

Staying Faithful in Babylon

Revelation 18:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 23, 2021 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor. ²He called out with a mighty voice,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!

It has become a dwelling place of demons,
a haunt of every foul spirit,
a haunt of every foul bird,
a haunt of every foul and hateful beast.

³For all the nations have drunk
of the wine of the wrath of her fornication,
and the kings of the earth have committed
fornication with her,
and the merchants of the earth have grown rich
from the power of her luxury.”

⁴Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,
“Come out of her, my people,

so that you do not take part in her sins,
and so that you do not share in her plagues;
⁵for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
and God has remembered her iniquities.

⁶Render to her as she herself has rendered,
and repay her double for her deeds;
mix a double draught for her in the cup she
mixed.

⁷As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously,
so give her a like measure of torment and grief.
Since in her heart she says,
‘I rule as a queen;

I am no widow,
and I will never see grief,’

⁸therefore her plagues will come in a single day—
pestilence and mourning and famine—
and she will be burned with fire;
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.”

(Revelation 18:1-8, NRSV)



Genesis 11 records the fascinating story of the Tower of Babel. Human beings, made in the image of God, had been created for two purposes. First, they were to reflect God’s glory in creation. That’s what an image does. My image in the mirror reflects me, for better or for worse. The image of George Washington on the \$1

bill reflects George Washington. Humans were made to reflect God, to bring glory to their Creator. Second, and on a related note, God told humans at creation that they were to spread out over all the earth so that his glory would be reflected in *all* creation. God specifically told Adam and Eve to make lots of babies so that his image-bearers would eventually bring his glory to every corner of the planet.

The Tower of Babel is the story of how humanity did the exact opposite.¹ You remember the story. The people of the earth decide one day to build a walled city with an immense tower that stretches to the sky. They do this for two reasons. They want a secure refuge to keep the rest of the world out, and they want an impressive tower to make a name for themselves. On both counts, of course, they have chosen to do exactly the opposite of what God commanded them to do at creation. They were made to bring glory to God; they seek to glorify themselves. They were made to care about the whole world; they only want to care about their little secure part of the world.

The text then says that, “**The Lord came down to see the city and the tower.**”² It’s the Bible’s version of a joke. The people built this very impressive city and tower but the Lord has to stoop down to take a look at their puny accomplishments. But God’s not laughing. In fact, he immediately frustrates their evil plans because they are so contrary to his good plans. Specifically, he confuses their language and brings division among them so that they cannot collude together and are forced out across the world. Some might suggest that these were natural consequences. My security depends on keeping others, who are not like me, out. My tower, if it is going to bring me glory, has to be bigger than your tower. Pride and tribalism always naturally lead to division.

What we have here again is that age-old choice that we talked about last week, the choice between living life on God’s terms or living life on our terms. And Babel is not just some old story about some long-forgotten people. It’s our story. You see, God’s original mandate from creation for us still stands. You and I were created in God’s image to reflect him in this world. Our

¹ Scholars argue as to whether the story is historical or not. Either way it’s true.

² Genesis 11:5. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

lives, in every sense, should be lived in ways that bring God glory. And yet, if we're honest, we must admit that much of our lives are spent instead trying to make a name for ourselves. Furthermore, we were not put on this earth to ghettoize ourselves into like-minded groups, hiding secure from the brokenness in the wider world God wants to set right. No, we were put here to give our lives, sacrificially if necessary, to joining God in seeing all of creation cultivated to his purposes and his pleasure.

Now, if you've been paying attention in our journey through Revelation, you've seen that John is putting this very same challenge before us. The last few weeks we've seen John use the image of Babylon to represent those in the world who are opposed to Christ and his ways and who want to leave God out of the equation as they seek to build a society. In the Jewish mind, of course, Babylon was the paradigm of wickedness, idolatry, immorality and cruelty ever since the Babylonians conquered Israel, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and carted off the Israelites to exile in the 6th century B.C. Perhaps you've never made the connection before, but Babylon in Revelation is also code for Babel. In John's day people were still building walls and towers, physical and otherwise, to cut themselves off from others and make a name for themselves instead of God. Doing so always demonstrates people have faith in themselves rather than faith in God, that they would prefer to pursue human progress rather than God's presence.³

As John speaks about Babylon in Revelation he uses vivid, often grotesque imagery and symbols, to help us understand the nature of this reality in our world. In chapter 17, just before what we read earlier, he refers to Babylon as a prostitute, one who sells her body for sexual favors. In 17:6 he declares, "**Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abomination.**" This is typical. All through the Bible God uses intimate, sexual language to speak metaphorically about his relationship with us. Later in Revelation we'll see that God's people, the church, are compared to the bride of Christ.⁴ The worst offense in marriage, of course, is infidelity. It tears marriages apart. This is the offense of Babylon. Babylon is everything and everyone in this world which was created to be pledged in devotion to Christ but has, instead, given the love of heart, mind, soul and strength elsewhere. Those in Babylon commit, if you will, spiritual adultery.

