

## **SERMON: RIVERS THAT TELL OUR STORIES (A Black History Sermon)**

**Psalm 137: 1-6 & Psalm 46: 1-5**

### **Psalm 137:1-6**

**(1) By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. (2) We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. (3) For there they that carried of us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. (4) How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? (5) If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. (6) If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.**

### **Psalm 46:1-5**

**(1) God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (2) Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; (3) Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah. (4) There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. (5) God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.**

### **Introduction**

According to his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes, then eighteen years old and recently graduated from high school, was sitting in a train in route to Mexico. As the train approached St. Louis, he stopped reading and stared out of the window and

marveled at the mighty Mississippi River as the train crossed the river from Illinois to Missouri. He remembered his Black Heritage and how often rivers were mentioned in everyday speech and in the lyrics of the spirituals. Then with spontaneous inspiration, he wrote one of his most famous poems, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*:

“I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its  
muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”

Our slave ancestors knew a lot about rivers. Many times, the slavery system carried them “down the river” to places they did not desire or deserve to go, and separated them from their families. Perhaps as they watched the water as it ebbed and flowed, and saw how drought and heavy rains affected the river as it made its way, they saw in the river a parable of the changing times of life. The warm flowing water gave comfort,

while a chilly flow became an emblem of death's cold grip, as in the much-used poetic line:

"Jordan River is chilly and cold. It chilled my body, but not my soul."

Langston Hughes emphasized a distinction of our culture. While all cultures have songs, poems, and saying about rivers, Blacks, however, dwell on the rivers of the Bible, especially the Jordan River. Just think about the spirituals: *Roll, Jordan Roll; Deep River; Down By The River Side; Jordan River I'm Bound To Cross; We're Crossing Over One By One; and Wasn't That A Wide River.*"

Our ancestors were on to something deeper than they realized. The course of human history is like a river, sometimes placid, sometimes widely turbid, with many twists and turns. Sometimes we see nobleness, compassion, and integrity, and then we see unrelenting meanness, senseless wars, sexism, and genocidal racism.

Let's look at a few of these Biblical rivers that our ancestors spoke about and sang about and extract the meaning of the imagery.

## **Exposition**

### **1. The Nile River**

(Demonstration Of Divine Inspiration And Ingenuity.)

(The River Saved Moses From Infanticide.)

(Blacks Turned The Flooding Of The Nile Into A Positive.)

(Two Growing Seasons Of Grain - Cast Your Bread Upon The Waters.)

### **2. The Rivers Of Babylon**

(Time Of Sadness And Injustice.)

(Time Of Protest.)

(When "Enough Is Enough.")

(When You Want Me To Make A Mockery Of My Own Religion.)

(When Worship Would Not Become Entertainment.)

### **3. The River of Justice**

(Let justice roll down like a gushing waterfall and righteousness as a mighty flowing river. (Amos 5:24.)

### **4. The Jordan River**

(A Symbol Of Determination.)

(The Last River Before They Entered The Promise Land.)

(It Was Flooding When They Crossed.)

(A Symbol Of The Final Stage Before We Transition To Eternity.)

### **5. The River Of Gladness**

(The River Of Assurance.)

(God's Timely And Gracious Presence In Our Experiences.)

(This River Provides Joy In The Midst Of Sorrow.)

(Psalm 46:4)

### **Closing Thoughts**

Our foreparents possessed unswerving faith in God. I will close with the lyrics of this somewhat obscure spiritual about crossing the Jordan River.

"Chilly water, chilly water.

Don't be scared; just step right in.

Jesus done saved you from your sins.

Jordan River is long and wide.

The good Lord is waiting on the other side

The good Lord is waiting on the other side.”

Give God Glory! Give God All The Glory!

## **End Notes**

1. In adding *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* to the introduction, I use the same spacing and indentations as the poem was originally printed in the book, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, which was published in 1926. Just for the record, we are not breaking the law because the copyright has expired.

2. The Nile River flooded each year. The flood waters inundated the farm land miles from the river bed. The Egyptians built their calendar around the flooding. They could not plant their crops until the water receded. Sometimes, this took weeks, even months. This cut the growing season for grain very short. On one hand, there was the flooding, and then, there was the hot dry summer. As you would readily conclude, the flooding was initially a nuisance and an impediment until they figured out a way to turn it into an advantage.

As a solution, on the farm land that was annually flooded, they began to sow wheat and barley seeds on the water. They did not wait until the water dissipated. As the water receded, the seeds germinated and developed roots. When the water had fully receded but the soil was still moist, the roots of the wheat and barley plants had a head start. The roots then penetrated the moist fertile soil and in weeks yielded a bountiful harvest. Since they started early with the sowing, they could produce two grain crops in one year. Other nations around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers copied this technique. Egypt was known throughout the ancient world for its production of grain. This is evident in the Bible, in chapter forty-two of Genesis, when Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain during a famine. This method of growing grain by casting the seeds on the flood waters was called *kar-souf-dar-metz* by the ancient Egyptians. It literally means “flood farming.” This is referenced in Ecclesiastes 11:1.

3. Verses seven, eight, and nine of Psalm 137 are what theologians label as “imprecatory.” It is the temporary expression of anger and revenge of a victim. Psalms 57 and 69 are also examples. Imprecatory Psalms are included in Scripture to let us know that in our humanness we sometimes act less than ideal and we need God to get us back on the right track.

4. When the Psalmist wrote, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,” he was not referring to any natural river upon which the holy city of Jerusalem depended. The Psalmist knew what all other Hebrews knew, that Jerusalem had no river. Its water supply was from Gihon, an underground spring that fed the much-used city pools of Siloam and Beth-zatha. That deep underground spring could be counted on to gush up at intervals during the day, making the pools it fed stir with liveliness and a fresh supply of life-giving water. Unlike other great cities of commerce, such as Thebes, Babylon, Nineveh or even nearby Damascus, Jerusalem had no great river on which to float its merchandise or to dispatch any ships. The Psalmist used the river image to symbolize God’s loving care and protection for His people. Just as cities depend upon rivers for their sustenance and success, believers depend upon God’s mercy and grace.

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