

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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DAY 6 - INTERPRETING PSALMS & POETRY

We hear a lot about carbohydrates today. Athletes load up on them before times of high output. We all need them. They supply energy for our bodies, and they are enjoyable and tasty eating. Grains, fruits and vegetables provide carbohydrates. Simple carbohydrates are among the quickest and easiest foods to digest and use. They are fast-working and productive.

God Word, our spiritual food, has something similar. There is a type of literature that is enjoyable and appealing to all. It is easy to digest and provides quick spiritual energy. Spiritual meals are made more exciting by it. It is *poetry*. Poetry is one of the quickest and easiest forms of Bible literature to understand and apply. It is full of emotion and life and speaks to our hearts. It provides the quick boost of spiritual energy we sometimes need. Poetical portions of the Bible include Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Solomon. There is hardly a book without at least some poetry in it. Much of what the Old Testament prophets had to say was in poetical form. Much of it gets lost when the Bible is translated into English. Still, there is a lot left for us to enjoy. You'll never run out of this food item!

When interpreting poetry some of the skills already covered must be used. The questions covered with interpreting history are important to use (Who, When, Where, What, How, Why). Look closely for structural relationships, too (Contrast, Comparison, Repetition, etc.). Doing a topical study or a word study is very useful and rewarding when studying poetry.

Figure Family

One literary device of special value in understanding poetry is the use of figures of speech. While these pop up in all forms of literature, they are especially common in poetry so we are considering them here. I refer to these as the Figure Family and use pictures of people (from a child's coloring book) with the names on to help children understand them. Let me introduce you to the Figure Family.

RHODA RHETORICAL is the grandmother of the family, the one always asking questions. The questions she asks aren't for an answer but to produce an effect. "Is Christ divided?" is an example. Also Gal. 1:10; 3:2

PAPA PARABLE is the storyteller in the family. He tells stories about natural happenings, but always with the purpose of teaching a spiritual truth by it. Aesop also did this. Jesus told many parables. We will look at them more closely in the next article.

ALICE ALLEGORY, the mother of the family, also tells stories. In hers, however, there is not one point but many parallels. Her stories are to teach something spiritual from each physical event recorded. Pilgrims Progress is an allegory, so is the Christian's Armor in Ephesians. 6:11ff.

TILLIE TYPE is the oldest child in our family. As a teenager she likes to act out, do impersonations. However she is shy and does them behind a screen so all you can see is her shadow. A type is a deed, person or object that, which really happening, also teaches about a coming deed, person or object. It is the shadow which comes before the object. Jonah, Joseph, the serpent of bronze lifted up, in fact everything about the Tabernacle - all are types.

MELODY METAPHOR is the young daughter, but you find her everywhere, getting into everything. She copies what her mother does, but in smaller form. She doesn't say much, just acts out in simple form. A metaphor is a figure based on some similarity between two objects, things or beings. One is characterized by what is true of the other. Jesus used this when He said, "I am the door," or "Go tell that fox Herod...".

SCOTTY SYNECDOCHE is one of the twin boys. A synecdoche is when part is put for the whole or the whole for the part. "Drink this cup" is an example, for it is the contents of the cup which are referred to.

MICKEY METONYMY is the other twin. He puts the cause for the effect or the sign or symbol for the reality it indicates. "They have the prophets," or "He will judge the circumcision" are examples. You can see these twins are very similar, yet a bit different. Don't worry if you can't tell them apart at first, many people have that problem.

SAMMY SIMILIE is the baby. He is the smallest in the family and his activity is easily discovered. A similie compares two objects with the words *as* or *like*. Look for these two and you have a similie. "All we like sheep have gone astray."

PERCIVAL PERSONIFICATION is the uncle, a real character who likes to dress up and pretend he is something entirely different. Personification attributes actions of people to inanimate objects. "O death, where is your sting." "The mountains leapt for joy, the hills clapped their hands."

HEFTY HYPERBOLE is the family dog - a bit overweight ("Hefty"). A hyperbole represent something as being much bigger than it really is. "We were as grasshoppers in their sight."

LITTLE LITOTES is the other family pet - a cat. She is very skinny. A litote is an understatement of truth for the sake of emphasis. Often there is sarcasm involved. "Wisdom will die with you."

Types of Parallelism

Since Psalms are part of poetry, it is necessary to look at some specific forms of poetry involved in them. One is the way Jewish poetry rhymes. It does not rhyme words, like English poetry, or all would be lost in translation. God knew that, so His poetry rhymes thoughts/ideas. It is really neat when you get the idea of it. Basically it is the relationship of the 2nd line to the 1st that makes their poetry 'rhyme.'

These apply wherever there is Hebrew poetry, not just the book of Psalms.

First line repeated

- *Iterative*: in the same or nearly same words (Psalm 93:3)
- *Synonymous*: repeated in different words to reinforce a thought (Psalm 24:1)
- *Introverted*: members are placed in reverse order (Psalm 5:7)
- *Alternative*: members follow one another by turns, 1st line being parallel to 3rd, 2nd to 4th (Ps. 103:11-12).

First line finished

- *Climatic*: 2nd line completes the 1st (Ps. 29:1)
- *Synthetic*: 2nd line explains, adds to first (Ps 19:7-9)

Opposite of the first line

- *Antithetical*: thought of 1st line emphasized by a contrasting thought in 2nd (common in Prov.) Ps. 1:6

Types of Psalms

Like with all interpretation, finding the main idea is important. With poetry it is easy for, like our church music, it breaks down into various kinds:

Praise, thanksgiving

- *Individual*: fulfills private vow to publicly praise God. Reason for praise & application to listeners given, too. (Psalm 8, 9, 11, 16, 19, 23)
- *National*: group praise to God for all His blessings (Psalm 33, 36)

Lament

- *Individual*: person in time of trial asks God to deliver him. (Psalm 3,4,5,7,10,13,14,17,22,25)
- *National*: Israel in trouble, turn to God for deliverance (Psalm 12)

Messianic Psalms

- *Messianic*: person and work of Christ in 1st coming as Messiah (Psalm 22, 53)
- *Royal*: Christ as reigning in kingdom in 2nd coming (Psalm 2, 20, 21)

Penitential: Confession of sin (Ps 6, 32)

Pilgrim: Sung traveling to Jerusalem, captivity, etc. (Psalm 120 - 134)

Impeccatory: asking God to cure one's enemies (Psalm 7,35,55,58,59,69,79,109,137,139)

Trust: profession of faith (Psalm 11, 16)

Historical: praise God for faithfulness in past (Psalm 78, 105, 106)

In your Spiritual Journal:

- Now that you have been introduced, look for the Figure Family and recognize them when you meet them. For practice identifying them in some of the following verses: Proverbs 1:20; 12:19; Luke 13:32; 18:1-7; I Cor. 4:8; Isaiah 55:9, 12; Romans 7:1-6; 3:30; Judges 12:7; Heb. 1:14, 10:20; Deut. 1:28; Galatians 1:10; 5:1; 4:14, 21-31; 1:18; 18:25; Num. 21:6-9; Matthew 13:3-8; 24:42; 5:13; Genesis 18:25; John 3:14; 6:51-63.
- Identify which types of parallelism are found in these passages: Psalm 37:9; 19:2; 2:6;