



“This is the Story...”

Written by Talashia Keim Yoder and Daniel Yoder. Artwork by Christa and Jonathan Reuel.
Song lyrics and music by Jonathan Reuel.

Week 22: How Can We Sing When You are Gone, Jerusalem?

Psalm 137

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/BBm8l7GLMpk>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God gave the people a new leader, Joshua, and through miraculous works brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). Leaders and prophets like Elijah, Huldah, Josiah and Jeremiah were how God stuck with the people and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers.

Tell the story: During the time of kings and kingdoms, the people had come to understand land as a gift from God, something that they owned. They understood the kings as leaders approved of and chosen by God. They understood the temple as the only place one could really worship God - as God’s dwelling place. We know because we are looking at the whole scope of the story that these were kind of faulty understandings. But the people, at that time, didn’t have that perspective. So imagine: if their whole understanding of their relationship of God was wrapped up in their land, their temple, and their kings, how much did their world fall apart when their kings were toppled and their temple destroyed, and they were removed from their land? This week’s scripture is a psalm of lament of the people in exile.

- Read Psalm 137

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**

- Notice the story here. The Babylonian captors have plundered them and taunted them, and the psalmist, broken, sits on the foreign soil by the foreign water and hangs their lyre on the foreign tree to weep and ask for justice.
- The final verse of the psalm is very squirmy, and often omitted in modern usage of this psalm. But take a moment to empathize. Have you ever wished harm on those who hurt you? The psalmist is being honest here.

- **Background information:**

- The “songs of Zion” the captors tell them to sing would be any temple songs. They were being commanded to provide entertainment. The contrast here is that the psalmist views these songs not as entertainment but as holy songs of YHWH.
- Verse 5 is wordplay. The Hebrew word translated as both “forget” and “wither,” *tishkah* actually only means “forget,” but a simple letter switch, *tikhash*, means “wither.”
(Alter, Robert. 2019. The Hebrew Bible, vol. 3: Writings. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, pg. 314.)
- The nation of Judah, the southern kingdom, was the second to fall to invading powers. This psalm was most likely written shortly after the people were deported to Babylon in 586 B.C.E.
- The exile was a complicated time. If you’re intrigued by these complexities, dig around a little for more information. Here’s a good place to start:
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-babylonian-exile>.

- **Conversation starters:**

- Most scholars think that the stories of Genesis and Exodus were written down by the scribes during this time. Think back to those early stories. How do you hear them differently when you think of people in exile writing them down? If you looked at the Babylonian creation myth back in Week 1, how do its differences with the Genesis creation story strike you now?
- We think the synagogue system began during exile. Synagogues are localized worship spaces, a portable way to worship God. Even after the temple was rebuilt, synagogues continued (and continue to this day). If you are reading this in a time of pandemic, what wheels does this get turning for you?
- The exile really shook up the systems of power. The tribe of Levi (priests) was the only tribe that really survived the exile. Prophets took on new roles, and leadership was localized. Do some internet digging if this intrigues you, and talk about the ways that you may see this phenomenon mirrored in today’s world.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity

Microsong: "How Can We Sing When You are Gone, Jerusalem?"

(Listen: <https://youtu.be/kWMPtDWAMsE>)

By the streams of Babylon, our captors ask for Zion's songs. How can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem?

Sing the big song: (Listen: <https://youtu.be/bstvQqjsG6A>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.

Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,

And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohhh ooohhh

A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.

God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses.

Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Oh Ohhhh

The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.

Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"

*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God. God is One, only God!"*

Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.

God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.

Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.

Corruption in the temple and God sends Samuel.

God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king.

Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.

And when a bully rules the land, a nation tears apart and loses David's heart...

Through a widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.

Josiah reads a misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did.

God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...

Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem... Jerusalem?

God loves every one of us, it's true. And God loves the universe.

Go do your household project!



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Week 23: God’s Breath is Hope

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/QD9UlrCziUc>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the shema, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God gave the people a new leader, Joshua, and through miraculous works brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). Leaders and prophets like Elijah, Huldah, Josiah and Jeremiah were how God stuck with the people and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. After the kingdoms fell, the people were scattered. Some were left in the ruins of the kingdoms, and some were sent into exile in foreign lands.

- **Key verse:** Ezekiel 37:14

Tell the story: The kingdom that Saul, David and Solomon ruled is over. The people have been scattered. Some were taken into captivity in surrounding nations. Some were left in the ruins of their homeland. We call this scattering of the people the “diaspora.” They were under the rule of foreign powers. Things would never be the same. It was a big, defining time for the people of God. Prophets like Ezekiel continued to try to pull the people together and call them back to God. Ezekiel was a strange guy who had some strange visions (kind of like dreams). This story is one of those visions. In it, the Spirit of God took him to a valley of dry (very dead) bones, and told him to prophesy to them. Ezekiel did, and the bones came back together, not just like dancing skeletons but with actual skin connecting them. God told Ezekiel that just like these hopeless bones could be put back together and brought to life, the people who were feeling hopeless and disconnected could be put back together and brought back.

