

Falling, Falling, Falling

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Date: 24 February 2013

Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] As we continue making our way through the last book of the Bible, we come to an awful text. An awful text portraying an awful reality of history.

Awful in every sense of the word. Terrifying. Terrible. Inspiring awe. Deeply offensive. Wonder to behold. Causing some in the text itself to cry out, whoa. And causing others in the text to sing, hallelujah.

Over the past weeks, as I have anticipated coming to this text in the revelation of Jesus Christ, I have cringed.

I've cringed at the thought that I'm actually going to stand in the heart of this city. This very sophisticated, world-class city.

[1 : 07] That I'm actually going to stand here and read this text out loud. Those of you who know me well know that I would much rather stand here and read John 3.16.

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. That whoever believes into him should not perish, which is what we do without his son. But have eternal life.

But if I'm going to be faithful to the call to preach the whole counsel of God, as the Apostle Paul said to the elders of Ephesus, I have to press through my cringing and read out loud what I'd rather not read.

I will do so in the confidence that after we've read and after I've preached, we will discover that John 3.16 is more wonderful than we ever thought.

Now, I remind you that in reading the last book of the Bible, we are not reading a newspaper. The awful text is not a newspaper account of particular historical realities.

[2 : 24] Rather, we are reading a drama. A drama which the risen and reigning Jesus put on for the Apostle John in 96 A.D. on the prison island of Patmos.

John had been banished to Patmos because he would not bend to the pressure. Because he would not buy into the inner spirituality of the empire.

In his loyalty to Jesus as Lord, he would not worship Caesar as Lord. The worship of Caesar was the inner spirituality of Rome. It was the glue that held the empire together.

And in refusing to buy into the glue. In refusing to go with the flow of an idolatrous culture. John was therefore an atheist. And he had to be dealt with.

And on that prison island, Jesus reveals to John, through a live drama, what he and we would otherwise not understand.

[3 : 31] Again, we're not reading a newspaper account of particular historical realities. We are reading Jesus' highly dramatized interpretation of the dynamics of history, which we would not otherwise understand.

The message of this awful text can be reduced to two or three propositions. I could summarize the text in two or three bullet points. But then the message would very likely simply wash over us like so much water, and we would go on living the way we were living before we heard the text.

Jesus dramatizes the message so that, A, it sticks, it grabs our imagination, and so that, B, we feel the message.

Now, this awful text is 36 verses long. So I think that it would be best for you to remain seated for the reading today. And you can either simply listen with your ear, or you can follow along with your eye by turning to the text in your own Bibles.

Revelation chapter 17, beginning at verse 1, and going to verse 6, then chapter 18, verse 1, and going through 19, 6.

[5 : 11] I've prepared you as best as I know how. Awful. In every sense of the word.

And one of the seven angels who had the seven bulls came and spoke with me, saying, Come here, and I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.

And he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality.

And upon her head a name was written, a mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth. And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.

And when I saw her, I wondered greatly. Chapter 18, verse 1. After these things, I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with its glory. [6 : 32] And he cried out with a mighty voice saying, Fallen! Fallen! This battle on the great! She's become a dwelling place of demons, and a prison of every unclean spirit, a prison of every unclean and hateful bird.

For the nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her immorality. The kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality.

And I heard another voice from heaven saying, Come out of here, my people, that you may not participate in her sins, and that you may not receive of her plagues.

For her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Pay her back even as she has paid. Give back to her double according to her deeds. In the cup which she has mixed, mixed twice as much for her.

To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously. To the same degree, give her torment and mourning. For she says in her heart, I sit as a queen, and I am not a widow, and will never see mourning.

[7 : 33] For this reason, in one day her plagues will come. Pestilence and mourning and famine. And she'll be burned up with fire. For the Lord God who judges her is strong. And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensually with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, Whoa, whoa, the great city, Babylon, the strong city, for in one hour your judgment has come.

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore. Cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet and every kind of citron wood and every article of ivory and every article made from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble and cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense and wine and olive oil and the fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep and cargoes of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives.

And the fruit you long for has gone from you and all things that were luxurious and splendid have passed away from you and men will no longer find them. The merchants of these things who became rich from her will stand at a distance because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, saying, Whoa, whoa, the great city!

She who is clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste. And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor and as many as make their living by the sea stood at a distance and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What city is like the great city?

