

# How to Read Poetry

Good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to Exodus 15. Exodus is the second book of the bible—many of you actually started reading in Exodus this week as part of this year’s bible reading plan. Or if you’re not so good at bible reading plans, you’ll start Exodus in like a few months, nbd. If you are here for the first time today, you’re joining us in the middle of a teaching series all about the bible. And *part* of the reason for that is that this year, in 2020, many of us in our church family are attempting to read through the entire bible together. **We put out a year-long bible reading plan that you can grab a copy of out in the lobby, and many of us have been working our way through it, day-by-day for almost a month now.** But to help along the way, we’re also doing a series of teachings from the bible, *about* the bible.

And specifically, for these last three weeks of the series, we are getting immensely *practical* with it all. **We’re spending time each Sunday talking about one particular type of literature found in the bible, and how to read it when we come across it.** Now I realize if you’re new to church or new to the bible, that might’ve sounded like a very strange sentence to you. But long story short, the bible is made up of a lot of different books, all written by different authors, and all going about what they say in a slightly different ways. In other words, there are different *genres of literature* in our bible. **So each of these last three weeks during our series, we’ve been focusing on one of those genres, and then using a set of questions to learn how to read it well.**

*Last week*, if you weren’t here, we talked about how to read the *largest* section of literature in the bible—and that’s *narrative*. Narrative is the term that describes the parts of the bible that are just telling us stories about things that happened. Then *today*, we’re moving on to talking about the *next* largest genre of literature in the bible, and that’s *poetry*. Right at a third (33%) of our bible, is actually made up of poetry. There are some books that are all or *nearly all* poetic—books like Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Job (or if you’re newer to the bible, *Job*). Those are almost entirely poetic books. But even aside from those, there is plenty of poetry in *other* books of the bible. Over half of Isaiah, about a third of Jeremiah, a good bit of Ezekiel, and over half of the minor prophets are made up of poetry. In fact, if you’re looking at just the *Old Testament*, well over *half* of the quoted speech of *God himself* is written in poetry. Imagine that: God himself is a poet. Or bare minimum, he chooses to communicate in poetry a lot of the time. But my point is that **understanding how to read poetry is probably more important than many of us *think it is* when it comes to reading the bible and understanding who God is.**

Now, when you think about poetry, don't *just think* "stuff that rhymes." For most of us, that's the *first* type of poetry we get introduced to, but it's far from the *only* type of poetry there is. Even in English, plenty of poetry doesn't rhyme. There are *acrostic* poems, where the first letter of each line combine to spell out a word or sentence. There are *free verse* poems, that don't hold to any traditional meter or rhythm. There are *haiku* poems, which I won't even *pretend* to be smart enough to explain to you. But the point is that poems don't *have* to rhyme, in modern day *or* in the bible. **Poetry, at its core, is a type of writing that uses language to invoke the emotions and the imagination.** And biblical poetry does just that. It attempts to use language in unconventional ways to invite the reader into a certain type of experience as a result.

So one very important question, then, is "how do I know when I'm reading poetry in the bible?" Right? Seems like that would be helpful to know. Well, luckily, the *formatting* in the bible almost always gives it away. So have you ever been reading through the bible, and all of a sudden it starts indenting every single line differently? Yep, that's trying to tell you that what you're reading is poetry. So anytime the text breaks from large paragraphs of block text, and starts indenting the text in that type of way, you're almost assuredly reading poetry. That's how you know.

So with all that being said, **rather than continuing to explain the technicalities of poetry to you, let's just take a look at an example of poetry in the bible**, which brings us to Exodus 15. What we're about to read is a *song*—which is a type of poetry—that celebrates the parting of the Red Sea. If you're new to the bible or unfamiliar with the story, God has just rescued his people, Israelites, from years of oppressive, cruel slavery to the Egyptians. And at *this* moment in the story, Pharaoh and his commanders are chasing the Israelites down as they leave Egypt in order to *re-capture* them. So in order for his rescue to *work*, God has to somehow bring the Israelites *through* the Red Sea. Only problem is, they have no boats. And turns out, at this point in human history, that severely limits your options for crossing a large body of water. So what God does is that he parts the sea on either side of the Israelites, allowing them to pass through on dry land. And then, as soon as they're through and the Egyptians start through the waters to chase them, God releases the waters and they collapse on top of Pharaoh and his army. So that's what happens.

