

Holiness In An Ungodly Nation: How to Flee From Babylon, Jeremiah 51:6-10

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | November 13, 2016

“It is of the very nature of God’s promises that they summon us to sanctification, just as if God had inserted an implied conditional.” — John Calvin

And so vibrant local communities are perhaps also the last, best chance for the broader society to learn basic truths of natural law by seeing them enacted in the flesh. Especially for people growing increasingly impervious to the admonitions of rational argument, there is no witness to the truth of family life, for instance, like families that are living that truth. In a sense, when it comes to the human good, seeing is believing. — John Cuddeback

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Proposition: We live in Babylon, and as Christians we must do what we can for our nation but scrupulously refrain from taking part in her sins.

[Image: Sunset on Babylon, by Raphael Lacoste](#)



Manuscript

We finished our three-months-long look at the Lord's Prayer last week, and I am leaving tomorrow to go on vacation. Thus, rather than starting a new section of the Sermon on the Mount, or returning to the topic of hypocritical religion which we have not looked at since August, today will be an election day sermon. All of us have had a few days to recover from the whirlwind of events which led up to Tuesday's voting, and we have some idea of what the future of our nation now holds. But as we confront this future, I want to take forty-five minutes or so this morning and introduce you to a huge theme in Scripture — a theme, a place, a city that comes up almost at the very beginning and looms large near the end too, along with a pretty big starring role right in the middle.

Now, I suppose that if I asked you to name the most prominent city in the Bible, one that comes up in the beginning, middle, and end, you would probably mention Jerusalem. And you're right: Jerusalem is of course the most famous, most prominent, most-mentioned city in the Bible. I saw a history of New York City called *The Island at the Center of World*. Those of us from the rest of the U.S. might not agree that Manhattan is really at the center of the world. But as Christians, we should have no doubt that Jerusalem is at the center of the world, spiritually speaking. Yet did you know that the Bible has another city, Jerusalem's opposite, which is just as loaded with spiritual overtones? It does. That city is Babylon, and this sermon will be about how we as Christians are to live in Babylon. Here's how: we are supposed to seek the welfare of this

city called Babylon, even while distancing ourselves from its ungodly and wicked practices. That's right: we can't reject every aspect of Babylon. Nor can we embrace every aspect of Babylon. God calls us to live within and yet against the world system called Babylon, and the way we do that is by perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Obeying Christ's commands is how we live in the midst of ungodly Babylon.

I. Babylon Is the Ungodly World System, Select.

Now, why do I say that Babylon is so heavily loaded with symbolic freight? Only because the connections are all over Scripture, and impossible to miss.

A. "Babel," Confusion, Is the Name of the Anti-God City, Gen. 11:1-9

Come with me to the beginning of the story of Babylon, as found in Genesis 11. What do we see here? That Babylon represents human pride and achievement. Babylon represents all that ungodly human beings seek to do in opposition to God and His commandments. What was God's answer to Babylon? It was to confuse human languages, and thus to create a "babble" of competing voices, cultures, languages, and thought-forms. Yes, the words are cognate: "Babel" in Hebrew means "Babel" and "Babble" and "Babylon." God is a God of order, but the ungodly city of man is called "Confusion." That is its name.

B. God's Answer to Babel: Calling Abraham out of Babylon, Gen. 11:10-12:4

Yet the story doesn't end there. As soon as Moses finishes telling us about the origin of Babylon, he tells us about the call of Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldeans (=Babylonians) and go west to the Promised Land. That's right: Abraham is originally a Babylonian. Abraham is originally from this mighty culture that represents humanity in opposition to God. Yet God promises the Abraham the same things that the builders of Babel were seeking: a place and a name. They wanted an earthly city that would reach to heaven; Abraham was promised a heavenly city that would ultimately reach to and transform earth. What happens? Well, Abraham's descendants ultimately inherited the promised land, and they set out in a fair way to become a blessing to all the families of the earth. By the way, we are talking about this calling in much greater detail in the evening service as we look at 1 Kings together every week. If this sounds intriguing to you, then I highly encourage you to come back this evening to hear how the Biblical historian describes life in the land of Israel. But regardless, Abraham is God's answer to Babylon, as the very narrative arc in Genesis 11-12 makes clear.