- Read Ezekiel 37:1-14
- Read page 146 in the *Shine On* story Bible

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**
 - Notice how many times you see the words “spirit,” “wind” and “breath” in this passage. All of these come from the Hebrew word *ruah* (or *ruach*). Do you remember that word? Look all the way back at Genesis 1... Read the passage paying attention to where *ruah* pops up, and see how that changes or deepens the way you read the story.
 - Notice other parallels to the Genesis 1-2 story. How does this change the story?
- **Background information:**
 - “Ezekiel is surely the strangest of all the prophets.” (*Alter, Robert. 2019. The Hebrew Bible, vol. 2: Prophets. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, pg. 1049.*) Many prophets were considered to ride the borders of insanity, but Ezekiel is in a class of his own. It is helpful as we read Ezekiel to remember that his prophecies have a hallucinatory quality to them.
 - When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, those of the elite classes were exiled, while the more common people remained in Judah. Ezekiel, of a priestly family, was placed in exile, and that is where his visions take place.
 - The NRSV translates the Hebrew *hayil* in verse 10 as “vast multitude.” But its meaning has military connotations, so Robert Alter suggests that “legion” is a better translation. Read the story with that word and see how you hear it.
- **Conversation starters:**
 - Some early Jewish and Christian interpreters read this story as a story of resurrection of the dead. But if you really read the passage, it is clear that it’s a story of resurrection of a people. It’s restoration to wholeness. It is communal, not individual. And it is specifically about the restoration of the people of Israel to their homeland. How should we talk about and interpret stories like this in our context?
 - Read verses 11-14. When have you felt the way the people feel here, all hope lost and completely cut off? What does this exile story have to say to you? How do we read this differently than we would have before a global pandemic?

Microsong: "God's Breath is Hope" (Listen: https://youtu.be/JkH_D7GnoO0)

I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel; God's breath is hope when hope is gone.

Sing the big song: (Listen: <https://youtu.be/bJROcyVnSqQ>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.

Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,

And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohhh ohhhh

A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.

God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses. *Ten strange
signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them.* Ohh ohhh.

The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.

Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"

*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God. God is One, only God!"*

Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.

God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.

Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.

Corruption in the temple, then God sends Samuel.

God gives them a prophet, They ask for a king

Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets

And when a bully rules the land, a nation tears apart and loses David's heart...

Through a widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.

Josiah reads a misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did.

God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...

Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem... Jerusalem?

I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel; God's breath is hope.

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Week 24: “She Risks Her Life”

Book of Esther

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/NbBpBrT5bHo>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the shema, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God gave the people a new leader, Joshua, and through miraculous works brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). Leaders and prophets like Elijah, Huldah, Josiah and Jeremiah were how God stuck with the people and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. After the kingdoms fell, the people were scattered. Some were left in the ruins of the kingdoms, and some were sent into exile in foreign lands. God continued to work through prophets like Ezekiel to reconcile the people to God, to each other, and to creation.

- **Key verses:** Esther 4:14-16

Tell the story: The story of Esther is a story that happens during the diaspora, the scattering of the people. Esther, a Jew, was an orphaned young woman, cared for by her cousin Mordecai, in the Persian empire. She found favor with the king and became queen, putting her in a position to help the Jewish people. Esther’s story includes palace intrigue, suspense and cunning. Esther is the daring hero in this story, putting her life on the line to save her people.

- Read the whole book of Esther for the full, intriguing story! Or if you want a shorter version, read Esther 1:1-5; 1:10-12; 1:16-20; 2:1-2; 2:4-12; 2:15-18; 2:21-23; 3:1-6; 3:8-11; 4:1-2; 4:5-17; 5:1-9; 5:12-14; 6:1-11; 7:2-6; 7:9-10; 8:3-6; 8:8; 8:17; 9:24-26; 9:32
- Read page 123 in the *Shine On* story Bible

