

Free to Grieve

Sometimes pain is so deep and strong that it is very difficult to express it or even acknowledge it. Yet, we are welcomed to open our hearts, to grieve, and even to express our anger before God. Such honesty is invited in prayer as God accepts our pain in all its fullness and rawness. In such freedom to grieve, healing can begin.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 137

Prophet Jeremiah's warnings of doom came true in 587 BCE, when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem. The walls fell, the temple was destroyed, the Davidic dynasty came to an end, and the leading citizens were taken to Babylon as exiles. The depth of their sorrow can be felt in Psalm 137, an expression of lament. This psalm was written either during the exile (587–539 BCE) or shortly after the people had returned to Judah. The psalm is brutally honest, and expresses despair and anger before God without fear or shame.

The Hebrew exiles gather at the "rivers of Babylon," perhaps a stream or canal of the Tigris or Euphrates rivers. Being in a strange land, they are homesick. When they remember their lives in Jerusalem, it is painful. Yet, it would be even more devastating to forget. If Jerusalem were forgotten, they would lose their identity. In remembering Jerusalem, the exiles are longing for their geographical and spiritual home.

The captors torment the exiles, taunting them to sing "songs of Zion" (v. 3), which were only to be sung in Jerusalem. Zion was the mount on which the temple was built and was a holy site. Psalms 46, 48, 76 and others are "Songs of Zion" that proclaim the greatness of Jerusalem, which was to be protected and defended by God always. So, asking for "songs of Zion" rubbed salt into the wound of Jerusalem's destruction.

In an act of defiance, the people hang up their harps and refuse to sing. This action is about being in control of one's freedom to choose one's response. Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl, who was incarcerated in Auschwitz, wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*: "The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do

to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance."

The exiles choose not to sing, but they choose to remember who they are and who God is. They pray for God to "remember" (v. 7) and to share in their pain, just as God shared in the pain of the Hebrew people when they were slaves in Egypt (Exodus 3:7).

Verse 9 is shocking, yet speaks something very important. Such cruelties have been witnessed and suffered by the exiles. At the heart of this verse is the need of the victims to have others understand and acknowledge their pain. Rather than taking the matter into their own hands, they take their anguish to God for understanding and healing, being honest with God about the depth of their feelings.

Being confident in faith, we can turn freely to God in all situations. **Lamentations 1:1–6** personifies the city of Jerusalem weeping bitterly in the night, mourning what it has become. In the words of **Lamentations 3:19–26**, the people turn to God in the midst of grief – praising, trusting, waiting. The writer of **2 Timothy 1:1–14** remembers Timothy with gratitude and joy, recalling his sincere faith and offering encouragement. In **Luke 17:5–10**, Jesus teaches about faith as the awareness of God's power, our relationship with God, and doing what is expected of us.

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God is open to all that is deep within us – things we may fear, be ashamed of, or be embarrassed about. We are free to grieve. It is from this place of honesty that faith is born and the desire for healing finds its home. What might help you to find the time to open yourself to God? What has prevented you from being completely honest with God? What might be possible when God heals your wounds?



October 3, 2010

Focus Scripture
Psalm 137

Additional Scriptures
Lamentations 1:1–6
Lamentations 3:19–26
2 Timothy 1:1–14
Luke 17:5–10

Seasons of the Spirit is based on semi-continuous readings of the Revised Common Lectionary.

O God, you invite us to be open and honest about our feelings. May we not be ashamed of the secrets of our hearts. Trusting in your steadfast love and unconditional acceptance, we place our lives into your humble care. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Children are often protected from situations that call for a lament. However, that doesn't mean that they aren't aware of them. If the situation is a personal one for the family, such as a serious illness of a family member or the loss of a parent's job, most children sense the anxiety in the adults around them, even if the situation is not discussed in their presence. The emotions during difficult times cannot be hidden.

However, prayers and songs of lament are not restricted to the major traumas of

adult lives. Children too have moments and occasions when they are fearful and anxious. They too need the assurance that God wants to hear all their feelings, not just their praises and thanksgiving when everything is going well. Thus, the Respond zones offer a time for the writing of a group lament and for the offering of a personal lament to God.

Pray that the children in your group will always remember that God hears their prayers eagerly, no matter how they say them or how much anger they convey.