This infidelity is fueled by the evil one in this world. In Revelation 17:3 John tells us that this prostitute Babylon is "**sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names.**" From the very beginning, when evil approached Adam and Eve in the garden in the form of a smooth-talking serpent, it has been the mission of evil to seduce people away from loving devotion to God, to instead look out for themselves and make a name for themselves. Remember that very first temptation when the snake tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit: "**You will not die [as God said]; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.**"⁵ Don't trust God; trust yourselves. Don't look to bring glory to God; bring glory to yourselves.

This is why Babylon always is so fiercely set against those who remain faithful to God. From Revelation 17 again: "**I saw that the woman [riding on the beast] was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.**"⁶ All through history those opposed to God have also been opposed to God's people. Sometimes that has resulted in bloodshed, even in our day. In fact, by the time you go to bed tonight, eight people in our world will have been killed for their decision to follow Christ. That's a sobering statistic. An estimated 260 million Christians live in parts of our world today where this threat of physical persecution is a constant reality.⁷ Even in parts of our world like America where this threat is not now present, there will always be a price to pay if you seek to remain faithful to Christ in your life. The one thing in this world that stands in the way of evil having its way is those wretched people who will not bow the knee to Babylon. The rule of evil in our world depends on their being no rivals and the King of Kings is the ultimate rival, along with all who worship him. And so Babylon is drunk with the blood of the faithful.

The good news, of course, is that Babylon, through still waging a furious battle, is already ultimately defeated. This good news is given over and over and over again in Revelation to a people, in John's day, who likely could not imagine that the Babylon they faced in Rome would ever fall. And yet John declares, from our reading today, "**Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!**" Though God's faithful now live within Babylon's boundaries, there will come a day when only the foulest of spirits and creatures will dwell within those same boundaries. Then God's people will be forever set free.

³ I'm borrowing this last phrase from cultural commentator and writer, Mark Sayers, from his book, *The Reappearing Church* (Moody Publishers, 2019).

⁴ See Revelation 17:7-9, 21:2

⁵ Genesis 3:5 (emphasis mine)

⁶ Revelation 17:6

⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/every-day-8-christians-killed-for-their-decision-to-follow-jesus/>

In fact, Babylon will implode from within, which is always what happens to evil. In verse 3 John declares, **“For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.”** In his imagery from chapter 17, the adulterous woman riding on the beast is actually devoured by the beast.⁸ And John tells us there that this is according to God’s purposes. It’s as if God has built a kill-switch into evil itself. We talked about this last week when we talked about God’s wrath, and the reality that God merely lets those opposed to him inherit the natural end result of the trajectory of a life on their own terms which they have chosen for themselves. Wickedness turns its back on itself, drinks her own poisonous cocktail which it mixed for others. Again, hear God’s judgment from verse 6: **“Render to her as she herself has rendered...mix a double draught for her in the cup she [herself] mixed.”**

The point of all this is to encourage those who are faithful to Christ. There will come a day, perhaps sooner than you realize, when all that is opposed to God will implode in on itself. In the meantime, however, the church (i.e. the bride of Christ) is warned over and over in Revelation to remain faithful to her betrothed, Christ. That’s what’s behind the passionate plea we hear in verse 4: **“Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues...”** This is Old Testament language, taken from places like Jeremiah 51: **“The sea has risen over Babylon; she has been covered by its tumultuous waves...Come out of her, my people! Save your lives, each of you, from the fierce anger of the Lord!”**⁹

Please remember that Revelation is not a book written to primarily help the church figure out the future, as much as it is a book meant to help the church know how to live faithfully in the present. And what John makes abundantly clear all throughout his Revelation is that Babylon, like Babel, is not only ancient history but an ever-present reality that we face today, that we must come out of today! In his day, Christians who read Revelation immediately recognized that Rome was the Babylon of their day. What other nation in the world at that time more epitomized the rebellion of evil in the world? The Roman Empire was all about making itself the summit of human achievement by its own efforts and for its own glory.

But we must not imagine that Babylon is faded in our day. As New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright puts it, Babylon in our day is any city, any nation or any culture which “sits in luxury at the heart of empire, dispensing

favors upon fawning (and fee-paying) visitors, giving royal treatment to those who can be useful, or who have substantial bank balances, and tossing aside as so much trash those who can’t have and haven’t.”¹⁰ Couldn’t we say those words describe so many cities, nations and cultures in our world, including our own? We wake up every morning in Babylon, or Babel if you will, a world around us committed to life on its own terms rather than God’s terms, devoted to individual security, self-glory, and one’s own tribe. And so the call here in Revelation for followers of Christ to come out of Babylon is as urgent as it ever has been. Though we can’t literally live outside the rebellious world around us, we must not adopt the ways of that world.