And they threw dust on their heads and were crying and weeping and mourning, saying, Whoa, whoa, the great city! In which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth. For one hour she has been laid waste.

[9 : 31] Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her. And the strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence and you will not be found any longer.

The sound of harpsists and musicians and flute players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer. No craftsman of every craft will be found in you any longer. The sound of a mill will not be

heard in you any longer.

The light of the lamp will not shine in you any longer. The voice of the bridegroom and the bride will not be heard in you any longer. For your merchants were the great men of the earth because of all the nations were deceived by your sorcery.

And in her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints and all who have been slain on the earth. After these things, I heard, as it were, a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven saying, Hallelujah, salvation and glory and power belong to our God because his judgments are true and righteous.

For he has judged the great harlot who is corrupting the earth with her immorality and he has avenged the blood of his bond servants on her. And the second time they said, Hallelujah, her smoke rises up forever and ever.

[10:41] And the 24 elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sits on the throne saying, Amen, Hallelujah. And a voice came from the throne saying, Give praise to God, all you his bond servants, you who fear him, the small and the great.

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty pearls of thunder saying, Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns.

Amen. I think you can see why I gave this text the title Falling, Falling, Falling.

Jesus is revealing to John and to the seven churches of Asia Minor and to us that Babylon in all of her incarnations is always falling, falling, falling.

We could also give the text the title So What Else Did You Expect? If the foundation is not solid, what else do you expect about the long-term viability of the building?

[12:04] Let me remind you of the literary context of this awful text. We are in Act 4 of the five-act drama that Jesus puts on for John. Act 4 begins with the verb open, 15-5.

And after these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened. Act 1 began with Jesus as the glorified Son of Man, the great high priest, standing among the seven churches of Asia and dictating his seven messages to the seven cities.

Act 2 begins with the verb open, 4-1. After these things I looked, and behold, a door open in heaven. And goes on to portray Jesus as the Lamb who was slain, who then begins to open the seven seals of the scroll of history, leading to these seven angels who blow seven trumpets.

Act 3 also begins with the verb open. In 11-19. And the temple of God, which is in the heaven, was open, and the Ark of the Covenant appeared. And goes on to describe this cosmic battle between the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, and the woman and the child.

Because the child is born and lifted to the throne, the dragon comes down, down, down. And Act 3 ends with the Lamb and his followers celebrating God's victory over all evil.

[13:28] Act 5 will also begin with the verb open, 19-11. And I saw heaven opened and behold. And I can hardly wait to read and preach that text. But we are in Act 4.

And we're at the end of Act 4, thank God. In Act 4, in chapters 15 and 16, we meet seven angels with seven bulls.

The seven bulls are taking us around the same historical realities that we meet in the seven seals and the seven trumpets. In the seven seals, we see the unfolding of history from the perspective of the church under pressure.

In the seven trumpets, we see the same unfolding of history from the perspective of the world experiencing God's actions in the world as judgment. And in the seven bulls, we see the unfolding of history from the perspective of the heavenly court working out God's just mercy and merciful justice.

And with the seventh bull, judgment ends. 16-17. It is done. John hears. A loud voice say. And then, the vision of the fall of Babylon.

[14:41] Now, in order to understand this awful text, we need to also hear it and see it in light of what comes next. That is, the context for this text is not only what precedes it, but what follows it.

The falling of Babylon in the last book of the Bible is juxtaposed with the coming of the new Jerusalem. The falling of Babylon juxtaposed with the coming of the new Jerusalem.

So, in 17-1, and one of the seven angels who had the seven bulls came and spoke with me saying, come up here and I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters.

Then, in 21-9, one of the seven angels who had the seven bulls came and spoke with me saying, come up here and I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb. Back to 17, verse 3, and he

carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness.

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast and on her forehead was written a mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots. Then, 21-10, he carried me away in the spirit to a great high mountain and he showed me the holy city, the new Jerusalem, the bride, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.

[15:56] Now, in this literary device, what Jesus is doing is he's confronting us with an option. Which city do you want to live in?

Which city do you want to be? Babylon or the new Jerusalem? In the awful text, we hear the phrase the great city seven times.

The great city, the great city, the great city, the great city, the great city, the great city, the great city, seven times. That's a device to say, which city do you want to be?

Do you want to be the great city or do you want to be the holy city? Do you want to be the city which for all of its greatness poisons the world with its poisons?

