do you think it means? What's the point?

But it seems with this poem, professor Collins is telling us that's the wrong question altogether. The poem's MEANING is not his primary concern.

And not to get too far ahead of myself, but perhaps, maybe, and I'm just wondering aloud here.... Perhaps asking what scripture means, especially the quarter that's poetry... isn't the only question, or the best question to ask.

What if we learned to hold scripture up to the light like a color slide? Or to press our ear against the hive of its apocalyptic literature, or to walk into scripture's wisdom literature and feel around for a light switch?

What if our expectation for scripture was something closer to an encounter than to understanding.

The point here is: Let's stop tying Scripture to a chair and torturing a confession out of it.

Perhaps understanding poetry better can help us be more inclined to encounter God in scripture. There's no better way to begin our movement toward encounter than by singing worship songs. This is poetry, after all, set to music. Just as the ancient Psalms were not just poems, but were sung by the people.

Message

This summer, we've been talking about "How the Bible works." And we've been doing that by learning more about how to read the Bible's various genres. We've looked at prophecy, apocalypse, the book of Acts, and last week we looked at law codes. And part of what we're coming to see is that the Bible is a collection of a whole bunch of humans encounters with God. We express what it means to be human and to be in relationship in myriad ways. We tell stories. We write letters. We imagine future possibilities. We write poetry.

I believe poetry is a form of communication that tries to express what can't be communicated. Put simply, it attempts to reach beyond itself. Where words fail, poetry attempts to express more than the words have the ability to say. It's no surprise that when we approach it, wanting it to give us the answer, it refuses us. It becomes difficult, and we tend to turn away to other means that are more immediate and will give us the answers.

But if God is a mystery... what better form of communication is there to say something about God than poetry?

Back in March, when this pandemic began, I attended a webinar that was specifically for professors of religion. They posed the question: "How do we as professors of religion go on teaching in the midst of so much uncertainty and isolation?" Do we just proceed with our content? Or do we spend all our time talking about the pandemic?

One of the hosts was Willie Jennings, who teaches at Yale. He began his answer by saying one of the things we needed to be offering our students is a "turn to the poetic." He didn't just mean to read a poem with them, but he meant poetry as a way of thinking or a way of being in the world.

Then Willie Jennings said something I found particularly profound: He said that poetry, like prayer, lets us live with the silence and the word. // **Poetry lets us live with silence and the word.**

When a pandemic hits, there are a lot of questions that we can't answer. From how long will this last to why a good God would allow people to die like this. And if you've ever taken those questions seriously, you know there are no satisfying answers. Jennings went on to talk about how poetry allows us to sit in mystery, to be in the presence of things that don't make sense, things that can't be put into words. Sometimes with mystery, we just have to be silent. We see that near the end of the book of Job. God finally speaks and all Job can say is:

"I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers?"

I will cover my mouth with my hand.

I have said too much already.

I have nothing more to say.” -- Job 40:4-5

Poetry invites us into THAT. It acknowledges mystery and humbly admits we don't have all the answers.

And yet poetry also helps us speak and say what has to be said. It teaches us to say something, to express what we can, even if we can't make our way to a full answer.

I've been thinking about that combination ever since. Silence and word. Mystery and voice. What we can and what we cannot say about God.

God is a mystery, beyond us, and I think that is one reason so much of the Bible is poetry. Whatever we say about God is never really true, because it's never enough. If what we say assumes it has understood God, we have lied. Because God cannot be understood. And yet... we must say something, say what we can. But how do we speak truth about God without our words limiting God to a simplistic understanding? We need to learn to speak about God, and yet to allow our words to push beyond themselves into mystery, into the things that can't be put into words.

And this is what poetry does. Poetry invites us beyond itself. It's not trying to understand God or explain God. Poetry invites us to something more than its individual words can achieve. But we have not been taught to think this way. When we study history, for example, we take countries and lives and relationships and we reduce it and package it into a book so we can own the information and use it for our purposes. But this is not the way of wisdom. The wisdom books in scripture invite us to move in the opposite direction, through the words in the text to something beyond themselves.

So how does poetry reach beyond itself?

Well, there are a lot of ways words do this. For example, when we read rhyming poetry aloud, there's something extra that happens. The sum is greater than the parts. But instead of looking at those, or a hundred other ways that words work, I'd like to focus on two particular ways that are significant for the Bible: parallelism and chiasm.