So in Exodus chapter 14—the chapter right before the one we're about to read from—we get a *narrative* account of all of that. It's a very straightforward, matter-of-fact description of the whole thing. But then what's interesting is that *after the narrative account, the*

author of Exodus comes *back* around, and describes the whole thing *again* in chapter 15, but this time he uses *poetry* to do it. And I want us to start off by looking at part of *that* passage, as a way of exploring how poetry *works* in the bible. So pick it up with me in chapter 15, starting in v. 4:

[4] *Pharaoh's chariots and his host he [that's God] cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. [5] The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. [6] Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy. [7] In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble. [8] At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. [9] The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'* [10] *You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.*

We'll just stop there. So there are all sorts of things in here we could talk about, but let me just point out a couple of them. First, **notice how vivid and graphic everything is.** It doesn't just *tell you* what *happened*, it helps you *imagine* it. "They went down into the depths *like a stone*." "The [waters] *congealed*," it says—apparently when the water stood up it looked a little like giant walls of Jell-O. "The floods *stood up in a heap*." **Do you see how this poetic account of the events actually enlists your imagination a little bit more than then a narrative would?** As you read it, if you're paying attention, it's like you have no choice but to actually *picture* the whole scenario in your mind's eye. It causes you to *enter into the story* yourself in a way that narrative doesn't.

I also want you to **notice how the author depicts God's actions in the poem.** "Your *right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy*." "[God] send[s] out his *fury*," in v. 7. In v. 8, it actually depicts the force that pushes back the seas as being "the blast of [God's] nostrils." Now, that's a vivid sentence if I've ever heard one.

And this brings up a very important point to be made about biblical poetry: **poetry is not primarily concerned with being literal or precise.** That's just not its *goal*. For instance, the author of Exodus here is not trying to make the argument that anytime the wind blows, it's actually coming from a giant set of divine nostrils up in the sky. Similarly, when we read that God's "right hand" did all this, we're not meant to go "wow, so God did *all* of this without even using his *left hand*!?" That's crazy!" The author here is not

primarily concerned with being *literal* or *precise*. Rather, what he's doing is **using figurative, imaginative language to help us experience something in a certain way**. He wants to help us see the might and power of God in what happened at the Red Sea, so he stretches and adapts the meaning of words and phrases in order to accomplish that. That's what poetry does. Lots of poems aren't *precise*, because that's not their purpose. Just like most science textbooks are not very *entertaining* either, because they're purpose isn't to entertain. Does that make sense? Poetry is not primarily concerned with being literal or precise. So we don't *read it* as if that's what it's doing.

So there are two things to consider about poetry. That's far from *everything* you need to know about poetry, but it at least gives you something to go on. But with all of that in mind about poetry, **let's talk through the questions we can ask when we read biblical poetry**. Just like we did last week, we'll just sprint through them first, and then we'll go back and use them to work through a couple passages so you can see how they work. Here are the questions:

- **What experience is the author describing?**
- **What imagery are they using to describe it?**
- **What does the imagery they use tell us about the experience?**
- **How do their words connect to any similar experiences we might have?**
- **How does this experience lead us to Jesus?**

There are our questions. To see how they work, let's use them to work through a passage in the bible. We'll start by looking at a fairly *dark* example of poetry in the bible. Turn with me to Lamentations 3. (Dark sounds fun, right?)

## **Lamentations 3:1-17**

Lamentations tends not to be a wildly *popular* book of the bible, mainly because it's exactly *that*: it's a book full of *laments* (or mourning, or complaining). Lamentations is written about a time when God is allowing his people to experience somewhat *severe* consequences of their sin. They have rejected God and run from God and refused to listen to God at every turn, now their reaping the fruit of all that. And most of the book is just poetic descriptions of that whole experience. ~~Some people have heard of Lamentations 3:22-24, that talk about God's mercies "being new every morning," and his "faithfulness" being "great," but what a lot of people don't realize is that that is basically the only *bright spot* in the whole book. Most of it actually reads more like the part we're~~

about to work through today. So start with me, in v. 1. And I'll just go ahead and warn you again—this is *intense*:

[1] *I am the man who has seen **affliction under the rod of his wrath*** [just FYI: the “he” or “his” in this passage is actually intended to refer to God]; [2] *he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light*; [3] *surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long*. [4] **He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones**; [5] *he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation*; [6] **he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead** of long ago. [7] *He has walled me about so that I cannot escape*; **he has made my chains heavy**; [8] *though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer*; [9] *he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones*; **he has made my paths crooked**. [10] *He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding*; [11] *he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces*; *he has made me desolate*; [12] *he bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow*. [13] **He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver**; [14] *I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long*. [15] **He has filled me with bitterness**; *he has sated me with wormwood*. [16] **He has made my teeth grind on gravel**, and made me cower in ashes; [17] *my soul is bereft of peace*; **I have forgotten what happiness is**; [18] so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my **hope** from the Lord.”