Or do you want to be the holy city that brings healing to the nations? Which city? The harlot or the bride? Now, when in the awful text John uses this word Babylon, he clearly refers to Rome, to the empire that has exiled him to Patmos.

[17:06] I say clearly because in 179, John speaks of seven heads of the beast who carries Babylon on seven hills. Now, people reading the apocalypse of Jesus Christ in the first century in John's day would have immediately thought Rome because Rome was built on seven hills.

Rome even had an annual festival called the Septimotivan, the seven mountains, the seven hills. And in this awful text, Jesus is telling John what he would have otherwise not deduced.

Rome would fall. Indeed, it was falling. No way! No way! Would the majority of the Roman citizens have said, no way!

As New Testament scholar Paul Barnett has observed, in 96 AD when Jesus gave his apocalypse to John, when he did this unveiling, Rome was at the height of her powers.

Barnett writes, there was no serious threat to her frontiers nor any sign of major uprising from her own subject people. Pirates had been cleared from the sea, robbers from the countryside, elegant cities dotted the shores of the Mediterranean.

[18:24] Romans were even referring to their city as the eternal city. Imagine that. Eternal city. New Yorkers only call their city the greatest city on earth.

Torontonians only call their city the center of the universe. Rome, eternal city, the everlasting city. So people would have laughed at John when they read what he wrote in Revelation 17 and 18.

Although it took a while, the prophetic picture was fulfilled. In 410 A.D., during one week in August of that month, Alaric and his goths entered Rome and laid it waste.

In one week, the eternal empire ended. Why? Because of its foundations.

Rome was not only built on seven hills. Rome was built on a fundamentally faulty vision of reality. Go back in the story.

[19:36] Go way back. Go back before John finds himself on Patmos. Go back before Jesus is born. Go back before Israel is redeemed from Egypt. Go back before God calls Abraham to leave the Ur of the Chaldeans and enter this journey in search for the city of God.

Go back to Genesis 11. To the story of the Tower of Babel. The word Babylon comes from the word Babel.

And the story of Babylon in its many incarnations is the continuation of the story of Babel. In Genesis 11, humanity seeks to build a city.

Having left the living God out of the vision of reality and therefore having no way to unite, humanity seeks to find unity in a grand building project.

They seek to build a great tower that will reach into the heavens. Genesis 11, 4. Let us make a name for ourselves. That's a way of saying let us build a new society by ourselves on our own our way without God.

[20:47] That's the key part. Without God. Let us build society by ourselves. So, Babel and then Babylon in scripture is a code word for human society seeking to build the city without God.

and as the story unfolds from that beginning a number of other city empires are called Babylon. Literal Babylon is called Babylon but so also Nineveh, Tyre, and Sidon.

They are Babylon and so then is Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. All of them having drunk the waters of Babel.

All of them having bought into the inner spirituality of Babel. We will do it our way. We ourselves will build the city of man.

All riding the original trajectory of independence from the living God. And what Jesus shows John and us through his live drama is that Babylon-ness had gotten a hold of Rome.

[22 : 01] And Rome was now Babylon. And like all Babylon's, Rome would also fall. In fact, Rome was falling, falling, falling.

Not that everything in Rome was bad. Not at all. Just as not everything in literal Babylon was bad. Not at all. Like all great cities, Babylon was alive.

It was a vibrant, pulsating city manifesting the full scope of human creativity. The creator has built into us.

The very creativity of the creator which he delights to give to humanity even when humanity ignores him. God loves to pour out his creativity.

And it's a wonder to behold. Babylon of old, for instance, was known for its hanging gardens.

Considered one of the seven wonders of the world. Babylon was also known for its great city walls, measuring anywhere between 23 and 102 meters.

[23 : 08] I mean, engineering feasts. Stunning work of engineering. Babylon of old was the center of learning. There were schools for mathematics and astronomy and philosophy and medicine. What a city to live in.

Whoa. Babylon of old grows to great power, reaching its zenith under Nebuchadnezzar the second, who in 586 leveled Jerusalem.

But for all of Babylon's greatness, it was founded on a faulty vision of reality. And so too Rome. For all of its greatness underneath and permeating throughout was a lie.

And the lie was being spread through the world. In the awful text of Revelation, John, or more accurately Jesus, puts his finger on the sign, the marks of Babylon-ness in the Roman Empire.

And these marks of Babylon-ness are but the natural consequences of building on this faulty foundation. So, for instance, autonomy.

