

Putting the Em'pha•sis on the Right Syl'la•ble

by Ronald G. Davis

Emphasis. That is what writer and speaker strive for. God's Spirit certainly knows emphasis. So, much of God's Word is written in emphatic form and style. Poetic style, in which much of the Bible is presented, is always emphatic.

In poetry there is the emphasis of repetition. This is especially true of Hebrew poetry's emphatic parallelism. But there is also the emphasis of figurative language that manages to say something twice with one set of words. The figurative stirs a thought of recognition and application.

A Christian teacher of adults will at times wisely choose poetry and poetic activity to follow in the Spirit's train. And every such teacher wants the educational emphasis of ideas that such choices allow. Consider the following learning activities related to figurative language, parallelism, and poetry.

A Favorite Poem

To get class members involved in a course of study from one of the Bible's poetic books, establish a display board for verses that are related to the studies. Put the title of this article as the title of your display. At the first study, or even a week or two before, give your class members a list of the primary themes of the study. Say, "You probably have one or more favorite poetic verses that relate to our coming studies. I have put up this board for a display. Bring them in week to week, and we will all enjoy them."

Next distribute the list of themes that you will be following. For example, you might have the following (from a past quarter of study in the *Standard Lesson Commentary*: "The Glory of God's Creation," "Living with Creation's Uncertainties," and "Lessons in Living." You can add key phrases such as *Praise, God's Presence, Hope, Resurrection, Meaning, Times and Seasons, Wisdom and Success, Integrity and Shame, and Godly Women and Family*. Suggest sources such as hymn and chorus lyrics, classic poems from school curriculum, greeting cards, and even class members' own compositions.

You may wish to post a few samples to get the activity started. Consider the following two, one a silly rhyme about dying, the second a traditional song about the sadness and futility of life without God and Jesus.

In Boxes

Birthday presents tied with bows,
Christmas gifts of wrapped up clothes,
Securely locked deposit box,
Assorted candies—creams and chocs—
Rectangular cartons filled with glee;
But the last thing I want in a box . . .
Is me!

How Tedious and Tasteless

How tedious and tasteless, the hours
When Jesus I no longer see;
Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers,
Have all lost their sweetness to me.
.....
O drive these dark clouds from the sky,
Thy soul cheering presence restore;
Or take me to thee up on high,
Where winter and clouds are no more.

The former might be used in a lesson from a text in Job in which Job’s tragedies elicit death wishes from him. The latter will work well in a study of Ecclesiastes, in which Solomon bemoans the futility and discouragement of life “under the sun.”

A simple poem such as Emily Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” could well reflect an attitude in contrast with David’s expression of Psalm 8:4: What is man, that You, God, are even mindful of him? Such a poem as E. E. Cummings’s “i thank you God for most this amazing” is a beautiful expression of praise, certainly appropriate for Psalm 104 or a similar passage.

Further, one can hardly hear Job’s humble acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty and care in Job 42 and not remember the powerful confession of Civilla Martin’s words: “Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come, / Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home, / When Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is he: / His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me”? And the hymnal is also a certain source of poems extolling the resurrection and its power.

Just a Couplet

Two-line poetic expressions are among the first that children learn to chant, and they still intrigue the adult. Because several of this quarter’s studies are written in the parallelism that is common to Hebrew writers, encouraging your adults to express themselves similarly is a worthy goal.

In Psalm 8 each verse a typical example of an expression followed by a related expression—sometimes a simple restatement in other words. For such a lesson, consider asking your students to complete the first expression with a second of their own composition. Verse one begins, “O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” The couplet could be completed with an expression such as, “May your name be praised by all,” etc.

Consider selecting a first expression from verses such as the following and asking class members to complete them: Psalm 8:6a; Psalm 104:5a; Psalm 139:7a; Psalm 145:13a; Job 1:21b; Job 32:8; Job 42:2a; Ecclesiastes 1:4a; Ecclesiastes 3:14a; Proverbs 3:5a; Proverbs 8:5a; Proverbs 11:12a; Proverbs 31:26a. (While this list comes from an actual quarter of studies, you could select the texts from your own course of study.) This exercise could be the assignment as students arrive or could be the homework for a lesson to come. Later comparisons and contrasts with the Bible text will emphasize the truth of the selected verses.

It Figures

An important part of poetic expression is the careful choice of figures of speech. Just as Robert Frost emphasized the importance of simple decisions in the course of life in “The Road Not Taken” by using the figure of a fork in the road; just as the proverb writer personifies wisdom (Proverbs 8:1); just as Job compares a life to a flower (Job 14:2)—the comparative device of figurative language must be used fully.

The teacher’s device can be as simple as beginning a comparison and letting class members complete it. For example, in a study of Psalm 8 try, “Man is like a .-..-.” Such similes allow not only a discussion of similarities but also demand a discussion of differences, such as the psalmist does when he says, “made him a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5). In Proverbs 31, the writer says of the godly woman that “strength and honor” are her clothing. Having the students examine the text for other articles of her “clothing” that would prove profitable. For example, do not several verses speak of her skill in household crafts? Does not verse 20 show generosity and kindness hanging in her “wardrobe”? Let your adults think creatively of her whole “closet of finery.”

Child’s Play

Involving children in the adult classroom offers real interest and variety. A class member’s child or grandchild presenting a short and simple children’s poem to the adult class can provoke true discussion of the significant themes from the Scriptures.

Though one might think children's poems are all fluff and nonsense, the great children's poets tackle the real issues of a child's life: feelings, hopes, life, and death. In the collections of such children's poets as David McCord, Aileen Fisher, Karla Kuskin, John Ciardi, Arnold Adoff, Jack Prelutsky, Shel Silverstein, and others, deep thoughts are expressed in humor and in deep sensitivity. (If you have an elementary school teacher or former one in your class, that person may relish finding "just the right poem" and inviting "just the right child" to read or say it to your class.)

In only 32 words Langston Hughes calls vividly for the hope only "Dreams" can sustain. Texts from Job and other Scriptures can be illuminated by such imagery. Christina Rossetti (1830--1894) captures the wonder of creation that the psalmist extols in Lesson 2; hear her "Who Has Seen the Wind?":

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.
Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

Such expressions are reminiscent also of God's challenges to Job. For a lesson on integrity, a reading/singing of the stanzas of "I Would Be True" by Howard A. Walter can add impact at application time. Having two alternating readers/speakers will add to the impact. For a lesson from Psalm 104, a child's reading Calvin Miller's "Catherine Caterpillar" from his book of children's poems *When the Aardvark Parked on the Ark* can emphasize the marvel of God's plans for each of his creatures. (Note: poems and stanzas not reproduced here can often be found on the Internet.)

Wax Poetic

God's Spirit often waxed poetic when he wanted to reveal God and his will. The beauty, the emphasis, the thought-provoking value of those expressions in the Word are a strong challenge to the teacher of Christian adults: how can I follow in his example? Give poetry a chance, and it will weave its web of power over your students.