C. Babylon Triumphs: Abraham's Descendants Exiled Back to Babylon, 2 Kings 25

Yet what happens at the end of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles? That's right: Abraham's descendants are taken captive by none other than Babylon. In the Jewish order of the books, 2 Chronicles is the last book in the Bible, as if to say, "God's people are still in Babylon! God's people are still in captivity, still under the rule of the ungodly city of man." Even Ezra and Nehemiah, which follow Chronicles in our Bibles, make it clear that most of God's people were still in Babylon. There was a return, but it was tiny, and Post-Exilic Israel was never what it was before, under David and Solomon.

Well, that's where the Old Testament ends: Abraham was called out of Babylon for the sake of the world, but Abraham's descendants have been carted back to Babylon. Far from blessing anyone, they are really just marking time in Babylon!

II. Babylon as Colonial Power Symbolizing the Ungodly World System, Jer. 51:6-9b

Well, that brings us to our text this morning. Jeremiah the prophet lived during the time when God's people were conquered by Babylon. A huge part of his ministry was prophesying about and living through the Babylonian invasion of his homeland Judah in the early 6th century BC. Here, in the passage before us this morning, Jeremiah takes up a prophecy against Babylon. In fact, he has two huge chapters foretelling the downfall of Babylon. Follow along with me to see how Jeremiah describes this ancient city, located on the Euphrates river, and the capital of a vast empire that overran Judah and burned down God's temple in 586 B.C. Under its famous king, Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon took many of Judah's citizens into exile.

A. Babylon: The Place Where God's People Live, v. 6a

Thus, Jeremiah begins with an exhortation to God's people to leave Babylon — which implies, of course, that they live in Babylon. Historical Babylon was a colonizing power that came to Israel, displaced the people there, and forcibly relocated them elsewhere. Mystical Babylon, or the symbolic Babylon, is this corrupt world system, “the present evil age” as Paul calls it in Galatians 1:4. Just as Jeremiah's countrymen lived Babylon, so we live in the midst of the corrupt world system.

B. Babylon: The Place Which God Will Destroy, vv. 6b, 8a

But secondly, God will not let Babylon endure forever. Of course, as you may know, presently the site of ancient Babylon is vacant. Saddam Hussein spent some money and time trying to rebuild it, but there is no city there — just ruins and modern reconstructions of what the city might have looked like millennia ago. This is in keeping with this very chapter of Jeremiah, of course, where God promises to destroy Babylon and make it a wasteland.

In the same way, we can and should understand that God will destroy the present corrupt world system. The present order of things will not last forever. We will not always have unrighteous nations and kingdoms competing through force and fraud for scarce resources. Someday, a king will reign in righteousness. Someday, God's perfect rule will be on earth as it is in heaven. Before that day comes, the corrupt world system must and will perish.

C. Babylon: The Power Which God Used for Judgment, v. 7

As we heard in our reading from Revelation 18, God used historical Babylon to enrich the world, and to judge those who were not obedient to Him. It was God who sent Babylon to destroy Judah, God who allowed Nebuchadnezzar to do all the evil things he did to God's people. In the same way, God uses the forces of the present corrupt world order to punish and harm those who egregiously break His law. While we cannot draw specific lines between one nation's wicked actions and another nation's wicked attacks on it, we can be sure that the nations of this present world are often very evil, and that when other nations attack and harm them, it is sometimes God's judgment on one wicked nation enacted by another wicked nation. One recent example

might be the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. There, two ungodly powers attacked and harmed each other for 8 long years for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. Both nations suffered, and for little earthly reason. Perhaps we can see there God using one part of the ungodly world system to judge another part.