[24 : 19] Autonomy. Auto namas. Self law. The self at the center. I am queen. I will have my way. No one is going to tell me how to live my life.

I'm going to put this together myself. Injustice. Rampant injustice. But of course, you see, if the self is at the center, if that's the basic conviction of a civilization, that the self is at the center, what do you expect but injustice?

Because the self at the center is always going to exploit other selves for the self will need.

Sensuality. The free reign of the passions of the human body.

Sexualizing of commodities. Selling everything through the power of sex. Luxury for luxury's sake.

Wanton extravagance. Ignoring the masses of people.

In some cases, exploiting the masses of people. Mammon. Trusting the power of money. Making an idol out of money. Finding security against the future in amassing as much wealth as possible.

[25 : 25] Violence. Rampant. Choosing to work out conflict through weapons. And amazingly, thinking that weapons can give you security.

Deception. John portrays the beast on which the harlot rides as mimicking Jesus. Intentionally mimicking Jesus. Trusting in have-truths and telling have-truths in order to capture people's minds. And slavery. Did you notice that when I read the text? 18-14? At the end of the list that is reflecting the value system of Babylon-ness.

Gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, fine linen, wood, ivory, spice, oil, cattle, sheep, horses, and then 18-14, slaves in human lives. Literally, bodies in human souls.

By mentioning slaves at the list, at the end of the list of commodities, writes Bruce Metzger, John intends a climax. Metzger says, the essential inhumanity of Rome's exploitation of the empire clearly reveals itself by the constant flow of slaves from the provinces to the city of Rome.

[26 : 38] Did you know that by John's day, 50% of the population of Rome were slaves? And then Metzger adds this. The last three words of the list, and human lives, refers to something even more sinister than regular slave trade.

For along with the slaves who were manual and clerical workers in the houses of the great, there were others whose fate was to fight for their lives and to die for the entertainment of the Roman crowds in the amphitheaters built for that purpose by the seasons.

Falling, falling, falling. For all the greatness of the great city, its faulty foundation was giving birth to the very things that would bring the great city down.

Now, I want you to notice what I think is the key phrase in this text. It's repeated three times. One hour. 1810, the kings of the earth lament, whoa, whoa, the great city, Babylon, the strong city, for in one hour your judgment has come.

1817, the merchants who became rich on the ways of Rome lament, whoa, whoa, the great city, for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste. 1819, the ship masters who carried Rome's cargo across the seas lament, whoa, whoa, whoa, the great city, in one hour she's been laid waste.

[28 : 06] In that key phrase, Jesus was revealing to John the mystery that John and we would have never been able to deduce on our own. Babylon and all of her incarnations collapse suddenly.

In the weeks after my heart attack in August, I was able to finish reading British historian Nigel Ferguson's book, Civilization, the West and the Rest.

Ferguson, Civilization, the West and the Rest. His basic contention is that the West rose to such supremacy because of six great values, what he problematically calls six killer apps.

That the West grew because of these six great values, which he shows the West is now rejecting and the rest are embracing and therefore ascending.

but what particularly grabbed hold of me is Ferguson's insight that empires collapse suddenly. Yes, empires go through a long, slow process of decline, but there comes a time when without notice the collapse takes place suddenly.

[29 : 29] Let me just read to you some of what he says. What if history is not cyclical and slow moving, but arrhythmic, sometimes almost stationary, but also capable of violent acceleration?

What if historical time is less like the slow and predictable changing of the seasons and more like the elastic time of our dreams? Above all, what if collapse is not centuries in the making, but strikes the civilization suddenly like a thief in the night?

He's read the last book. Civilizations of all shapes and sizes exhibit many of the characteristics of complex systems in the natural world, including the tendency to move quite suddenly from stability to instability.

Western civilization in the first incarnation, the Roman Empire, did not decline and fall sedately. It collapsed within a generation, tipped over the edge of chaos by barbarian invaders in the early 5th century.

In 1530, the Incas were the masters of all they surveyed from their lofty Andean cities. Within less than a decade, foreign invaders with horses, gunpower, and lethal diseases had smashed their empire to smithereens.

[30 : 47] The Ming dynasties rule in China also fell apart with extraordinary speed in the middle 17th century. At the time of the Young Turk Movement, which came to power in 1908, the Ottoman empire still seemed capable of being reformed.

By 1922, when the last sultan departed Istanbul aboard a British warship, it was gone. Japan's empire reached its maximum territorial extent in 1942 after Pearl Harbor.

