

Revelation 15:5-19:6
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First Baptist Church, Vancouver
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Falling, Falling, Falling
(Series: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ)

As we continue making our way through the last book of the Bible, we come to an awful text. An awful text which portrays an awful reality of history. It is awful in every sense of the word: terrifying, terrible, awe-inspiring, deeply offensive, a wonder to behold. It causes some in the text itself to cry out “Woe!”, and causes 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 at the thought that I would actually stand here and read it out loud, in the heart of this highly sophisticated, world-class city. Those of you who know me well know that I would much rather stand here and read John 3:16: “For 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 God’s Son – “but have eternal life.” But if I am to be faithful to God’s call to preach “the whole council of God” (Acts 20:27), as the apostle Paul puts it, I have to press through my cringing and read out loud what I would very much rather not read. I will do so in the confidence that after reading the awful text, John 3:16 becomes even more wonderful than we had 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. Rather, we are reading a drama; a drama that the risen and reigning Jesus put on for the apostle John in 96 AD on the prison island of Patmos.

John had been banished to Patmos because he would not bend to the pressure and 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, the glue that held the Empire together. In refusing to buy into the glue, to “go with the flow” of an idolatrous culture, he was, from Rome’s perspective, “an atheist”, and had to be sent away. And on that prison island, Jesus revealed to John through a live-drama, what he, and we, would otherwise not understand.

Again, we are not reading a newspaper account of particular historical realities. We are reading Jesus’ highly dramatized interpretation of the dynamics of historical reality we would otherwise not understand.

The message of the awful text can be reduced to two or three propositions, to two or three bullet points. But then the message would very likely simply wash over us like 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 imaginations; and so that (b) we feel the message.

The awful text is 36 verses long. Prepare yourself. Awful in every sense of the word:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, 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 on her forehead 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. When I saw her, I wondered greatly. (Revelation 17:1-6)

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality, and 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."

I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and 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, and give back *to her* double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, mix 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.' For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will 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 sensuously 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, 'Woe, woe, 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 any more— 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 fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep, and *cargoes* of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives. 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, 'Woe, woe, the great city, she who was 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 out, weeping and mourning, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!’ Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her.”

Then a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer. And the sound of harpists and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer; and no craftsman of any craft will be found in you any longer; and the sound of a mill will not be heard in you any longer; and the light of a lamp will not shine in you any longer; and the voice of the bridegroom and bride will not be heard in you any longer; for your merchants were the great men of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your sorcery. And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth.”

After these things I heard something like 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 was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and He has avenged the blood of His bond-servants on her.” And a second time they said, “Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up forever and ever.” And the twenty-four 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 our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great.” Then I heard *something* like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

(Revelation 18:1-19:6)

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 its incarnations is always “falling, falling, falling.” We could also entitle the text, “So What Else Did you Expect?” If the foundation is not solid, what else did you expect about the long-term viability of the building?

Let me remind you of the literary context of this awful text. We are in Act 4 of the 5 act drama that Jesus put on for John. Act 4 (Revelation 15:5-19:10) begins with the verb “open”: “And after these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened...”

Act 1 (Revelation 1:9-3:21) began with Jesus as the glorified Son of Man and great High Priest, standing in the midst of the seven churches of Asia Minor, speaking His seven messages to the seven cities.

Act 2 (Revelation 4:1-11:18) begins with the verb “open”: “After these things I looked, and behold, a door open in heaven ...” and goes on to portray Jesus as the slain Lamb, who then opens the seven seals of the scroll of history, leading to seven angels blowing seven trumpets.

Act 3 (Revelation 11:19-15:4) begins with the word “open”: “And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened, and the ark of the covenant appeared ...” and goes on to describe the cosmic battle between the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, and the woman and her child. Because the Child is born, and lifted up to the throne, the dragon goes down, down, down. Act 3 ends with the Lamb and His people celebrating God’s victory over all evil.