[Scripture Slide 1] To understand parallelism, we are going to look at Proverbs and to see chiasm we will look at Psalms.

Nearly every single verse of Proverbs is parallelism. So you can open it anywhere but let's look at 1:7-9. Parallelism simply means that the one thought runs parallel to the other, like railroad tracks. Watch how saying the idea a second time reinforces the first idea. But also watch how it doesn't only re-state it, it also introduces another idea.

“Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.
My child, listen when your father corrects you.
Don’t neglect your mother’s instruction.
What you learn from them will crown you with grace
and be a chain of honor around your neck.” -- Proverbs 1:7-9

Parallelism works to slow us down. It makes us listen a second time, invites us to consider the similarities and the differences, and makes us wonder if this truism has other connections?

Parallelism most often works like a synonym, as in vs 8:

*“My child, listen when your father corrects you.
Don’t neglect your mother’s instruction.”*

The first idea is being repeated and reinforced and extended beyond itself.

Parallelism also works as an antonym, as in vs 7:

*“Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”*

Showing its opposite reinforces the first line’s truth. This technique also opens up the first idea beyond itself.

There’s lots more that could be said about parallelism, but let me note this. Of all the ways words work, rhymes and meter and all that ... the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament primarily relies on parallelism. Think of a sonnet, which relies heavily on meter and rhyme. How the words sound is soooo important for feeling that sense of beyondness that’s essential to how a sonnet works. But what happens to meter and rhyme when you translate it to another language? It’s nearly impossible to keep.

However, what happens when you translate parallelism? It remains. This form of poetry is translatable. And I think that’s so incredible, because the word of God was destined to be translated into thousands of languages.

[Scripture Slide 2] So now let’s look at chiasm, which the Psalms rely heavily upon. BTW, it’s also translatable. Let’s look at Psalm 1, because my grandfather was a preacher and a church planter, and this was his favorite scripture. He had it memorized and would quote it often. It also serves as an introduction to the whole book of Psalms.

Chiasm is just a more developed form of parallelism. And the best way to understand it is to just read a Psalm and see it at work. I'm using a different translation here than the one we normally use, because I want to point out something specific in the text that not all translations show. So, here's Psalm 1.

[Use the Chiasm Image here -- keep it up throughout the discussion of the text]

1 (A) Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,

nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

2 (B) but his delight is in the law of the Lord,

and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 (C) He is like a tree

planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season,

and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

4 (C^) The wicked are not so,

but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

5 (B^) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

6 (A^) for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.

So, as you can see with the labels here, we have the pattern of A, B, C and then C, B, A. For the most part, the first half of the Psalm, vs 1-3, is about the righteous. The second half is parallel, using antonyms to show how the wicked are the opposite.

We could say a lot about the parallels between vss 1 and 6, but very simply, just note the repeated use of the word way. There is a way, or a path that the righteous walk down, and there is a way that the wicked walk down.

In vs 2, the righteous delight in God's law. For the Israelites, this was the law of the land, so delighting in the law was very real and physical, like in courts. In vs 5, the wicked don't stand in the judgment. They are not able to decide cases or affect people's lives in positive ways.

In vs. 3, the righteous are like a tree planted by water, strong and fruitful. Paralleling in vs 4, the wicked are like chaff, which is just the husk of wheat, that blows away in the wind.

So why write in chiasm? Well, it was likely a memory technique for an oral culture. And it can be used as a memory technique for you today, if you choose to memorize this Psalm, like my grandfather.

But here's another reason: when you begin noticing the structure, you're left with a sense that the whole is greater than the parts. This is because the meaning isn't limited by the definitions of singular words, but is instead encoded in the structure of the poem. And when you feel the truth of that structure, you begin noticing it in other places as well. It connects with some larger truth of the universe, or of who God is.

And that's why we need poetry.

And as we've talked about with every genre of the Bible that we have looked at over the last couple months, learning how to read a genre takes practice. So I'd like to suggest two ways you can practice reading poetry.

The single most important thing is that we learn how to **slow down and listen** well to the text. In order to recognize chiasm, for example, you have to be aware of it as a possibility, and then you have to immerse yourself in the text. Remember, poetry isn't trying to tell you how to think. It's trying to invite you into an experience. So, in the first poem we read, Professor Collins uses all 5 of our senses to invite us into the poem's truth. He asks us to hold a poem up to the light and look at it. We are to press our ear against its hive. We are supposed to walk inside and feel our way around for a lightswitch.