D. Babylon: The Place God's People Care About, vv. 8b-d

Regardless of whether we can identify modern "Babylon" as an agent of God's judgment, however, we can certainly understand the prophet's command to wail for Babylon. In light of the fact that God will judge our earthly homeland, we should cry out and wail. We should care what happens to this earth, to our towns and cities, to the places that we love and call, where the bones of our ancestors are buried. Do you love Gillette or Sheridan or Wright or Rozet like this? Do you long for your city to flourish? Do you seek its good? You know, the Bible tells us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem in Psalm 122 — and it tells us to pray for the peace of Babylon in Jeremiah 29. On an eschatological level, those two things are mutually exclusive. But here on earth, in time, we must seek the welfare both of the church and of the ungodly world system that so often persecutes and harms our Christian brothers and sisters. We are actually required by God to care about what happens to our city, our county, our state, nation, and continent. You should care about the USA and North America because you live here. Yes, in many ways it's Babylon — part of the corrupt world system and destined for judgment. But in many other ways, it's your homeland, God's good creation, that place that sustains you and the church and everything else that you undertake.

E. Babylon: The Place God's People Want to Heal, v. 9a

And thus, brothers and sisters, we can see that our ancient counterparts, the people of God in exile away from Judah, really wanted to heal Babylon, yet were unable to do so. They sought to evangelize there. They sought to warn the Babylonians not to serve their false gods any more. As Jeremiah commanded them in 10:11, they testified to their neighbors that false gods would perish.

We have the same responsibility to our modern Babylon. We too must testify to the ungodly world system, when and as we have opportunity, that we will not worship their idols and that their idols are false gods which will perish. We must speak against the goddess of sexual liberation, that great idol of the modern West. We must speak against the god of economic prosperity, as if 4% growth were the be-all end-all of human existence. We must speak against the god of tolerance, as if every idea were equally true and acceptable. We must seek to heal our Babylon. We must try to lessen the corruption in the corrupt world system. God won't let us check out or give up on this world.

F. Babylon the Incurable, v. 9b

But ultimately, brothers and sisters, Babylon is incurable. Babylon is not and will not be healed. Not completely. Not totally. Not ever. In fact, Babylon is going to perish. But even as we understand that the world system around us will fall and be destroyed by the power of the Lord God who judges it with strength, that doesn't cancel out our love for the place where God has

planted us. Our relationship with the world, brothers and sisters, will always have this note of tragedy in it because we know that the world was created good but is marred by sin, and that that sinful element will have to be purged away before this world can be what it was created to be. We aren't looking for a city that reaches to and becomes heaven; we are looking for a heavenly city that ultimately reaches down to and transforms earth.

III. Babylon's Fall as a Motive for Holiness, vv. 6, 9c-d, with Rev. 18:4-5

Well, since we live in the corrupt world system known as Babylon, and we love certain aspects of this world, and at the same time recognize that God will judge and destroy all the ungodliness we see, how do we respond? We have to respond by what this passage and a host of others calls "getting out" of Babylon. You have to flee Babylon. You have to leave. Trust me: you don't want to be there when the brimstone starts falling. Forsake her, and go to your own country.

Well, in the case of the historical Babylon, this advice is relatively straightforward. Babylon was a particular city, and you could leave it and go back to another earthly city — say, Jerusalem, or Damascus. But how do we understand this in our day? We know that Babylon is the corrupt world system, and it's not possible to leave the corrupt world system. Even if you go into a monastery, that monastery still has some kind of relationship to the outer world. It will exist on land claimed by some national government or other. If it is its own independent city-state, then (a) it will have other people in it and to some degree partake of the corruption that is in the world, and (b) it will have to have a foreign policy and some way of relating to other nations, which again will implicate it right back into the corrupt world system.

So literally leaving the world is not an option. It's not possible. In a certain sense, even as Christians we *are* the world, and just as Milton's Satan can say, "Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell!" so we can say, "Which way I fly is Babylon; myself am Babylon." How, then, do we understand this repeated exhortation to leave Babylon? That it is something we desperately need to understand is proven by the fact that it is repeated in so many words twice in the OT and twice again in the NT.

And I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities." (Rev 18:4-5 NKJ)

"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. (2Co 6:17 NAS)

God commands His people to come out of Babylon, both in 2 Corinthians and in Revelation as well as in Isaiah and Jeremiah. What does He mean? He means a moral separation from the corrupt world system. He means that we may not and must share in the sins of Babylon.