October 3, 2010



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Psalm 137, and biblical background material (p. 35). For what do you lament this day?
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 8* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from www.spiritseasons.com.
- ❑ Bring songs "Let the People of God," "Stand, O Stand Firm," and "May Peace Be with You/Salamun Kullahee" (p. 2, 12, and 11, *Music Section*; also #27, #18, and #24 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *green cloth* for the Season after Pentecost, *Christ candle*, *matches*, *offering basket*, and *Bible*. Place *bookmark* at the beginning of Psalms. Display *poster "Open Window"* so the children can see it when seated.

Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell story on *today's resource sheet "A Cry to God."*

- ❑ For feelings group, make feelings cube using *today's resource sheet "All My Feelings."*
- ❑ For Bible research group, bring *copies of today's resource sheet "Psalm 137"* and *directions*.

Respond

- ❑ **Art zone:** *poster board* and pictures showing reasons to lament from *newspapers* and *magazines*
- ❑ **Music zone:** songs "Trust Greatly," "Fresh as the Morning," and "Paz, Queremos Paz/Peace, We Want Peace" (pp. 1, 8–9 and 10, *Music Section*; also #17, #3, and #8 on *Seasons Music CD*). For your convenience, lyrics for the songs in the *Music Section* can be found in the Library of www.spiritseasons.com and in the "Song Lyrics" folder of *SeasonsDisk*.
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *poster "Wisdom's Path," small bowl or basket, construction paper teardrops* (see resources sheet "Templates" on p. 103 for pattern), and *directions*
- ❑ **Game zone:** *copies of resource sheet "Memory Game"* (p. 102) on *construction paper or card stock*



Free to Grieve

Scripture
Psalm 137

FOCUS To hear the lament in Psalm 137 and know that we can speak of our feelings to God too.

GATHER

Welcome the children and introduce guests or new children to the others. Play the song “Let the People of God” (p. 2, *Music Section*; also #27 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather at the worship table.

Opening ritual

Call to learning Light the Christ candle. Remind the group that its flame is a reminder of Jesus Christ’s presence with us. Invite the children to gaze at the poster *Open Window* and repeat each line of the call to learning after you:

This is the season after Pentecost.
During this season,
we will learn from prophets
and disciples,
from the psalm writer
and apostle Paul.
The Bible will be like a window
open to God’s ways
and wisdom.

Song Play the song “Let the People of God” (p. 2, *Music Section*; also #27 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Encourage the children to sing with you. During the song, receive the offering.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

Holy God, we gather to learn about you and how to follow Jesus. May our hearts and our minds be open to your teachings. Amen.

Extinguish the candle as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

Connecting with the focus

Happy and sad To prepare the children for Psalm 137 with its deeply sad tone, have them consider the many feelings that human beings experience. Ask such questions as:

- **How do you feel when your team wins a game? When you lose a game? When it is almost your birthday? When a friend moves away?**

Ask questions particular to your group. Conclude this activity by explaining that the Bible passage for today is about a time when the Israelites were really, really sad.

ENGAGE

Preparing for the story

Psalms Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship table and open it to the bookmark. Ask them whether the bookmark is in the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament. Show them the first page of Psalms. Point out that the “p” at the beginning of the word is silent. Have them look at the page. Ask:

- **How does this page look different from most other pages in the books of the Bible?**

After a child notices that it looks like poetry, explain that Psalms is the hymnbook of the Israelites. It is the words to songs without the music. Psalms can also be read as prayers.

The Bible story

Song of lament Invite a child to turn to Psalm 137 and hold the book open as you tell the story on today’s resource sheet “A Cry to God,” which includes Psalm 137. After the story, ask:

- **How were the people in this story feeling?**
- **What made them so sad?**

These questions will be explored further in the next activities.

Exploring the story further

To enable the children to explore the story further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.

Feelings group This group will identify the feelings of the people at various points in the story.

You will need today's resource sheet "A Cry to God" and the feelings cube from today's resource sheet "All My Feelings." Tell the story "A Cry to God" and pause at each asterisk. Have the group identify the feelings of the people at that point in the story and find a face that expresses that feeling on the feelings cube. Conclude this activity on a positive note, reminding the children that God is ready to hear us, whether we are happy or sad.

Bible research group This group will look at the story behind Psalm 137. Provide copies of today's resource sheet "Psalm 137" and these directions:

- 1 Take a copy of "Psalm 137."
- 2 This version of the psalm is from a Bible translation called the Contemporary English Version.
- 3 Work together to learn more about the story behind this psalm of sadness.

