

Beyond Babylon

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. We started this church back in 2008, and when we started the church, we did so in order to be able to make a long-term commitment to the city.

The identity of our church has, from the very beginning, been tied into our understanding of the city, to our belief that Christians are called to commit to loving the city long-term.

Commit to doing that because that's what God has called us to do. It glorifies God when we do that, and so our church exists to fulfill that calling and that mission, to serve and to seek the flourishing of this city by being a gospel-centered community in it and by building other gospel-centered communities in it.

And so from time to time, it's important to come back to this question of how should Christians think about this city? How does God think about this city? And we've been doing this series in the book of Revelation, and we've come to this big section of Revelation, chapters 15 through 18, that show us something about God's heart for the city, that help us remember and get re-centered on what that is and how we should think about the city.

And so we're going to look at this large section of Scripture, but all of these chapters are sort of telling us the same thing. They are all focused on the city, the earthly city. And what we see are three things about the city.

[1 : 2 5] We see the potential of the city, the brokenness of the city, and then ultimately the hope of the city. The potential of the city, the brokenness of the city, and the hope of the city.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that rather than us sitting down and parsing out and determining what we will accept and what we will reject and what we will attend to and what we will overlook, we pray that your word would attend to us and dissect us and open up our hearts, reveal to us things that we may have overlooked, reveal to us those deep places where we most need your love and your truth and your grace.

We pray this, Lord, that we might glorify you in all that you've called us to do. In your Son's name, amen. So first of all, the potential of the city.

I want to give you a little context because this is admittedly covering a lot of ground, but thematically it all holds together. If you look at and read chapter 15, it gives us this vision of all of God's people standing next to, as it says in verse 2, a sea of glass mingled with fire.

So they're standing next to a sea, and they're singing what it says is the song of Moses and the Lamb. The song of Moses and the Lamb. And then as they sing, seven angels are preparing to bring plagues of judgment on the world.

[2 : 5 9] And then we look at chapters 16 and 17, and that describes the plagues in chapter 16, and then the judgment in chapter 17. And then chapter 18 is then a song about the judgment.

So all of it holds together. And in terms of meaning and reference, one of the things that we've said in this series is that a lot of these images are drawn from the Old Testament, and this is no different.

This is meant to remind us of the great story that defines the people of Israel and their identity, which is the story of the Exodus. You have God's people who are enslaved in Egypt under Pharaoh, and God sets out to liberate His people so that they can worship Him in the wilderness.

That's what He says. That's the passage we read from Exodus 15. And in order to do that, God sends plagues on Egypt until Pharaoh finally relents and lets His people go.

And then once they are finally liberated, they stand next to the Red Sea and they sing the song of Moses. And so all of these images are meant to conjure up that collective corporate memory of the Exodus.

[4 : 10] And so what this is telling us is, Revelation is depicting in these final chapters a kind of ultimate Exodus. This is the final Exodus. The Exodus to which all other Exodus accounts point.

And it's telling us that God's people are still enslaved. We're enslaved in the world. And so God is bringing new plagues and a new final judgment to free His people so that they can worship Him.

So that's what's going on here. And the object of God's judgment here is not Egypt. It's Babylon. Now, we read that and we might first think it's Babylon the city.

And we say, well, wasn't Babylon a long time ago? Why is God still angry at Babylon? But what we realize is that it's not actually the literal Babylon. John uses the name Babylon.

But what he's describing is a city that could just as easily be Rome or Jerusalem or New York or D.C. And what we begin to realize as we unpack it is that God is not so much judging a place.

[5 : 20] This is not geographic judgment. So much as a way of life. So when Revelation talks about Babylon, it's talking about a way of life. It's talking about a spirit that has come to define the world.

The spirit of Babylon, which enslaves people, which prevents them from worshiping, God as they were created to do. And so once we realize that, then we have to ask ourselves, well, what does God actually think about physical cities?

And the truth is, God loves cities. God created cities. Cities were his idea. And all throughout history, cities have played a central role in human history and society.

In fact, the entire story of Scripture is moving from a garden, the Garden of Eden, to a city, the New Jerusalem, which we will look at in a few weeks.

So God's plan is a city. God's vision for the future of the world is a city. And so we've seen cities play a key role in human history. They've historically been places of refuge and safety.

[6 : 36] The wall provided enough protection and the combined resources provided enough provision to allow people to move beyond subsistence living, subsistence farming.

And so you have culture that begins to grow out of urban living. Cities have historically been places of tremendous diversity and thus collaboration and cross-pollination between cultures.

