



## No Songs In Exile

Sunday, October 5, 2025

Pastor Dave Schultz, Aledo UMC

### Psalter, Psalm 137:1-6

<sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

<sup>2</sup> There on the poplars we hung our harps,

<sup>3</sup> for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

<sup>4</sup> How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

<sup>6</sup> May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider  
Jerusalem my highest joy.

In 1970, Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton of the Jamaican reggae group The Melodians wrote and recorded "Rivers of Babylon." The lyrics are adapted from the texts of Psalms 137 and 19. It's a catchy, upbeat song. In the words of your average teen judge on *American Bandstand*, "It's got a good beat, and you can dance to it."

Today, you can easily find "Rivers of Babylon" on YouTube, but you'll most likely come across the 1978 cover by Europe's Boney M, a German funk, reggae, and disco group.<sup>1</sup> And I never thought I would say the words "German," "funk," and "reggae" in the same sentence. Here in America, "Rivers of Babylon" peaked at number 30 on Billboard's Hot 100. However,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivers\\_of\\_Babylon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivers_of_Babylon). Accessed October 1, 2025.

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the song was a much bigger hit in Europe where it achieved platinum status. And in Great Britain, it became one of the top ten, all-time best-selling singles.

British theologian John Goldingay writes, "In my naivete, it was some years before I realized its original significance. It is a Rastafarian song...that provided singers in the Caribbean with raw material for expressing their protest and lament about colonialism and its related oppression, as well as their longing for freedom."

Rastafarianism is a religion that originated in Jamaica nearly a century ago. It's also a socio-political movement. In the Rastafarian faith, the term "Babylon" is used for any political system which is either oppressive or unjust. Therefore, "By the rivers of Babylon" refers to living in a repressive society and the longing for freedom, just like the Israelites in captivity.

Professor Goldingay continues, "The Rastafarians were not campaigning for violent revolution but were issuing a call to the people to stop simply accepting Babylonian domination and Babylonian cultural values...The irony of the naivete of Brits like me, who loved the song, is that **we** were the Babylon to which it refers."<sup>2</sup>

*Great Britain was the Babylon to which the song refers.*

Columbus Day is just around the corner. Soon after Christopher Columbus landed on Caribbean shores, the European nations of Spain, Portugal, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands set out to colonize the West for their respective homelands. And as our European forebears settled in this land, they continued to colonize it, especially as they moved Westward. How do you suppose Native Americans might relate to Psalm 137? How might other minority people relate to it?

You'll notice I spoke of those minorities in the third person; that's because I recognize that as a white American, some of those minority people might view me as a part of Babylon. That's rather humbling. And disturbing. It might be offensive.

This is a beautiful psalm. But it's also a disturbing psalm. And it challenges the powers that be.

We can't change the history of our nation. What's done is done. But we do have to learn to live together in this land. And as we live together, we can and we should give space to our minority neighbors so they might sing their own songs of Zion, whatever Zion might be to them.

That's not to say that you have to be a minority to relate to this psalm. It's always had a powerful impact on me, though I never really knew why. And I found it difficult to put those feelings into words. Maybe that's why, when I saw that this was the suggested psalm for the first week in October, I was drawn to it.

Psalm 137 is a psalm of lament. And we can nail down almost exactly when it was written. The Babylonians conquered the Southern nation of Israel—known as Judah—in 586 BC and began to deport the best of land to Babylon. Among those Jewish refugees were Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego of fiery furnace fame, and Daniel of the lions' den fame.

This psalm was almost certainly written a year or two after deportation. In the absence of a synagogue, it appears that devout, displaced Jews began to meet down by the riverside. But there was no song in their hearts.

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<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms for Everyone, Part 2*, pg. 193f.

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That's the irony of Psalm 137; it's a song about not being able to sing. "But how could we possibly sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?" they lamented.

Haven't we all found ourselves in Babylon at some time in our life? We may feel as though we're being held hostage by powers beyond our control: our mortgage company. The credit card company. Our job. Our health, or our lack of health. Our professors. Our family. Our exes—even the ones that don't live in Texas. They all have the potential to hold us captive.

Sometimes our Babylon is of our own making. But it turns against us anyway and binds us tight with invisible cords and invisible chains.

The good news is that neither the Hebrew people nor the Rastafarians of the Caribbean ever rose up in military rebellion against their oppressors. Instead, the Hebrews did something that was far more dangerous and almost certainly more effective.

They prayed.<sup>3</sup>

I like nice prayers. Well thought-out prayers. Polite prayers. Years ago I read a book by John Buchanan, the former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church on North Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile in downtown Chicago. Rev. Buchanan died this past February 3, just four days after his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday. Rev. Buchanan advised preachers to write out their prayers for every service rather than praying spontaneously lest they fall into the same speech patterns in every prayer. I've long since taken his advice.

And hopefully the results are nice prayers. But the prayers offered by the Hebrew believers on the banks of the rivers in Babylon were not nice prayers. They were not polite prayers.

<sup>7</sup> Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"

<sup>8</sup> Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.

<sup>9</sup> Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

That's not a nice prayer. Someone might hear that prayer and pressure the Hebrew faithful to "just get over it." As though that something easily accomplished. Or they might pressure them to forgive. And yes, we need to forgive. But sometimes forgiveness can wait.

I thought it was brave of Erika Kirk to say that she had forgiven the man who murdered her husband. I will admit that I was surprised that it came so soon after his death when the emotions had to be so raw. She may have to forgive him again. And again. And many more times over the course of her life.

Many of us would have waited a while before we forgave someone. But what are we waiting for? In the case of Psalm 137, sometimes you have to take time to be honest with God. And for these devout men and women on the banks of the river, that meant that they offered a prayer asking God to take revenge on those who abducted them from their homes in Judah.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

When was the last time you prayed for revenge? It was probably a prayer that you didn't share with others. (And thank you for not presenting it as a prayer request!) But the Hebrew believers in Babylon put it right there in scripture for all the world to see.

You know, there's nothing you can say to God that will shock him. He's heard it all before. In every language under the sun. What is remarkable about this prayer is that it recognizes that God is still God, even when they were in Babylonian captivity. And God hears us when we pray, even when we pray in the worst of circumstances. And God is with you in the worst of circumstances because God is everywhere present.

You can still pray to God no matter where you might be on this green globe. And God will hear you. He may not respond to you the way you would like him to respond, but he will be with you, whether you're in Babylon or in the valley of the shadow of death.

God eventually did answer this prayer. Does that mean that babies were thrown against the rocks? We have no record of that ever happening. Rather, God answered this prayer when the Hebrews returned to their Promised Land. It took 70 years, but it still happened. But during those 70 years, they indeed learned to sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. Those 70 years gave them time to learn to sing in captivity.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first installment in Maya Angelou's autobiography. This volume describes her young and early years as Maya learns how to overcome racism and trauma. It sounds like she was experiencing Babylon.

The book begins when three-year-old Maya and her older brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the tender age of 16. In the course of *Caged Bird*, Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice.<sup>4</sup> One might say that Maya became a whole person. But it took time. **Grief can turn to hope.** And it can happen to you. God truly wants to help you find relief and freedom from whatever may be oppressing you.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Know\\_Why\\_the\\_Caged\\_Bird\\_Sings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Know_Why_the_Caged_Bird_Sings)