Read verse one together. Then have someone read the information in the box with the arrow pointing to verse one. Continue reading, stopping at each arrow to read the boxed information.

4 When you have read the whole page, talk about these questions:

- What feelings are expressed in this psalm?
- Why do you think the people felt safe in speaking this way to God?



The Bible story and us

Play the song "Stand, O Stand Firm" (p. 12, *Music Section*; also #18 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to come together. When everyone is settled, ask:

■ What do we learn about God from this psalm of sadness?

The children will continue to explore ways to express their feelings to God in the Respond zones.

3

RESPOND

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Art zone: Lament collage** The children will create a visual lament about things in the world today. Provide drawing paper, markers, the newspaper and magazines pictures you have gathered, a sheet of poster board, and glue. Explain the project to the children, making connections between the reasons for the lament in Psalm 137 and reasons for our lament to God today. As pictures are drawn and selected, work together to arrange them, overlapping, on the poster board. When everyone is satisfied with the arrangement, glue everything in place. The children in this zone can present it in Bless.
- **Music zone: Songs of lament** The song "Trust Greatly" (p. 1, *Music Section*; also #17 on *Seasons Music CD*) reminds us of God's loving presence when we face difficult times. Some children may remember it from the



previous season. Sing it together, repeating it several times without pausing. Any children who do not know the song will pick it up quickly if you encourage them to join in. Try singing the song as a two-part round. Continue to sing songs about God's presence, such as "Fresh as the Morning" and "Paz, Queremos Paz/Peace, We Want Peace" (pp. 8-9 and 10, *Music Section*; also #3 and #8 on *Seasons Music CD*). Sing them with strong voices, remembering that God is with us no matter what.

- **Outreach zone: Group lament** The children can write their own laments, patterning them after psalms of lament. When we see something terrible happening to others, such as war or a natural disaster, one response is to pray a lament on their behalf. Help the children select a problem in the world or their community and write a group lament about it. Follow these steps:

- 1 Identify a problem, something that you all agree is wrong and must be changed. Describe it in a few sentences. Write them on newsprint.
- 2 Think about how you feel about this problem. List the feelings of the group on newsprint.
- 3 Describe what the situation would look like if the problem were gone. Write the descriptions in two or three sentences on newsprint.
- 4 To get some ideas, of how to begin your lament, read Psalm 22:1, Psalm 94:3-4, and Psalm 25:16-17.
- 5 After you write the beginning for your lament, talk about the problem and how it makes you feel. Decide what you want to happen. Write this to end your lament.

With a little editing, perhaps the lament can be used in congregational worship.

- **Quiet zone: Personal laments** Children in this zone will have the opportunity to concentrate on their private laments, without revealing them to the group. Display the poster *Wisdom's Path* so the children can look at it as they write. Place a small bowl or basket under the poster. Provide large teardrops cut from construction paper, pens, and these directions:



The people crying out to God in Babylon included children. You can cry out a lament to God too. As you think about a difficult time for you, look at the woman in the poster. Imagine that she is helping you write your lament. Perhaps she represents God for you.

- 1 Think about how you feel about your difficult time.
- 2 Take a teardrop and pen. Write how you feel in a few words.
- 3 What do you want to change? Write about it on the teardrop.
- 4 Put your teardrop, with the writing down, in the basket. You have just prayed to God.



- **Cooperation zone: Memory game** Playing this game will help the children recall the story setting for Psalm 137 as well as encourage them to think about the situation in more detail. Cut apart the game pieces from the resource sheet "Memory Game" (p. 102). Mix them up and arrange them in even rows. To play, select two pieces, turn them over, trying to make a match. If a match is made, put the pieces back face up. If no match is made, put them back face down. As matches are made, have the children talk about how that illustration is part of the story of the people in Babylon and why they were so sad.

The children can also use a set of the pictures to arrange and tell the story of the sad people in Babylon.



Gather Play "Stand, O Stand Firm" (p. 12, *Music Section*; also #18 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather at the worship table. Light the Christ candle. Say:

The light of the candle reminds us that Jesus the Christ sent the Holy Spirit to be with us.

Play the song "May Peace Be with You/*Salamun Kullahee*" (p. 11, *Music Section*; also #24 on *Seasons Music CD*). Invite the children to sing the parts

they recognize.