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**
 - This story is kind of the biblical equivalent of a tall tale. Rooted in real experiences and a historical context, it's a heroic folk story. As you read it, notice the elements of the story that remind you of other legends and tall tales you've read.
 - As you read the book of Esther, notice how many times God is mentioned. What do you think of that?
 - This is a story of reversals, many of them comedic (like when Haman dreams up a triumphal parade for himself, only to realize the recipient of his plans will be his enemy). Notice and maybe even list all of these reversals.
 - King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes) is depicted as bumbling and weak. Notice how many decisions he makes based on his own convictions and how many he makes based on the people who have his ear. He's a "last person in the room" kind of ruler.
- **Background information:**
 - Esther is the only book in the Hebrew Bible that was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is not mentioned in the New Testament. Its inclusion was controversial among rabbis and among early Christians. Yet the book won out and was included. Why do you think that might have been?
 - This book is peppered with Persian words and names. It was written during or right before the return from exile, and is truly a product of its time. In its original language, the use of Persian/Hebrew has a comedic effect.
 - Get out a map and check out where India to Cush (Ethiopia/Nubia) is. How does this change the way you picture the story? The Persian Empire was known to be very tolerant of other religions. Looking at the map, does this make sense?
- **Conversation starters:**
 - The hero of this story is a woman! This is even unusual in folklore today. Talk about Esther as a hero and the importance of her inclusion in the big story of the Bible.
 - The festival of Purim is a celebration of the end of winter (similar timing to Mardi Gras). Like the story, the festival has a kind of carnival feeling to it. It plays with all the reversals of the story. If you're intrigued, put Purim on your calendar (February 25-26, 2021) and come back to the story and celebration then.
 - Rules are a theme in this story. "Their rules are different from our rules." This difference in rules is the cause of a lot of the conflict. Rules here seem to be the outward way (religion) that values and beliefs (faith) are lived out. Can you come up with a parallel tale in today's world?

Microsong: "She Risks Her Life" (Listen: <https://youtu.be/IDFmjLNuhZ0>)
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.

Sing the big song: (Listen: <https://youtu.be/Gg-Sz1NNs1k>)
This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,
And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, oh ohhhh
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.
God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses.
Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Oh ohhh.
The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"
*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God! God is One, only God!"*
Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.
God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.
Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.
Corruption in the temple and God sends Samuel.
God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king. Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.
And when a bully rules the land, the nation tears apart and loses David's heart...
Through a widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.
Josiah reads a misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did.
God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...
Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?
Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem... Jerusalem?
I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.
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Week 25: A Sea of Joy and Celebration

Ezra 4-6

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/5UFtZExuwqM>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God gave the people a new leader, Joshua, and through miraculous works brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets like Elijah, Huldah, Josiah and Jeremiah, who continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. After the kingdoms fell, the people were scattered. Some were left in the ruins of the kingdoms, and some were sent into exile in foreign lands. God continued to work through prophets like Ezekiel and brave, everyday people like Esther to reconcile the people to God, to each other, and to creation.

- **Key verses:** Ezra 5:11-12; Ezra 6:22

Tell the story: The Babylonian empire fell to Persia, and King Cyrus of Persia authorized a return of Jews to Judah. He instructed the returning Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The other people inhabiting the land weren’t big fans of the building project, and tried to get it stopped by writing to the king(s) (multiple times), but King Darius found the original decree by King Cyrus let it proceed. This was the beginning of a cooperation between Israel and ruling nations, first Persia and then the Roman Empire. The people rebuilt and dedicated the new temple, and celebrated with the passover.

- Read Ezra 5:6-6:2; 6:13-22
- Read page 118 in the *Shine On* story Bible

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**
 - Read Ezra 5:11 - you know the story this refers to! Remember it.
 - In Ezra 5:13, the king is called Cyrus of Babylonia! Why? It seems he went by this for a bit after conquering Babylon.
 - Read Ezra 5:2. Where have you heard these names before? Yes, these two were contemporaries of this story!
 - This is a very political situation! Read back earlier in Ezra if you're intrigued by this. It's not as simple as returning and rebuilding. For example, the building project is funded by Persia. Notice the political turns in the story.

- **Background information:**
 - Ezra and Nehemiah are traditionally read together, even though they are definitely written by at least two different authors. Ezra writes from the perspective of a scribe and priest, and is chiefly interested in the reestablishing of the worship/communal practices. He is known as a "separatist."
 - Ezra is mostly written in Hebrew, but some of this passage is one of two parts that are written in Aramaic. It's only the end of the passage, verses 19-22, that return to Hebrew. Look at the difference of subject matter here to get a clue for the reason for the language switch.

- **Conversation starters:**
 - As the book of Ezra continues, the next focus is on the rebuilding of the community. And then, Nehemiah continues the project with the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Discuss possible reasons for this order.
 - Here's another squirmy part of the story. The people who were not exiled (who would have been the commoners, as the elite were the exiles) were treated as second-class citizens when the exiled returned. They were regarded as inauthentic (particularly the Samaritans). They weren't included in the building project. Wrestle with this. Does it change how we read the Ezra text? As we continue in the story, how will this change our reading of the New Testament?

Microsong: "A Sea of Joy and Celebration"

(Listen: <https://youtu.be/OSfY2104j3o>)

Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.

Sing the big song:

(Listen: https://youtu.be/Ri6L4bl_6Ys)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,
Then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohh ohhh
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.
God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God, God sends Moses.
Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Ohh ohhh.
The people complain. God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"
*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God! God is One, only God!"*
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Josiah reads a misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did.
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Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem... Jerusalem?
I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.
Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and
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God loves every one of us, it's true, and God loves the universe.

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