

Refugees and the Bible

Welcoming the stranger

Session 3: The land: living in it and leaving it

Pray

Spend some time in prayer dedicating your discussion and reflections to God.

Watch

Part 3: The land: living in it and leaving it

(Download from biblesociety.org.uk/refugeesandthebiblefilms)

Discuss the clip. How do you react to what was said? Do you agree with it? Is there anything you disagree with?

What does the word 'home' mean to you? When are you deeply and contentedly 'at home' and when are you not? Is 'home' for you a place, a state or a relationship? Or something else?

The Israelites had a very particular relationship with the 'land' – it was, they believed, given to them by God and caused them great anguish when they were taken away from it during the exile.

Read

Ask someone to read the passage out loud slowly, leaving enough gaps for reflection; you might also want to leave a few minutes for silent reflection at the end (make sure you read right to the end and in your discussion you might want to talk about why verse 9 is there!)

Psalm 137 (Contemporary English Version)

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

² *We hung our small harps
on the willow[a] trees.*

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?*

*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!"*

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

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

Read Jeremiah 29.7

Pray for peace in Babylonia and work hard to make it prosperous. The more successful that nation is, the better off you will be.

Notice the difference in tone and emotion in this verse, discuss the difference between the two passages.

Unpack

- In case you are unfamiliar with the exile, in the 6th century BC, Judah (the Southern part of Israel where Jerusalem was) rebelled against the Babylonian empire who during that time ruled over them. The Babylonians punished for this rebellion by invading Jerusalem, destroying the temple and carrying large numbers of the population off into Exile in Babylon. The Exile refers to the period while they were away from the Land between c598/7 and 538 BC.
- The two passages here reflect two different attitudes to the exile. Psalm 137 is an emotional response declaring an inability to praise God away from their homeland. Jeremiah, a prophetic text speaking to the people, encourages them to settle in their new homeland and to seek its welfare/peace.
- The word translated in some translations as 'welfare' and in others 'peace' is the Hebrew word *shalom*. It is a much richer word than our English word 'peace'. The word *shalom* has a resonance of wholeness, completeness and well-being. This is why welfare is a good translation – it is the peace that brings wholeness. Jeremiah's message to the exiles is that their well-being was tied up with the well-being of the place in which they found themselves. Although it was not home, they should treat it as they would home.

Reflect

- These passages resonate strongly with the experience of being a refugee or exile, but they may remind you of times in your life when you have felt like this or been in a similar situation. If you feel able to, share with the group an occasion when you have felt 'unable to sing the Lord's song in a strange land'.
- Think about the emotions you observed in Psalm 137, what might we need to bear in mind about how refugees feel as they settle in a new place?
- The command in Jeremiah to seek the 'shalom' of the place where we live is as relevant to people who feel at home there as it is to those who have arrived recently. What might it look like if we all sought the 'shalom' of the place where we lived? What might this involve us doing?
- Is there anything that you have explored in your discussion today that you would want to apply to the question of how we think about and/or welcome refugees?

Pray

Spend time in prayer committing what you have discussed to God. Bring to him in prayer those who are wondering whether to flee their country; those who are currently seeking safe haven and those who are in refugee camps in various places around the world. See our online prayer resources at biblesociety.org.uk/prayertree