Act 5 (Revelation 19:11-22:6) will also begin with the verb “open”: “And I saw heaven opened, and behold ...” and I can hardly wait to read and preach that text!

We are in Act 4, at the end of the act. In Act 4, in chapters 15 and 16, we met seven angels with seven bowls. We are being taken around the same historical realities portrayed by the seven seals and 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 unfolding of history from the perspective of the world experiencing God’s actions in the world as judgment. In the seven bowls we see the unfolding of history from the perspective of the heavenly court, working out God’s just mercy and merciful justice. With the seventh bowl, judgment ends (16:17). “It is done,” John hears a voice from the throne loudly declare. And then, the vision of the fall of “Babylon.”

Now, in order to understand this awful text, we need to also hear it and see it in light of what comes after it. That is, the context is not only what proceeds the text, but also what follows the text.

The falling of “Babylon” is juxtaposed with the coming of the New Jerusalem. Revelation 17:1: “And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying “Come up here, I shall show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters.” Then in Revelation 21:9: “And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls ... came and spoke with me, saying “Come up here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

Revelation 17:3: “And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast ... upon her forehead was written a mystery, ‘Babylon the great, the mother of harlots ...’” Revelation 21:10: “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem [the bride], coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.”

Jesus is confronting us with two options: Babylon or the New Jerusalem? Which city do you want to be?

In the awful text, we hear the phrase “the great city” seven times. Which city do you want to live in? Which city do you want to be – the great city or the holy city? The city that for all its greatness poisons the world with its poison, or the holy city that brings healing to the nations? Which city? The harlot or the bride?

When in the awful text John uses the word “Babylon,” he is clearly referring to Rome, to the Empire that has exiled him to Patmos. I say clearly because in 17:9, John speaks of seven heads of the beast who carries Babylon on seven hills. People reading the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ in the first century, in John’s day, would immediately think of Rome. Rome at that time was built on seven hills. Rome even had an annual festival called “Septimontivan”, “Seven Mountains” or “Seven Hills.”

And in the awful text, Jesus is telling John what he would not have otherwise deduced: Rome would fall. Indeed, it was falling. “No way,” would have been the response of the majority of citizens. As New

Testament scholar Paul Barnett has observed, in 96 AD, when Jesus gave John His Apocalypse, His unveiling, “Rome was at the height of her powers. There was no serious threat to her frontiers, nor any sign of major uprising from her own subject peoples. Pirates had been cleared from the seas and brigands from the countryside. Elegant cities dotted the shores of the Mediterranean ...” (quoted by John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 213-214).

Romans even referred to the capital city as “the eternal city”. Imagine that – eternal city. New York only calls itself “the greatest city on earth.” Toronto only calls itself the centre of the universe. Rome – the eternal city, the everlasting empire. So people would have laughed at John after hearing what he writes in Revelation 17-18.

Although it took awhile, the prophetic picture was fulfilled. In 410 AD, during one week in August of that year, Alaric and his Goths entered Rome and laid it waste. In one week, the “eternal city” was leveled.

Why? Because of its foundation. Rome was not only built on the seven hills, Rome was built on a fundamentally faulty vision of reality. Go back in the story ... way back. Before John finds himself on the prison island, before Jesus is born, before Israel is redeemed from Egypt, before God calls Abraham to leave his city, the Ur of the Chaldeans, and enter the journey toward the city of God.

Genesis 11 tells the story of the tower of Babel. The word “Babylon” comes from the word “Babel.” The story of “Babylon,” in all its 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 their vision of reality, humanity seeks to find unity in a grand building project. They seek to build a tower that will rise to heaven. Genesis 11:4: “Let us build a name for ourselves.” It means, let us build a new society by ourselves, on our own, our way – without God. That is the key point – without God. Let us build the world ourselves. “Babel,” and then “Babylon” is a code-word for humanity seeking to build the city without God.