By 1945, it was gone. The sun set on the British empire with comparable suddenness. He's a Brit who's writing this, so it's okay for me to read. The sun set on the British empire with comparable suddenness.

In February 1945, Prime Minister Winston Churchill bestrawed the world stage as one of the big three deciding the fates of nations with U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at Yalta.

No sooner had the war ended when he was swept from office. Within a dozen years, the United Kingdom had conceded independence to Burma, Egypt, Ghana, India, Israel, Jordan, Malay, Pakistan, Salon, and the Sudan.

[31 : 53] The most recent and familiar example of precipitous decline is, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the benefit of hindsight, historians have traced all kinds of rot within the Soviet system back to the Brezhnev era and beyond.

According to one recent account, it was only the high oil prices in the 1970s that averted Armageddon. But this was not apparent at the time. In March 1985, I remember the date, when Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, the CIA wrongly estimated the Soviet economy to be approximately 60% the size of the U.S.

economy. The Soviet nuclear arsenal was genuinely larger than the U.S. stockpile. Governments in what was then the Third World, from Vietnam to Nicaragua, had been tilting in the Soviets' favor for most of the previous 20 years.

Yet, less than five years after Gorbachev took power, less than five years, the Soviet Imperium in Central and Eastern Europe had fallen apart, followed in 1991 by the Soviet Union itself.

This line, if ever an empire fell off a cliff, rather than gently declining, it was the one founded by Lenin. in one hour, three times, in one hour, in one hour, in one hour, the great city fall.

[33 : 25] So, what are we supposed to do? How then should we live? Revelation 18, 4. And I heard another voice from heaven saying, come out of her, my people, that you may not participate in her sins.

Of course, why do you want to stay in that which is falling, falling, falling? But is this not the opposite of what God called his people to do in the old Babylon?

The Jews had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar to the capital of the empire. And through the prophet Jeremiah, God says, Jeremiah 29, 7, seek the peace, the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile.

Pray for the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace you will have peace. Build houses, plant gardens, live in the city, says God. But does this come out of her, my people, not move us then in the opposite direction?

No. Because come out is unto being able to bring peace to the city. Come out is the call to live as aliens, as resident aliens in the city, to live in the city from the values of a different city, to live in Babylon, but to live from the values of the New Jerusalem, to live in the harlot, but to resist her seductions, all the while living for the Lamb, living as the Lamb and waiting for her husband.

[34 : 56] It's as aliens that we become possible sources of peace to the city. Come out so that we are not of the world, as Jesus puts it.

In the city, but not of the world. So this text is calling us to resist Babylon-ness wherever we find it. To resist the pull of autonomy.

It is a lie that has got a hold of our culture. We are not the captains of our own lives. resist injustice wherever you find it.

Resist sensuality. Refuse to buy the products that are sold on the back of sexuality. Just refuse to buy them.

And write to the programs on television that are being advertised by the advertisers who treat us as though we are animals in heat. Tell them we will not watch those programs if you are going to do that.

[35 : 58] Resist luxury for luxury sake. Resist the lie that we need all this stuff to be happy. Resist the power of mammon. Place all of our wealth at the feet of Jesus and let Jesus direct us how to use the money.

And reject violence wherever we find it. For goodness sake, refuse to buy these video games that teach kids how to kill hundreds of humans at one time. They just need to go and resist the inclination in the entertainment industry to glorify violence.

Resist deception. Resist the have truths. Reject all forms of the great lie that is at the heart of Babel and resist all forms of slavery.

National Geographic is telling us that right now 27 million people in the world are slaves. 27 million. That's almost the population of Canada. There are more people who are slaves now than all of those seized from Africa during the four years of slave trade.

And millions of those people are sex slaves. Human trafficking is the great scourge of our time. And you know very well that no civilization can ever stand that will not stand against this human trafficking.

[37 : 25] Google member of parliament Joy Smith. My new hero. Joy Smith is a courageous disciple and she's calling us to wake up and take our stand against this gross inhumanity that is just beneath the surface of the glitter of our great cities.

Well, you no doubt realize that we have now come back to that fundamental question the last book of the Bible keeps posing.

Whom are you going to worship? You're going to worship somebody. We're going to worship somebody. Who will it be? Who will determine our identity and values and lifestyle?

Whom are you going to worship? Whom are you going to worship?