Pray the group lament written by the children and then this prayer:

Our God, who listens to our prayers of joy and sadness, thank you for loving us even when we feel unlovable. Amen.

Blessing To each child say, "(Child's name), pray to God this week, and include a lament for others or yourself."



How did the children handle the idea of lament? What did you discover about the children in your group and their awareness of the difficulties of others?

For whom or what will you pray a lament this week?



A Cry to God

based on Psalm 137

Think about the different ways in which you might convey the emotions in a story. Consider such things as the use of your voice, facial expressions, and the way you hold your body.

(* indicates instructions for Feelings group in Engage in the session plan.

The people of Jerusalem had gone through the most terrible time you can imagine. First soldiers from a country called Babylon had surrounded the city, so that there was no escape. (*) Then the soldiers attacked the city and burned down all the houses, and all the shops, and the king's palace. They even destroyed the temple. (*) Finally the soldiers captured many of the people and marched them away to Babylon. (*)

It was the most terrible, awful, horrible, miserable, ghastly time anyone could ever remember. And then, as if things weren't bad enough, the soldiers started taunting the people, saying things to hurt their feelings.

"Sing us the songs about your great God," the soldiers jeered. "Sing us the songs about Jerusalem."

The people wept tears of sorrow as they remembered their city and the beautiful temple. Would they ever see their homes again? (*) The people's hurts and pain and anger were all written into a prayer, telling God how they felt.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down.
How we cried when we remembered Jerusalem.
(*)

We hung up our harps and refused to play
when the soldiers told us to sing our songs.
(*)

How can we sing to you, God?
How can we sing to you, when we are in a
strange land? (*)

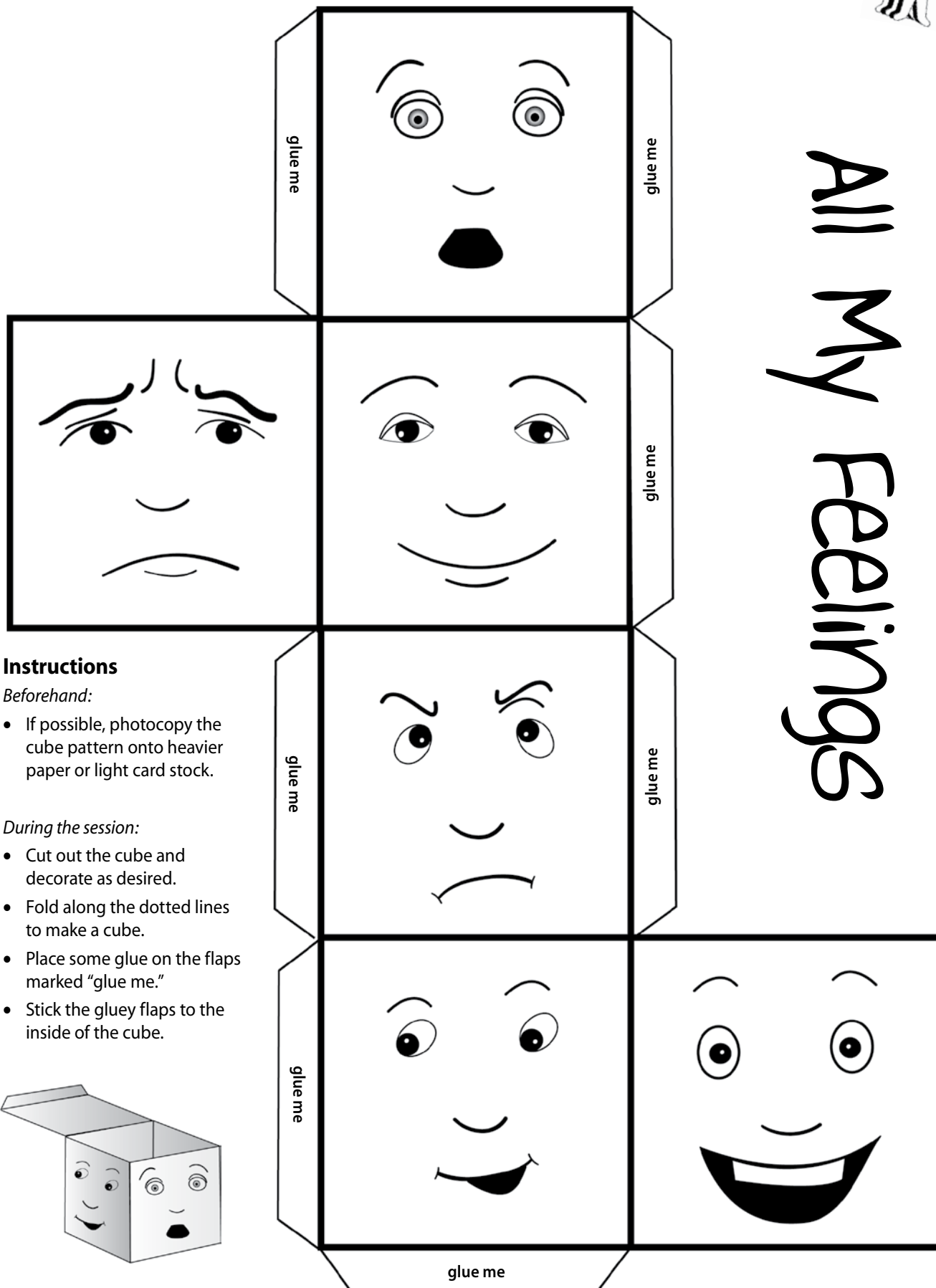
Remember, God, what happened to
Jerusalem.
Remember how it was torn down. (*)