We are fools if we do not heed this warning. Almost nothing grieves my heart as a pastor more than when I see people who once gave their lives to the way of Jesus now conformed in their lives instead to the ways of our world. Just the other morning God started bringing to mind the names and faces of many I have known who once sought to live life on God’s terms but who now are living life on their own terms, or at least on the world’s terms. There are many others who, though they may sit regularly in a worship service on a Sunday morning, spend the rest of their week living lives that look almost entirely like others in our world who do not follow Christ. I understand this may not describe many of you because I know so many here in this community who genuinely want to live faithfully to Jesus in every moment of every day. Even so, we would be wise to heed John’s warning here that even though we must live in this world, we must not allow ourselves to live like this world. If we do not remain vigilant in this, then we, like so many before us and among us, can also be easily seduced.

Part of the challenge we face is in recognizing Babylon in our midst so that we can steer clear. In his excellent commentary on Revelation, scholar Darrell Johnson points out seven marks of Babylon drawn from John’s descriptions in Revelation and other parts of scripture.¹¹ I think he’s right on the money. I personalized these marks in the form of questions. I’ll let you answer them for yourself.

1. *Does our culture seek to leave God out of the equation?* Babylon always keeps God - his presence, his grace, his will, his purposes - out of the center of its cultural and political life.
2. *Is there a trend in our culture to abandon or corrupt God’s beautiful design for human sexuality?* Every

⁸ Revelation 17:16-17

⁹ Jeremiah 51:42, 45. See also Isaiah 48:20, 52:11-12.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 161.

¹¹ Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge* (Regent College Publishing, 2004), 302-303.

time people turn their worship from God to themselves or idols, sexual immorality is quick to follow. What's the first consequence when Adam and Eve sin in the garden? Immediately they are ashamed of their nakedness. In Romans 1, Paul declares that when people seek their own glory instead of God's glory, the first result is that God gives them up to **“the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves.”**¹²

3. *Is the nation in which we live built on unjust economic structures?* The Babylons of this world always thrive on the backs of their poorest, most vulnerable members.
4. *Does our culture worship material things?* Do people around us find their identity in what they can produce and own? In Babylon, if you trace the actions of people back to their core motivation, it often has something to do with material or financial gain.
5. *Is there a prevalence around us to use violence as a way to solve conflict?* In Babylon, weapons and war are thought to bring security and freedom.
6. *Is our culture full of deception and counterfeits?* In Babylon, what is evil and harmful is regularly dressed up to resemble what is good and healthy.
7. *Is our culture full of religion and spirituality that has little, if anything, to do with worshipping the one true God we know in Jesus Christ?* Babylon is actually incurably religious. But remember that idolatry is religious, and idolatry (i.e. the worship of created things rather than the Creator) is the religion practiced in Babylon.

You be the judge. You can't deny that historically each of these marks clearly identified Rome as Babylon to the Christians of John's day. But what about our day and our context? I'm grateful to live in America in the 21st century as opposed to the Roman Empire in the 1st century or, for that matter, in many other parts of our world today where following Jesus might get me killed.

Still, does that mean you and I didn't wake up this morning Babylon? Do you see in America, in our culture and in our history, any hint at all of pushing God out of the center of national life, a degrading of biblical sexuality, the wealthy profiting off the backs of the poor, a fascination with the consumption of material

things, violence as a way to solve conflict, false things dressed up as the truth, or widespread spirituality that excludes or marginalizes Christ? Any of that seem relevant to our context? In my mind, it seems absolutely relevant!

So how do we respond? Well, when Peter, in his first letter, tells the Christians of his day that they live as **“aliens and exiles”** in the world he does so after reminding them, **“[you are] a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”**¹³ In Philippians 3 Paul has a similar message. Speaking about those around us in the world who have rejected Christ he says, **“Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”**¹⁴ You see, all around us in this world people made in the image of God are tragically neglecting their God-given mandate to reflect his glory in this world to every corner of the world. Their ultimate devotions and affections do not lie with Christ, but with themselves, their own glory, and the glory of those like them. And the result, just like it was in Babel, is always division, as our world becomes more and more tribal. But our allegiance, our devotion, our citizenship even, belongs solely to Christ and his Kingdom.

It's providential that today we celebrate Pentecost, the day when we remember how God mercifully undid the damage we did at Babel. As our Call to Worship reminded us this morning, shortly after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the inauguration of the coming of his Kingdom on earth, his followers were gathered together in Jerusalem and the Spirit of Christ fell from heaven and consumed them, filled them, empowered them, transformed them. And what was the immediate result? Acts 2:4: **“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them authority.”** They spoke in their distinct languages, and yet understood one another perfectly! It's the undoing of Babel!