Everyone around you may be watching evil shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld*. You are not to partake of those ungodly entertainments, no matter how popular they are with your

friends and co-workers. Everyone around you may be coveting, fornicating, breaking the Sabbath, disrespecting their parents, and on and on and on. But as Revelation has it, we must not share in their sins, because to do so means to receive of their plagues. Paul, too, applies Isaiah's exhortation to come out of Babylon by saying that because we have this exhortation, we must cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1). When Paul says not to touch the unclean thing, he is citing Isaiah, who commands those who bear the vessels of the Lord not to touch anything unclean. But of course, we are not just carrying vessels of God; we *are* vessels of God. We are the temple of the Lord. God Himself lives within us!

So how do we flee from Babylon? Not by changing our location, but by changing our moral stance toward the corrupt world system. We flee Babylon by categorically refusing to take part in its sins. Whatever the defining sins of our nation and time are, we must refuse them.

There's no doubt that the dominating sin of our time is the sexual revolution. On TV, in the clothing that we wear, in the things our culture considers normal, we have come a very long way since 1916 or even 1966. Brothers and sisters, one place that Babylon lures us is by sexualizing things. That's why Babylon is portrayed as a scarlet whore in the book of Revelation. The corrupt world system glamorizes sexual immorality, and if we do not stand against this flood of sexual immorality, then we too will receive of her plagues.

Do you think that the sins of our modern Babylon reach up to heaven? Does God have to come down to investigate where we in the USA have gone wrong? I don't think so. Brothers and sisters, take God's statements about Babylon as a motive for holiness! As you value your life, you have to get out of Babylon. You have to refuse to sin the popular sins and do the popular things that are contrary to God's law. If you don't, then in a single hour you, along with your Babylonian overlords, will be destroyed. That's the message of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul, and John.

IV. Babylon's Fall as a Motive for Worship, v. 10

Well, if Babylon's presence is a motive for holiness, then Babylon's fall is a motive for worship. Why does Babylon have to fall? Because it is wicked in itself, and because it persecutes God's people.

A. It Represents the Vindication of God's People, v. 10a

When God destroys the corrupt world system that hurt and killed His people, then it will be clear: we will be vindicated. God will reveal our righteousness — not that we are so good, but that our cause was just and our claims were true. We aren't interested in Babylon falling because we wish ill to our fellow human beings; we want to see the corrupt world system taken down because it makes God look bad. It challenges His authority. It says that He is wrong and that wicked men are right. But when Babylon falls, as fall it will, then it will be crystal clear: Christians were right. God's people were right. God was not in favor of the reprehensible behavior of those who ran and benefitted from the corrupt world system.

B. It Results in Recollecting God's Work in Corporate Worship, v. 10b

But secondly, the destruction of Babylon results in God's people going to Zion — that is, to the place of God's presence in Jerusalem — and declaring the marvelous thing God has done in liberating His people from the present evil age. That actually happened, for instance in Nehemiah 9. But it will happen for more completely on the great day when mystery Babylon falls completely. That's what the song of praise in Rev. 19 is about. That's what many of our songs of praise are about. We will praise God because He has preserved us from the sin of Babylon and saved us from the judgment of Babylon.

So, when you look at our country, do you see it as a beloved object, worth saving and healing, a place that you genuinely love and care for? And do you simultaneously see it as a part of Babylon, the great anti-God world system of confusion which has been the enemy and oppressor of God's people throughout the ages? The truth is that it's both. And it will remain both until that mighty messenger Jesus Christ Himself unleashes His judgment upon it. Until that day, we need to labor for the healing of our Babylon. We also need to diligently separate ourselves from its defilement. Don't take part in the sins of our nation. Don't let yourself be caught up in these wicked actions all around us. And worship God in anticipation of the day of our vindication. Homosexual activists sometimes make the claim that they are on "the right side of history." But the word of God tells us that only those who separate themselves from the wickedness of Babylon and wait for God's vindication are truly on the right side of history. "Therefore, having these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2Co 7:1). Amen.