As the story then unfolds from that beginning, a number of city-empires are seen as a “Babylon.” Literal Babylon, but also other city-empires: Ninevah, Tyre, Sidon. Each of them “Babylon”. Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome. All having bought into “Babel;” all having bought into the inner spirituality of Babel: “We will do it our way. We ourselves will build the city of man.” All riding that 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 on Rome, and Rome was now “Babylon.” And like all “Babylons,” Rome too would fall ... because it was falling, falling, falling.

Not that everything about Rome was bad – not at all. Just as not everything about the literal Babylon was bad – not at all. Like all great cities, Babylon was alive – a vibrant, pulsating city – manifesting the full scope of human creativity, the creativity the Creator has built into us. The very creativity of the Creator which He delights to freely share with us ... even when we ignore Him!

Babylon of old, for instance, was known for its hanging gardens, which were considered to be one of the seven “Wonders of the World.” Babylon of old was also known for its city walls, measuring anywhere from 23 to 102 meters – a stunning engineering feat. Babylon of old was a centre of learning – it had schools of mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and medicine. What a place to live! Babylon of old rose to great power, reaching its zenith under Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC), who leveled Jerusalem in 586 BC.

But for all of Babylon's greatness, it was founded on a faulty vision of reality. So too Rome. For all its greatness, underneath, and permeating throughout was a lie, a poisonous lie, poisoning the rest of the world.

In the awful text of the Revelation, John, or more accurately, Jesus, puts His finger on some marks of "Babylon"-ness in Rome. These are the natural consequences of building on a faulty foundation.

1. Autonomy. Auto – nomos. Self-law. The self is at the centre. "I sit as Queen" – I am in charge of the world. "I do not need God." "I am the captain of my own ship." "No one is going to tell me how to live." "I can make it on my own."

2. Injustice. But of course! How can there be true justice if the fundamental value is "self"? Self as centre always leads to the exploitation of others for the self's own end.

3. Sensuality. Free reign to the passions of the body. The sexuality of commodities; selling goods by appealing to the sex drive.

4. Luxury for luxury's sake. Wanton extravagance, while ignoring the plight of the masses. In some cases, exploiting the masses.

5. Mammon. Trusting in the power of money. The idolization of economic powers. The quest to amass more and more in order to feel more secure against the uncertainties of the future.

6. Violence. Choosing to resolve conflict with weapons, and thinking that weapons bring security and freedom.

7. Deception. John portrays the beast on which the harlot rides as intentionally mimicking Jesus – twisting the truth in order to gain control over people's minds.

8. And slavery. Did you catch that when we read the awful text? Revelation 18:14 – at the end of a list reflecting the value system of "Babylon"-ness? Gold, silver, precious stones, pearls and fine linen, wood, ivory, spices, oil, cattle, sheep, horses ... and then 18:14 "slaves and human lives." Literally, "bodies and human souls."

"By mentioning slaves at the end of the list of commodities", writes Bruce Metzger, "John intends a climax: 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. By John's time, slavery made up almost half the population of the city" (86).

Then Metzger adds: "The last three words of the list ("and human lives") refer to something even more sinister than regular slave trade. For, along with the slaves who were the 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 Caesars" (86).

Falling, falling, falling. For all the greatness of "the great city," its faulty foundation gave birth to what eventually brings "the great city" down.

Notice a key phrase in the text, which is repeated three times: “One hour.” Revelation 18:10 – the Kings of the earth lament, “Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.” Revelation 18:17 – the merchants who become rich on the unjust ways of Rome, lament, “Woe, woe, the great city ... for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste.” Revelation 18:19 – the shipmasters who carry Rome’s cargo across the seas lament, “Woe, woe, the great city ... in one hour she has been laid waste.”

It is the key phrase of the text because it reveals the mystery John and we could never deduce on our own. “Babylon,” and all her incarnations, falls suddenly. In the weeks after my heart-attack, I finished reading British historian Niall Ferguson’s book *Civilization: The West and the Rest*. His basic contention is that the West rose to such prominence because of six great values, that he (problematically) calls “killer apps” – which the West is now rejecting and the Rest are embracing, and thus are ascending.