You see, these men and women had so much that threatened to divide them: gender, ethnicity, national citizenship, economic status, personality. If they committed to stick to the security of their own tribe and seek a name for themselves on their own efforts, such differences would certainly divide, the story of Babel on endless repeat. And yet now, all that was unique about them no longer divided them because at the heart of

¹² Romans 1:24

¹³ 1st Peter 2:9,11

¹⁴ Philippians 3:19-20

who they were there was a deeper shared identity. Though still people of every race and tribe, they were now all one family, beloved sons and daughters of God himself, completely unified in Christ. Now they had been called out of Babylon to be sent unified back into Babylon as witnesses that there is another, better way to live. This was the day the church was born, and its mission and purpose in this world has not changed since its birth. We are called out of the world to become aliens and strangers in this world that we might then humbly bear witness in and to the world of the love and grace of Jesus Christ who welcomes anybody else who would turn their hearts towards him.

Our witness, if we are to follow Jesus as his disciples in this world, must be that our lives increasingly bear marks that counter the marks of Babylon around us.

Specifically, Christ must never be left out of the equation in our lives. In fact, in every aspect of our lives we must seek, with his help, to conform our lives to his purposes. You must follow Jesus not only to worship Sunday morning, but to work at your job, and into the classroom and your studies, into the marketplace, into your checkbook and savings account, into your calendar, into the voting booth, into every moment of every day.

We seek to honor Jesus by honoring his desires when it comes to this beautiful and sacred gift of sexuality. As we do so we will stand out like sore thumbs in our world. We must be willing to stand out.

We fight against unjust economic structures and practices and refuse to participate in them ourselves, aligning ourselves more with the plight of the poor than with the comfort of the rich.

We daily resist the lure of consumerism in our culture that is out to seduce us into thinking that our souls are satisfied by material things. They are not! We must live as if we truly believe that the richest person in the world is more likely not the one who possesses the most, but the one who is satisfied with the least.

We are committed to Jesus' call to be peacemakers, knowing that violence has never, and will never, be the way of Jesus or his followers. Peaceful, loving resistance, yes. Violence, never.

We are committed to what is true, never dressing up falsehood as truth. Christians must be discerning, knowing that all that glitters is not gold.

And finally, we must not fall into the trap of others who insist that all religion and spirituality, as long as it is sincerely held and practiced, is good and true. No! Much of religion these days, even in the church, is nothing more than godless idolatry.

I get it. Believe me, I understand that if our lives bear these marks we are not going to fit in well with the world around us. But you know, if I had to summarize what I think the main goal of John's Revelation is, I would say that his main goal is to encourage the church. Perhaps as he wrote this all down on Patmos he had in mind those words he heard Jesus speak all those years before when Jesus talked about what it would be like to follow after him in this world:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.¹⁵

Don't be deceived. Most of the world around us is on a wide, easy road that is headed for destruction. Babylon is heavily populated, in our day as much as any day, full of people seeking their own tribe and their own glory. That's not my opinion; that's what Jesus says. And so to wake up every day in Babylon and still follow Jesus is not an easy endeavor. The way is narrow. The road is hard. There are only a few companions along the journey.

But over and over John tells us, as he learned from Jesus, we must stay on the way. We must stay faithful in Babylon. Do not give up. As you follow Jesus he is leading you in a direction that leads to life. And as you continue on your way, perhaps others will see the joy and peace and hope you have found even in the hard journey, and decide to join you. May our lives bring glory to God in this world for the sake of a world that desperately needs to see his glory.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage again from Revelation 18:1-8. What stands out to you here?

¹⁵ Matthew 7:13-14

2. In the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) the people build a city to secure themselves from the rest of the world and a tower to make a name for themselves. How might this story be the story of people in our day?
3. In the Revelation passage, God's people are called to "come out" of Babylon. What do you think this means?
4. Consider that these are the marks of Babylon: leaving God out of the equation, abandoning standards of biblical sexuality, thriving off unjust economic structures, finding identity in material things, using violence as a way to solve conflict, counterfeiting the truth, and religion without Christ. As you consider these characteristics, do you think that we live in Babylon today?
5. Consider again Jesus' words from Matthew 7:13-14: **"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."** What do these words mean to you right now in your life?
6. How does this message encourage you? How does it discourage you?
7. What is one thing you believe Jesus is saying to you through all this? How will you respond to what he is saying?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



If we follow Jesus in this life, what is one way that we are going to look different from people around us who are not following Jesus?

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	Judges 6 / Psalm 114
Tuesday:	Judges 7 / Psalm 115
Wednesday:	Judges 8 / Psalm 116
Thursday:	Judges 9 / Psalm 117
Friday:	Judges 10 / Psalm 118
Saturday:	Judges 11 / Psalm 119
Sunday:	Judges 12 / Psalm 120