Sooooo welcome to City Church, we're just here to encourage you this morning. So this is heavy, right? It's *intense*. And **what's maybe most disturbing about it all is that the author seems to be attributing all of this brokenness and darkness he's experiencing, to God**. This is a poem about what he feels like *God* has done to him, and what we'll see more broadly is that it's also about what God has done to the nation of Israel. So, let's see if we can use our questions to make some sense out of all this. First...

### **What experience is the author describing?**

So there's sort of two levels to answering this question. On one level, the author is experiencing what feels like extreme discipline, suffering, and even abandonment from God. He feels like his life is one long tragedy, and that God is behind it all. But *on another level*, what you'll find if you do much digging is the man speaking in first-person in the story is actually intended as a *representative* of God's people as a whole. He uses first person singular like “I” and “me” and “mine” but he actually is referring to how God's people feel *communally*, during a part of their story when Babylon laid siege to the city of

Jerusalem. And he's describing the *effect* that event had on God's people. Now, just in case you're wondering, I didn't just deduce that from the passage on my own—you'll find those details in any good commentary or study bible, and even in the Bible Project videos that we recommended in our reading plan. But that's what the author is describing: a time when God allowed something horrible to happen to his people. Second...

### **What *imagery* are they using to describe it?**

Well, all *kinds* of imagery really. He uses the imagery of *violence*—he says that he has been “under the *rod* of God's wrath” and that God has “driven his arrows” into his “kidneys.” He also enlists the imagery of *illness and injury*: he says that he feels like his flesh and his skin has wasted away, like God has “broken his bones.” He uses the imagery of *darkness* and *chains*. And we could probably go on. But these are the types of images the author gives us to help envision the experience he's describing.

### **What does the imagery they use tell us about the experience?**

To put it lightly, he is depicting the people of Jerusalem are in a dire state. We can definitely conclude that. But to be more descriptive, his language seems to be insisting that it feels like God is “out to get them”—like they have a target on their back and God is purposefully inflicting all this on them. Do y'all feel that in the language of this passage? So to the author, it doesn't feel like this is just random, senseless suffering—it apparently feels like God has deliberately *singled them out* with all of it, and that it feels like God is allowing it to reach an unbearable level.

Now, **there are a number of things that we need to *dissect* here, precisely because of how *odd* they are to hear someone say about God. A number of things in this passage are actually polar opposite from what we know to be true about God from other parts of the bible.** It says twice that God has “filled” him “with bitterness.” Now from Scripture, is it *true* that God fills us with bitterness? Is that an accurate statement about God? *No*. In fact, many parts of the bible tell us God wants us to “put away” bitterness. It also says that God has “made [his] steps *crooked*.” Does *that* sound like something God does? *Also no*. In fact, many times in Scripture it says that God “makes our path *straight*.” He calls God “a bear or a *lion* lying in wait” for him, waiting to destroy him. Does that sound like who God is to you? No, in fact, in other places in Scripture, that's actually almost identical to the description of *Satan*—a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. So **the author depicts God as doing quite a few things that we know God doesn't do.**

But I want you to remember: that's because we're reading *poetry*. It isn't primarily concerned with theological *accuracy*—it's primarily concerned with describing an *experience*. We're meant to read this and immediately go "something's off." Something's off if this author is believing all of these very untrue and uncharacteristic things about God. That is meant to communicate to us *just how distraught* he is—just how bad of a place the nation of Israel is in—if *these* are the types of things they are thinking and feeling. Does that make sense? Next...

### **How do their words connect to any similar experiences we might have?**

So maybe you haven't ever been in quite *this* dark of a place in your relationship with God. Or maybe you *have*—I don't know. But chances are a *lot of us* have experienced times where it can *seem* like we are receiving *pain* and *sorrow*, rather than *joy*, from the Lord. And we might have even hit a place where we feel like God has allowed that pain to reach an almost unbearable level, like the author here in our passage does. So there's a friend of mine who has in his life experienced just a seemingly *inordinate* amount of suffering. He and his wife struggled with infertility for years, then became pregnant with sextuplets, then lost all six babies. Not long after that, they gave birth to a daughter, and that daughter was diagnosed with cancer when she was three years old. They got pregnant later on and *that* baby had a rare disorder where her skull didn't fully develop and only survived for minutes after being born. So yeah...just a seemingly *unbearable* amount of suffering in their life. And I know my friend—the father of this family—that he personally wrestled greatly with why it felt like there was a target on *his* back when it came to suffering.