Have you ever been reading something and really been struck by one sentence? What did you do? Did you stop and let your mind wander? Did you read the sentence again? Did you write it on a post-it note and hang it on the mirror where you get ready? Did you journal about it? Or share it with a friend? When we do these things, what we're doing is being led into the mystery, the thing that's bigger than the words themselves. We're allowing the words to expand beyond themselves. And I believe that's a good way to approach scripture and to hear God's voice, always speaking, always calling us to more.

My second suggestion is super, super simple. **Read poetry aloud.** I have a friend that writes a good deal of poetry, and he'll often send it to encourage me or to get feedback. I once opened one of his poems and spent about an hour reading it and making notes and giving him feedback. And I emailed him all of my grand insights and then waited on his reply to show how he'd adopted all my brilliant feedback. A few days later, he still hadn't written me back, and I decided to return to the poem, and this time I noticed something that made me read one of the lines aloud. I then read the whole poem aloud and It was perfect. And I realized the comments I'd written him the day before were mostly about clarity, but what his poem was doing was something more. When I spoke the words, I could hear those structures that my eyes

couldn't see, and the poem drew me beyond itself. So I wrote another email and asked him to ignore everything I'd written before.

[Image: Wings] Rather than more talking about poetry, let's practice reading another poem. This one was written by George Herbert in the 1600's. It's called Easter Wings, and it was originally published sideways, like this, to highlight the structure of the poem, which is chiasmic. Herbert was steeped in biblical poetry, and he often used techniques similar to scripture. This poem makes the chiasmic structure really easy to see, and uses it to help us see the truth of our thinness without God vs our fullness with God.

Easter Wings, by George Herbert

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,

Though foolishly he lost the same,

Decaying more and more,

Till he became

Most poore:

With thee

O let me rise

As larks, harmoniously,

And sing this day thy victories:

Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne

And still with sicknesses and shame.

Thou didst so punish sinne,

That I became

Most thinne.

With thee

Let me combine,

And feel thy victorie:

For, if I imp my wing on thine,

Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Our sin makes us smaller and smaller, thinner and thinner, til there's almost nothing left. And we see that visually in the poem. The sound of the poem also reinforces this, as three syllable words are used, and then two syllable words, and then we are left with sharp one-syllable words in the middle: Most Poor, Most Thin. But when we meet Christ at our most thin, we are afforded his victories. We rise into the five-syllable word of harmoniously, which literally means bringing together, combining but still remaining separate. The apostle Paul says we participate in Christ's death that we may also participate in his resurrection. This poem gives that to us visually, and in the sounds of the words, and their meaning. Easter wings. That morning of the resurrection. Hope that gives us flight.

The picture Herbert gives us here is also what we practice in taking communion. Christ moved from glory, born into this world and became most poor, most thin, even unto death. And in taking communion, we remember Christ's sacrifice. Christ said "This is my body, this is my blood. Take. Eat. Do this in remembrance of me." And so we remember, and we participate in Christ's death, so that we may also participate in his resurrection.

Let us pray over the communion, and then as you receive communion, I will read one last poem. It's a communion poem by one of my favorite living poets, Malcolm Guite.

Let's pray:

Lord, your gifts to us are bounteous. And yet, in our sin, we become so poor and thin. We confess we are unable on our own to live as you would have us live. As we partake of these elements today, may they become a spiritual food to us, may they be your mercy to us, that we might combine with you and rise harmoniously. Thank you for your sacrifice and resurrection that makes possible our resurrection. Amen.

This poem by Malcolm Guite is called Love's Choice:

This bread is light, dissolving, almost air,

A little visitation on my tongue,

A wafer-thin sensation, hardly there.

This taste of wine is brief in flavour, flung

A moment to the palate's roof and fled,

Even its aftertaste a memory.

Yet this is how He comes. Through wine and bread

Love chooses to be emptied into me.

He does not come in unimagined light
Too bright to be denied, too absolute
For consciousness, too strong for sight,
Leaving the seer blind, the poet mute;
Chooses instead to seep into each sense,
To dye himself into experience.