Those who destroyed our city should be
punished.
What they did was wrong.
They should be severely punished. (*)

The people knew it was important to remember what had happened to them. They would tell the stories of the terrible time when the soldiers came and captured them. Together they would say the psalm, so that they, and their children, and their children's children, would always remember what it was like to be taken away by soldiers to a strange land.



All My Feelings



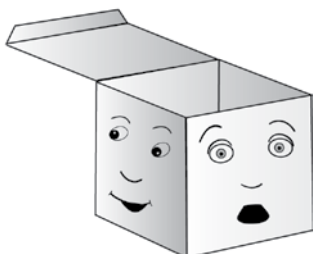
Instructions

Beforehand:

- If possible, photocopy the cube pattern onto heavier paper or light card stock.

During the session:

- Cut out the cube and decorate as desired.
- Fold along the dotted lines to make a cube.
- Place some glue on the flaps marked "glue me."
- Stick the gluey flaps to the inside of the cube.





Psalm 137

Verse 1: The Hebrew exiles gathered together beside a river in Babylon, which may be a stream or canal of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Being in a strange land, they were homesick.

1 Beside the rivers of Babylon we thought about Jerusalem, and we sat down and cried.

Verse 2: In an act of defiance, the people hang up their harps and refuse to sing. They may have lost everything, but they can still choose to disobey an order that will cause them even more pain than they have already suffered (see note for verse 3).

2 We hung our small harps on the willow trees.

Verse 3: Zion was the mount in Jerusalem on which the great Hebrew temple was constructed. The songs of Zion were songs that told about the greatness of Jerusalem. These songs said that Jerusalem would always be protected and defended by God. As Jerusalem and the temple had just been destroyed, asking the exiles to sing these songs was a cruel thing to do.

3 Our enemies had brought us here as their prisoners, and now they wanted us to sing and entertain them. They insulted us and shouted, "Sing about Zion!"

4 Here in a foreign land, how can we sing about the LORD?

Verse 4: Jerusalem was very important to the Hebrew people. It was a holy city where their temple was built. The people experienced God's presence in a special way in the temple. The Psalmist is afraid that if Jerusalem were forgotten the exiles would forget who they are and where they came from. They may even forget about God.

5 Jerusalem, if I forget you, let my right hand go limp.

6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I don't think about you above all else.

7 Our LORD, punish the Edomites! Because the day Jerusalem fell, they shouted, "Completely destroy the city! Tear down every building!"

Verse 7: The Edomites are usually described as enemies of Israel. It seems that the people of Edom celebrated when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. By asking God to "remember" how the Edomites responded, the exiles are asking God to share in their pain.

8 Babylon, you are doomed! I pray the Lord's blessings on anyone who punishes you for what you did to us.

Verse 8-9: This shocking prayer for revenge is a cry from the heart and talks about the cruelty of war the exiles had already experienced themselves. The exiles have a need for God and others to understand their terrible pain and grief. By expressing their innermost feelings to God, healing can begin. It is also a cry for justice; surely God cannot ignore what has happened?

9 May the Lord bless everyone who beats your children against the rocks!

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version Copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

If you have time you might want to look at a map of Bible lands and see if you can find the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.