And in moments like that, whether they're great or small, I think part of the reason we are given poems like what we find in Lamentations 3 is so that we know *there is space* in our relationship with God *to be battling thoughts like that*. In fact, **one of the incredible things to me about the bible, is that in the bible, the blunt, honest words of God's suffering people have now become God's words to us in our suffering.** That's a beautiful thing, is it not? It's like God is saying "not only is it *understandable* to feel this way, but here are some examples of other people who have felt what you felt. Who have struggled like you have struggled." And in some cases, even "here are some words you might want to use when praying and processing through it all." How good is God that he provides those sorts of things for us? So the bible doesn't tell us when we are suffering to just get over it, correct our theology, and move on. Instead it gives us chapters upon chapters of these beautiful, haunting, heartbreaking, and helpful prayers and songs to cry out in those very moments where we experience things like this.

So in answering this question, we might say something like this: *when we suffer* and *struggle*, and when we struggle with God's involvement in it all, there is space for bringing our difficulties and complaints with us to him. They aren't something we have to hide or pretend like they aren't there. Now, it shouldn't *stop* there, with us venting and complaining—but it can absolutely *start* there. That are part of what a living, breathing relationship with God very well may look like. Which brings us to our last question...

### **How does this experience lead us to Jesus?**

Well, according to the bible, the people of Israel aren't the only ones to experience suffering. And they aren't even the only ones to experience the type of suffering that seems like it is *from God*. According to Isaiah, Jesus felt very similar. He is referred to as the "suffering servant." Isaiah tells us that he was a "man of sorrows," someone "acquainted with grief." It even goes on to say that it was "the will of the Lord to *crush* him." Jesus more than anyone knows what it feels like to suffer the 'rod of God's wrath' as Lamentations describes it—because he actually *did* suffer the wrath of the Lord on the cross. Scripture tells us that part of what was happening when Jesus was brutally murdered on the cross is that he was absorbing all the just anger of God the Father towards the brokenness and injustice in our world—he was absorbing all of that into himself. So if anybody knows what that feels like to suffer under the "rod of God's wrath," Jesus does. He certainly does.

And it's *because* he experienced that, that those of us who follow Jesus know we never *have to*. What I mean by that is that we can know, even in the moments that we *feel* like God is smiting us, crushing us, overwhelming us—that Jesus actually endured all of that *for us*, on our behalf. So we may still suffer on this earth; we may even suffer *greatly*. And God might *use* any and all of that to help grow us and establish us. But **because of what Jesus endured on the cross, we know that God's *wrath* is no longer directed at us. It's no longer aimed at those who know and follow Jesus. We no longer have to experience that, because Jesus already *did, for us*.**

That's how this type of experience is meant to lead us to Jesus. So one down, one to go. Is it making *some sense* so far? Cool, let's do another one. This one will be a little more pleasant than the last. Turn with me to Psalm 139.

### **Psalm 139:1-12**

As we mentioned earlier, the book of Psalms is *entirely* made up of poetry, from a few different authors, encompassing a wide variety of experiences. This one specifically

describes an experience almost exactly opposite the one we just read about in Lamentations. *There*, the author was overcome by how distant and *antagonistic* God feels, but in this passage the author is overwhelmed by how close and *intimate* God feels to him. Let's start off by reading just a *portion* of it to get a feel for what it's about. Start with me in v. 1:

[1] O Lord, you have **searched me and known me!** [2] You **know** when I sit down and when I rise up; you **discern my thoughts** from afar. [3] You search out my path and my lying down and are **acquainted with all my ways**. [4] Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, **you know it altogether**. [5] **You hem me in, behind and before**, and lay your hand upon me. [6] Such knowledge is **too wonderful for me**; it is high; I cannot attain it. [7] Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or **where shall I flee from your presence?** [8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! [9] If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, [10] **even there** your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. [11] If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," [12] even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, **for darkness is as light with you**.

Okay, we'll just stop there for today. Are you beginning to pick up on the *tone* of this psalm? Whereas the last passage mourned how *distant* God felt, in this one, the psalmist is caught up in wonder and awe at how *near* and *present* God feels to him. So with that in mind, let's work through our questions:

### **What experience is the author describing?**

He's describing an experience of being thoroughly known, seen, and understood by God.

