

No More Strange Land?

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As a child growing up in South Korea, “By the Rivers of Babylon” by Boney M was a popular song—one that even children would sing and dance to. The melody was energetic and fun, uplifting in a way that drew us all together, even if we understood nothing of the lyrics. Most of us didn’t know English well, so when we sang along, it was usually with Korean lyrics that mimicked the English sounds but had only silly meanings.

It wasn’t until I grew older and learned more English that I realized this song was actually based on Psalm 137—a psalm sung not in joy, but in deep sorrow. The lively tune masked a song of longing, tears, and heartbreak. The words came from the Israelites, ripped from their homeland and forced to live in Babylon as exiles. Reflecting on those childhood memories, I realize how disconnected the joyful music was from the ancient pain that inspired it.

Psalm 137 opens: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps...” The psalmist’s dilemma is the impossibility of praise in the “strange land.” Their temple, the sacred heart of their identity and worship, had been utterly destroyed. Their land—the ground promised by God—was gone. The Israelites were not simply homesick; they were surrounded by captors who mocked them, taunting, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could they? How do you sing songs of praise when every outward sign of God’s presence seems to have vanished? The pain and humiliation were so great they could hardly lift their voices.

There is something in this story that transcends history. The feeling of “strange land” is not only found in the literal exile of ancient Israel. It happens anywhere people feel displaced: in lands of political turmoil, in places marked by

poverty and division, amid spiritual coldness or apathy. Many of us, whether immigrants, displaced by disaster, or simply feeling like strangers in a changing world, know something of what it is like to weep by unfamiliar rivers.

As someone who served as a missionary in Nepal for seven years, I know the feeling of being far from home, culture, and family. There were seasons when I missed Korean food, the sound of familiar language, and the comfort of community. But even more poignant was hearing the pain of Nepali friends who had been driven from their villages because of their faith or ethnic background—singing the Lord’s song felt just as impossible for them as it did for the exiles by Babylon’s rivers.

The strange land is present wherever despair tries to silence our voice, wherever division and oppression keep us from living fully as the people God made us to be.

But the Scriptures do not leave us sitting by foreign rivers. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, offers a powerful counterpoint: “This is why I remind you to fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you... For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” (1:6-7)

Paul wrote to Timothy during another era of hardship—when following Christ meant risking public shame and persecution. Yet Paul did not counsel Timothy to retreat or accept the silence of exile. Instead, Paul insists that the Spirit within us is God’s own gift—a fire waiting to be fanned into flame, not to be snuffed out by fear.

This is more than motivational advice. It is a declaration that the greatest power we possess is not found in external circumstances, but in the Spirit breathed into us by God. Power. Love. Self-discipline. These are the antidotes to spiritual exile. They allow us to speak, move, and sing, even in the most hostile land.

Paul's encouragement challenges us not to be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord. Even when the world is indifferent or even hostile, we are called to bear witness to a reality that is greater than the divisions and disappointments that surround us. The world may still sometimes feel like a strange land. But the Spirit assures us that we are never truly alone or abandoned. The gifts of God are with us, urging us to live boldly and faithfully, no matter where we find ourselves.

On this World Communion Sunday, we gather at a table that calls us out of exile into community. The communion table is a sign that we do not belong to the world's divisions, but to Christ. When we stretch out our hands to receive bread, we reach beyond boundaries — across languages, histories, and even wounds. It is not just remembrance; it's resistance to the powers that divide.

This table tears down the barriers that make us strangers to one another. Here, a Korean pastor, immigrants, refugees, and American friends can break bread as one. Here, bread from any nation becomes a symbol of Christ's body, shared for all. Communion proclaims that in Christ, there is no longer "strange land." We are at home wherever the Spirit gathers the faithful.

I remember so many times in Nepal when I felt homesick or spiritually dry. But when we celebrated the Lord's Supper—sometimes with just a simple cracker and juice in a small village, sometimes with rice and water in a mountain valley—I felt united with Christians everywhere. The barriers of language, custom, or nation melted away at Christ's table. The promise of Isaiah 56 was becoming true: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

But this is not just a warm feeling. The table challenges us to truly live as those who belong to God and one another. "No More Strange Land?" is a question as well as a proclamation. Do we really live as people at home in God's grace?

Does our love and unity reflect the power, love, and sound mind God gives us? Or do we sometimes settle for division, suspicion, or indifference?

World Communion Sunday is not just about what happens in this sanctuary. It is a summons to see every sister and brother worldwide as part of one family. It is a call to remember Christians in war zones, in refugee camps, in persecuted churches, as partners at Christ's table. It is a challenge to let God's Spirit break down every wall that keeps any of us in exile.

The ancient song of Psalm 137 is filled with lament: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" It was once unthinkable. But because of Christ—who knows exile, suffering, and estrangement firsthand—the song of God's people is no longer silenced. On this World Communion Sunday, we proclaim that peace and love can be sung anywhere, by anyone.

Despite the wars, conflicts, and chaos that strain our world, our communion table becomes an act of hope. Even when the world feels divided, the church dares to sing a different song—a song of unity, justice, and new creation. Every time we break bread together, we lay one more stone in the foundation of God's coming realm.

So, beloved, the question, "No More Strange Land?" is answered most truly at this table, in this act of communion, and in the lives we build together. Let our worship today be both memory and prophecy—remembering all who have wept by the rivers of Babylon, proclaiming that in Christ, exile is ended, and singing courage, hope, and love as part of the family of God.

Let us gather now at the Table, with hearts united and songs renewed—no longer strangers, but beloved children, at Home. Amen.