But what grabbed me most is Ferguson’s insight that empires collapse suddenly. Yes, empires go through a gradual decline. But there comes a time, when without notice, the collapse takes place suddenly.

“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 a civilization suddenly, like a thief in the night?” (299)

“civilizations of all shapes and sized 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 its 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 fifth 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, gunpowder and lethal diseases had smashed their empire to smithereens. The Ming dynasty's rule in China also fell apart with extraordinary speed in the mid-seventeenth 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 too was no more.

The sun set on the British Empire with comparable suddenness. In February 1945, Prime Minister Winston Churchill bestrode the world stage as one of the ‘Big Three,’ deciding the fates of nations with US president Franklin Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin at Yalta. No sooner had the war ended than he was swept from office. Within a dozen years, the United Kingdom had conceded independence to Burma, Egypt, Ghana, India, Israel, Jordan, Malaya, Pakistan, Ceylon and Sudan. ...

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 of the 1970s that 'averted Armageddon.' But this was not apparent at the time. In March 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, the CIA (wrongly) estimated the Soviet economy to be about 60 per cent the size of the US economy. The Soviet nuclear arsenal was genuinely larger than the US stockpile. And governments in what was then called the Third World, from Vietnam to Nicaragua, had been tilting in the Soviets' favour for most of the previous twenty years. Yet less than five years after Gorbachev took power, the Soviet imperium in Central and Eastern Europe had fallen apart, followed in 1991 by the Soviet Union. If ever an empire fell off a cliff rather than gently declining, it was the one founded by Lenin." (302-303)

"In one hour." Three times. "The great city" ... "in one hour."

So what do we do? How shall we then 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! Who wants to stay in that which is falling, falling, falling?

But is this not the opposite of what God called His people to do when living in old Babylon? The Jews had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and brought to the capital of the Empire. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God says – Jeremiah 29:7 – "Seek the peace [the shalom] of the city where I have sent you into exile; and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its peace you will have peace." Build houses, plant gardens, live in the city. Does not "come out of her My people" move us in the opposite direction?

No. For one thing, where are we going to go? In our world ... where are we going to go from the influence of "Babylon"? But for another, the "come out" is in order that we may seek the peace of the city. "Come out" is the call to live as aliens – resident aliens in the city, living by the values of a different city. In Babylon, living by the values of the New Jerusalem. Living in the harlot, rejecting the harlot's seductions, living for the Bride, living as the Bride (!) waiting for her Husband.

It is as aliens that we become instruments 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 city."

Resisting "Babylon"-ness in all its forms.

- Resisting the pull of autonomy; rejecting it as a lie about our humanity.
- Resisting injustice wherever we find it.
- Resisting sensuality, refusing to buy products that exploit sex to make a sale; letting advertisers know we will not watch programs they support with ads that treat us like animals in heat.
- Resisting luxury for luxury's sake; rejecting the lie that we need all this stuff to be happy.
- Resisting the power of Mammon; laying our money at the feet of Jesus, allowing Him to direct how it is to be spent.
- Resisting violence wherever we find it; not buying video games that celebrate the killing of human beings; refusing to buy into entertainment that glorifies any form of violence.
- Resisting deception; rejecting all half-truths, rejecting all forms of the great lie at the foundation of the Tower of Babel.
- And resisting all forms of slavery. National Geographic is reporting that there are 27 million people being treated as slaves today. 27 million – that is more than all the people "seized from

Africa in four centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.” And millions of those people are sex-slaves. Human trafficking is the great scourge of our time. No civilization can last that does not stand against human trafficking. Google Member of Parliament Joy Smith. She is one very courageous disciple who is calling us to wake up and stand against the gross inhumanity beneath the surface of our great cities.

As you no doubt realize, we are back to the fundamental question that the last book of the Bible poses: “Whom will we worship?” To whom will we give our ultimate allegiance? Who will determine our identity and values and life-style? That which is falling, falling, falling – or that which is truly eternal?