Cities have been places of creativity and ingenuity and invention. And it's interesting, when you look in chapter 18, you know, all of chapter 18 is this lament over the destruction of Babylon.

But what you see are, there are these places where there are, it's kind of sarcastic, and then there are these places where it's truly sad. And one of the places where it's truly sad is in chapter 18, beginning in verse 22, the angel, according to John's writing, laments this, the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters will be heard in you no more.

And a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more. And the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more. The light of a lamp will shine in you no more.

[7 : 58] The voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more. And this is this lament that all of the culture produced in the city will cease.

And it shows us and it reminds us that cities are the birthplace of culture for the rest of the world. And if you think about DC, things that happen here in DC affect and touch every other part of the world.

It's one of those international crossroads where the things that happen here touch lives all around the world. This is the function of the city in society.

And so we have to understand that God loves cities. Cities were God's idea. And cities have amazing potential because they create the culture that shapes the rest of the world. But here's the thing.

Here's the difference. If the heart of a city belongs to God, if the heart of a city belongs to God, then goodness and truth and beauty will flow into every other corner of the world from that city like a freshwater spring.

[9 : 10] If the heart of a city is rotten, is corrupt, then it will pollute and infect the rest of the world like a sewer pipe.

And this is the difference. Cities can either be freshwater springs or they can be sewer pipes. And as the city goes, so goes the broader culture.

And so as we look at Babylon, something in the city is rotten and it stinks and it's infected the world. And so this brings us to the brokenness of the city.

Chapter 18, verse 11, it shows us the merchants of the earth. It says, and the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for Babylon since no one buys their cargo anymore.

And I told you parts of the lament are genuine and parts of it are sarcastic. This is the sarcastic aspect of the lament. The angel is sort of sarcastically saying, you know, Babylon has such a voracious appetite for luxury goods and all of the merchants made so much money off of the Babylonian people that when Babylon falls, all of the merchants of the world are going to weep and cry because that was their, you know, that was their retirement plan.

[10 : 32] You know, that was the bedrock of their business was Babylonian voracious appetite. Right? This insatiable desire for things. A spirit of rampant, unbridled consumerism.

So we see the spirit of Babylon is just sort of taken with this materialism and this consumerism. And so as a result of that, Babylon is a place where some people are growing rich and powerful and they're living luxury lifestyles.

And other people are being exploited and even enslaved. Verse 13 is so striking in chapter 18, verse 13.

Here's just, it's giving a list of the luxury goods that are bought and sold in Babylon. Just listen to this list. Cinnamon, great. Spice, mm-hmm. Incense, myrrh, frankincense, great.

Wine, love wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, chariots, all sounds good. And then it says, and slaves.

[11 : 38] And then it clarifies, just in case we miss the shock of it, it says, slaves, that is human souls. It says it in the text.

And it's John's way of making sure we don't miss the shock of the fact that right alongside cinnamon and fine flour and precious wood and wine, human souls are bought and sold.

And this shows, this is sort of lifting the lid and the stench of Babylon beginning to strike our nostrils and it's an offensive odor.

The spirit of Babylon, I think, is alive and well in D.C. The spirit of Babylon is alive and well in our city. And this is why when you look at D.C., you have some of the wealthiest, most powerful people living right next to some of the poorest and most powerless people.

You have luxury condominiums that cater to young, elite, highly educated professionals right next to homeless shelters and subsidized housing.

[12 : 45] You have this tremendous disparity of great poverty and unimaginable wealth in the greater DMV area.

If you, you know, we recognize that in our country, the slave trade was technically abolished and yet we still feel the effects of slavery in the pervasive economic injustice that exists that literally divides our city.

In the ongoing reality of racial tension and division that is very core to the culture of D.C. And we like to think we've ended slavery, but in fact, we still have slavery in the form of things like sex trafficking, which happens right here in the district.

You know, there are routes that sex traffickers use that go through Richmond and D.C. and Baltimore. It's a reality right under our noses.

People are still slaves to things like drugs and alcohol. This is the spirit of Babylon in all of this. And then it says in verse 3 of chapter 18, For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.

[14 : 00] The spirit of Babylon is devoted to hedonism and indulgence. The city is a place where you can come and be anonymous. You can do what you want with whomever you want.

There's no accountability. There's no one to answer to. This is the spirit of Babylon. And that trickles down into every other corner of society. Chapter 18, verse 24 says, The spirit of Babylon sheds innocent blood.

In a city that is defined by the spirit of Babylon, innocent blood will be shed. That's what it's saying. I think of Maurice Scott. I don't know if you know about Maurice Scott or read about Maurice Scott.