### **What imagery are they using to describe it?**

At least in the verses we just read, the author is using a lot of *spatial* imagery. He says that God "hems [him] in, *behind* and *before*," which is a way of saying that he feels continually *enveloped* in God's presence, nearly everywhere he goes. He then says that if he "ascends to heaven," God is there. If he "makes his bed in *Sheol*," God is there too. "*What is Sheol*," you might ask? Well it was a sort of ancient, Old Testament understanding of hell, or the *underworld*: the place where the wicked go when they die. So this is one more example of why it is so important that we don't take poetry *literally*. I know people that would consider themselves Universalists or Christian Universalists that would say this verse tells us that God is present even in hell. But that is to completely

miss the point. The psalmist is not trying to make a theological point about the different locations God exists. He's using hyperbolic language in order to say "God, it doesn't matter where I go, you're always with me—you're so vast and present that you are everywhere." It's not *literal*, it's experiential: it's meant to help us experience what the psalmist is experiencing.

### **What does the imagery they use tell us about their experience?**

Well, we've sort of mentioned it already, but the vast, sweeping language used tells us that the psalmist is swept away, *blown away* by vastness and ever-present nature of God. It's like he's grasping for the language needed to adequately describe how *near to* God and *known by* God he feels. He feels like God is in front of him, behind him, far above him, far below him. It's his way of describing how present and close and *available* God is. We're witnessing the author being blown away in worship about God's presence in his life.

### **How do their words connect to any similar experiences we might have?**

I think it helps us worship in moments when we sense the palpable presence of God. That God pursues, that he is always waiting. That he doesn't withhold himself from us or abandon us, but is always pursuing, and always present.

### **How does this experience lead us to Jesus?**

It prompts us to remember that this nearness of God is only possible through Jesus. God is not near to us because he happens to like us or because we're fun to be around. **He's near to us because Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, has bridged the relational divide between us and God the Father.** Through the cross, he has taken away the sin that separates us from God and brought us *near* to him once and for all. Ephesians 2 tells us that those who were once "far off" have been "brought near" by the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross. So when we, like the psalmist, celebrate the *nearness* of God to us, what we are truly celebrating is Jesus, and how he made that possible through the cross. Does that make sense? That's what we can glean from *that* poem.

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So are you starting to see how poetry differs from *narrative*, that we studied last week? Whereas narrative seeks to describe events or history, poetry seeks to draw you into an *experience*. It wants to help you see through the eyes of the author. It wants to help you feel what they feel, sense what they sense, experience what they experience. And **because of that, you will find a wide range of different experiences described through the poetry in the bible. Because following Jesus encompasses a wide of a**

**range of experiences.** Some of the poetry in the bible actually describes an experience *God* is having. So today, we just covered passages where *people* describe their experiences with *God*, but there are plenty of passages where *God* describes his experiences with *man*: his joys, his sorrows, his love, his frustration with his people. But all of the poetry in the bible is there to help *draw us into* those experiences. To help us experience those things as if we were there.

So as we land today, I'd love to just have all of us consider something. Something I've noticed about myself over the years is that I tend to be very dialed into loving God with my *mind*. I can spend hours reading and learning and thinking about God, I can spend every commute ever listening to podcasts about spiritual things. Loving God with my *mind* seems to come really naturally. But I tend to be really bad at loving God with my heart. With my *emotions*, with my *soul*. It's like my *emotional IQ* when it comes to God is in the single digits. I don't know if any of you can identify with that experience or not—but I feel like the Spirit might be telling me that a lot of us have that struggle in some form.

And the reason I bring it up is because I think *one* of the reasons there is so much poetry in our bible is that God also wants us to learn to love him with our *heart*. He wants to help get your *emotions* involved when it comes to your relationship with him. And we're in luck. Because when it comes to the bible that we hold in our hands, a third of it—a *third!*—is made up of men and women allowing their *emotions* to be a *guide through* their relationship with God. Now, notice I said a *guide*—not *the* guide. Notice I said that they're a *guide*, not an *authority*. *Truth* about God is also a guide. *What we know to be true about him and us* are also *guides*. But our emotions aren't to be simply *forgotten* and *disregarded* in it all. They *matter*, and the poetry in the bible often helps us see *why* and *how* they matter.

And you need that. Because plenty of people will tell you from experience, **when the hardest moments of life hit, you will need more than just your *mind* to be dialed in to who God is.** You'll also need your *heart*. You'll also need the ability to pray and sing and vent and process all the *emotions* that will inevitably hit you. And *that* is a big part of what poetry is doing in the bible. It helps us see that when it comes to feeling unbearably distant from God, and unbelievably close to God, and everything in between—there's space. It's trying to help us see that we're not alone—we're not the only people to ever feel what we're feeling. God wants us to know how to draw near, and not just to know things about God, but to *experience* who he is with our hearts. That's why biblical poetry should matter to followers of Jesus.