



“This is the Story...”

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## **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](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!**