Fifteen-year-old boy, much loved by his community, his family, his school. He was mentored for years by my dear friend Phil, who used to go to Advent. And just a few weeks ago, he was shot dead outside a convenience store.

Nobody has any idea why. And Babylon sheds the blood of innocence. You know, I think of the fact that D.C. has one of the highest abortion rates in the country, which is indicative of so many systemic problems, but all stemming from the spirit of Babylon.

[15 : 15] Most of these children that are aborted are African-American. And so as we look at all of these issues, I think the thing that we need to see is that they are all symptoms of something deeper.

The spirit of Babylon is rotten at the core. Verse 7 says, of chapter 18, Underneath all of this, the spirit of Babylon glorifies herself.

Chapter 17, verse 5, kind of puts an exclamation mark on that. It depicts Babylon as this prostitute. And the prostitute, the vision of the prostitute, she has her own name written on her forehead.

Which is interesting, because as we've seen in Revelation, symbolically, when somebody has a name written on their forehead, that shows who they belong to, who they worship, who they seek to glorify, what defines them.

And the spirit of Babylon, depicted as this prostitute, has her own name. She lives for no one beyond herself. And this goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 11, when human beings gathered together to build Babel.

[16 : 25] To build this great tower that reaches to the heavens. And here's what it says in verse 4. Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.

This is the core of the spirit of Babylon. It's a spirit that says, I want to glorify myself. I'm accountable to no one other than myself. I want to make a name for myself.

And from this rotten core, flow all of these symptoms. So we ask, why is D.C. not the kind of beautiful, freshwater spring that it could be, with this international crossroads?

Why is it not contributing life and goodness and beauty and health and flourishing into all the rest of the world? Well, the reason is because the city has a rotten heart.

We seek to glorify ourselves. We answer to no one but ourselves. We want to make a name for ourselves. That's why people come to the city. That's why we come. That's why most of us came.

[17 : 27] Was in some way, shape, or form to get the education or the credential or the connections we need to make a name for ourselves. And so all of the power grabbing and backstabbing and bitterness and loneliness and racism and poverty and sexual brokenness and crime and meaninglessness, it's all symptoms of the spirit of Babylon.

So that's the bad news. The good news, the final point is this. God has a plan. God has a plan. Our hope for the city. Some of you have renovated houses.

Some of you are renovating houses right now. In this region over here specifically. And when you renovate a house, especially if it's some houses, and some of you work in real estate and you know this better than I do, some houses, in order to renovate the house, you first have to just gut the entire house.

Because you go in and there's rot and there's mold and there's massive termite damage. And you know that you could slap some wallpaper and new paint on top of that, but eventually it's just all going to crumble because there's a rotten core to the house.

And so you have to gut the whole thing. Right? Or when you go to plant a garden as we did in the previous home we owned and I got really excited about planting a garden and I realized you can't just plant in the soil that's there.

[18 : 44] You've got to till it all up. And when you start to till the soil, there are big rocks and old gnarly dead roots and garbage. You know, I pulled out an old rubber tire and some broken glass and some bricks and some old paint cans.

You know, this is all what comes up when you till the soil in certain parts of Washington, D.C. And some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. You have to get all of that out and then you have to lay down fresh soil, fresh, healthy, nutritious soil, and then you begin to plant in that.

Right? And so in the same way that you have to gut a house, in the same way that you have to tear out all the garbage, God is saying in order to renovate the world, he has to do that kind of thing on a cosmic level.

In other words, God's plan, as we see here in Revelation, is to rip out the spirit of Babylon root and stem and eradicate it so that it is no more.

And in its place, God will plant, God will build a new city, the new Jerusalem, which is what we see when we get to the end of Revelation, which reminds us again and again, the hope of Christians is not to escape this awful place and go to a nice place.

[19 : 52] The hope is that this place will be renovated. It will be restored. The physical world will be renewed. And here's the clarion call from God to his people that you see in chapter 18, verse 4.

It says, Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues. Now that does not mean come out of the city.

Go live in walled-off communities. Now, there's a place for that, and some of you may be called to do that. But if all of the Christians leave the city, there is no hope for the city. And God's heart is for the city.

And so this doesn't literally mean come out of the city. It means come out of the spirit of Babylon. Come out of the way of Babylon. This is showing us, as clearly as anything could, the way of Babylon is a dead-end street.

There is no future for those who live in the way of Babylon. So the invitation, the command, is come out of that. Which means ground your life in something greater than Babylon.

[21 : 04] Ground your life, not in the earthly city, but in the city of God. And as we think about what this means for us, you know, one of the coolest things about D.C., and having been here for over a decade, one of the things that I love about D.C.

is that D.C. draws the best and the brightest. I mean, D.C. draws the most amazing people to it. And as I look at the room, I mean, you all have tremendous gifts, and you have tremendous talents, and you have tremendous resources and connections.

And every year that we do life together as a church, that grows. You get promoted. Your influence expands. You're building resources of all kinds.

And as I look at our congregation, I was thinking about this week. We have people who work in art, and music, and finance, and business, and real estate, and hospitality, and government, and non-profit, and international development, and foreign policy.

You know, we have people who are writers, and people who are thinkers, and people who are teachers, and people who are administrators, and policy advisors, and, you know, masters and doctoral students, and homemakers, and designers, and, you know, you could just go on and on and on.

[22 : 19] It's this embarrassment of riches. And if you take all of these gifts and talents, and if we think of all that God has given us, and if we think that life is about building a name for ourselves, if that's all this is, then this should show us that's a dead-end street.

And the good news is, is that most of us here are still young enough, that if that's the course that you're on, you can correct that course. You can start building a different kind of life. Right?

So the invitation is to come out of Babylon, and to live a life that looks beyond Babylon, to the great city of God. To recognize that Jesus Christ set us free, through the cross, set us free, not just personally, not just to deal with our sin, the bad things that we've done, but he set us free from the things that enslave us, so that we could worship him.

And so that we could rest in a new identity, that enables us to begin to live a different life. To live for God's glory. And then, you know, you can imagine, when that becomes your foundation, you begin to become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Because if you're just trying to make a name for yourself, you're part of the problem. You're part of what's wrong with the city and the world. To be part of the solution means, maybe you're a little less driven by the need to succeed.

[23 : 44] Or maybe you're a little less terrified, or crushed by failure. It means, maybe you're able to accept people that you once excluded. Maybe you're able to try to understand people, that you once rejected.

It means we're able to break free from things, that used to have a hold on us. You know, most of those things are good things. DC is filled with luxury goods. It means using our gifts and talents and resources, to advance God's kingdom, rather than our own empire.

Right? So all I can do here, is give you a kind of low resolution snapshot, of your vocation. The only one that can develop a high resolution view of your vocation, is you.

Because you know your job better than anyone. And so you have to take this low res idea, and develop a high res vision, for your vocation, and what God is calling you to do.

Are there, you know, think about your job. Think about the sphere that you live and work in. Are there prevailing attitudes, or policies, or practices, that reflect a spirit of Babylon?

[24 : 57] What are those? What's the kind of fallen edge of your vocation? And then what is the redemptive edge of your vocation? What would it look like to embrace a life, rooted in the city of God, here and now, in your vocation?

Broken as the field may be. What would it look like to be a citizen of God's city, in your vocation? So, you know, maybe that means, to whatever extent you can influence your workplace culture, that you begin to foster a culture, of openness, and trust, and collaboration, instead of competition, and resentment.

Right? Maybe it means that, you use your influence, and some of you are very influential, maybe instead of just trying to hire friends, you look beyond your immediate peer group, and you try to give an opportunity to somebody, who might otherwise not have that opportunity.

Right? Maybe it means, you just reach out, and mentor somebody. Maybe it's somebody who lives on your street. Maybe it's somebody in this church. Maybe it's somebody who's just starting out in your field.

You know, a lot of people ask me all the time, do you know anybody who could mentor me? And most of the time, I don't. But I often think, you know, but I know a lot of people that you could mentor. Maybe you reach, you know, maybe you reach out, and you say, hey, I'd love to spend some time with you.

[26 : 20] You're just getting started. I'd love to just invest in you, and see where this goes. Right? Maybe you plan a neighborhood cookout, so that people who live on the same block, can start actually getting to know each other.

There's some people who've done that in the city. It's amazing when your neighbors know each other, how it changes the city. So when we talk about securing a long-term home in the city, all of the conversations that we're having about how to get there, all the conversations we're having about potentially moving to a transitional space, and all of the debate around that, I hope we never lose sight of the larger picture, which is the reason that we're here, which is to love the city by living in the city as citizens of the heavenly city.

That's why we're here. It's because we believe that once the rotten core of this city has been torn out, that God's going to build something new and glorious in its place.

And, you know, the difference is profound. In Babylon, everyone plays their own music because everyone wants to be a solo artist. But God's city is a symphony.

Everybody playing in harmony, everybody looking to the same conductor, Jesus Christ. That's our vision for Washington, D.C. So I suppose here's the question for us to think about as we move on in our worship.

[27 : 41] If you came to D.C. to make a name for yourself, would you be willing to stay here to make a name for God? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.