

“Babylon or the Bride?”

Introduction: In Bridgewater, N.H., where our family spends time in the summer, we find ourselves sitting in between the towns of Bristol and Plymouth. Over the years, I have found that folks are either oriented toward one or the other. You either go to Bristol for your groceries, gas, coffee, and Chinese food, or you go to Plymouth. In Annapolis, MD, where Rama grew up, residents there oriented their life either around Baltimore, or Washington, D.C. And if you live in Essex, and are a fan of Market Basket, you are either inclined toward the one in Rowley, or you have been wooed by the new one in Gloucester. Now, there is nothing immoral about any of these choices and so generally personal preference and convenience rules.

But there’s another choice that citizens of this world must make that is not so neutral. It is the choice between Babylon and the Bride, or the New Jerusalem as she is identified in chapter 21. We’re helped in understanding the book of Revelation by understanding its structure, and what we have in the final 6 chapters (17-22), is a contrast between life in Babylon and life in the New Jerusalem. We’ll take a look at the bride, at the New Jerusalem, more closely next week. Today, we need to make sure we know, as John wanted his first century congregations to know, what Babylon is all about. We need to be aware that she is very seductive, that she symbolizes a way of life that vies for our attention, but that ultimately, she is a counterfeit bride, the “mother of prostitutes” as John identifies her, who will neither last nor satisfy.

So, to whom or what is John referring when he writes “Babylon?” What are her charms? How can we guard against waking up in her arms?

I. The Mother of Prostitutes

A. Babylon actually gets her start in the story of the building of the tower of Babel, from which the word Babylon comes. As recorded in Genesis 11, building that tower was an attempt by the citizens of the world to make a name for themselves. The tower symbolized a society without God, one in which men and women were their own lord. Though there would eventually be a literal nation with the name of Babylon, where Israel would spend time in exile in the 6th c. B.C., throughout the OT numerous cities and nations are also identified as “Babylon,” from Nineveh, to Tyre, and even to the “old” Jerusalem. So does Isaiah allude, as he’s speaking God’s word to the rebellious Israelites (1:21): “See how the faithful city has become a prostitute! She was once full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers!”

B. For John’s readers, Babylon would have been clearly identified with Rome, but in any case, and in any generation, what made Babylon the symbol that she was had to do with her character. She clung to and got her power from, the beast, which we learned last week, is one of the henchmen of the evil dragon, or Satan. Her elaborate clothing and jewelry represent a life of materialism that pursues excessive luxury and trusts in its great wealth. It is a lifestyle that is built on the foundation of immorality and injustice, as it built on the backs of slaves (18:11-13) and as she is “drunk with the blood of God’s holy people” (17:6).. Most dangerous of all, she seeks to lure God’s people into her way of thinking and living. The word “adultery” that is associated with her has a long history of describing the way in which Israel continued to get off track in her relationship with the living God and pursue the idolatry offered by “Babylon.”

C. Thus, Babylon stands for a nation, a city, a way of living that ignores the living God. It is materialistic, self-centered, immoral, and unjust. Importantly, these are not values that belong

to a forgotten age but are well recognized up to the present time. Part of why Jesus gave John this vision was to warn those in the first century against becoming intoxicated by the prosperity that Rome promised to provide for those who oriented their life around her. Some, according to the seven messages to the churches, had already committed such “adultery” (2:14, 20-22).

II. The Mother’s Charms

A. If we’re to guard against waking up in Babylon’s arms, we need to ask: What is so attractive about this prostitute? Why are her charms so alluring? Eugene Peterson has a great way of putting it, noting that adultery with the prostitute is the “commercialization of our great need and deep desire for meaning, love, and salvation. . . It is the diabolical inversion of ‘you are bought with a price’ [referring to the life of the Lamb that has been sacrificed for us, his bride] to ‘I can get it for you wholesale.’” [Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 147).

B. This, interestingly enough, is another way of describing the essence of the manner in which Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness. To paraphrase: “worship me and I’ll give you all of this. Forget the cross, the way of sacrifice; it’s way too hard.” In other words, we’re tempted to believe that satisfaction can be bought, that material goods and a luxurious way of life will satisfy. And on the surface, it seems easy and compelling. The prostitute offers pleasure and convenience, a transaction in which we get what we want when we want it, and how we want it. What could be better? But what we’ll find, John warns, is that she is really a counterfeit bride who cannot offer what will either satisfy or last.

III. Resisting Her Arms

A. Lovingly, John commands his readers to have nothing to do with her. As he puts it in 18:4, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins...” This is actually drawn from the prophet Jeremiah who, in words about the coming destruction of (literal) Babylon says, “Come out of her, my people!” and then somewhat humorously but quite seriously adds, “Run for your lives!” (Jer. 51:45). We need to “run for our lives” because our very soul is at stake. Now, by coming out of Babylon John is not urging his readers to leave their homes and move into the country. He’s talking about the orientation of their lives. He’s talking, as Peter puts it in his first letter, about living for the will of God as opposed to evil human desires (1 Peter. 4:2). He’s talking about living a life that is oriented around, that clings to, Jesus. He’s calling us to flee the materialism and self-centeredness, immorality and injustice that are the hallmarks of Babylon, and live instead lives of self-giving and generosity, morality and justice.

B. How do we get there, to this orientation? First, we need to recognize, as the vision seeks to communicate, that Babylon won’t last; it’s going to blow! It’s going to be judged and destroyed. This is the reason for all of the hallelujahs as chapter 19 opens. It’s not that the sermon series is almost over, but that, even better, evil is finally on its way to its ultimate defeat! Babylon has been brought to her knees, she is no more, and the two beasts and the dragon are about to follow. The point is that it’s a no win situation to throw our lot in with Babylon and the beasts, so don’t even think about it, counsels John, for you’ll go down with them.

C. Of course, the pull of the prostitute is still powerful and so another way to resist her attraction is to recognize that there is something far better that is before us, something far more satisfying and beautiful than the prostitute could ever offer. What awaits us is the marriage supper of the Lamb in which we are to be the bride, the bride of Jesus when he returns! It is to recognize that we are engaged to the Lamb. This means that we have a relationship, not a transaction to look forward to. This means that we are loved by Jesus with the love of a passionate and faithful suitor who will love us in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, and beyond when death does us part. This means that we are secure in this love because we are loved by one who has given his

life for us. This means that we are given beautiful clothing to wear, “fine linen, bright and clean” (19:8) which represent righteous and wonderful deeds, or the new life which he empowers us to live, and through which our relationship with him is affirmed. We don’t want to wake up in the arms of Babylon as something far more beautiful and satisfying awaits us.

D. As we seek to replace Babylon with the New Jerusalem in our affections, there is practice, a discipline, which can be very helpful to us. It centers, surprisingly enough, around the pledge cards you will receive this week. Simply put, the discipline of giving is one we need, not because it helps pay for heat and lights and insurance, but because it helps us to resist the strong pull of materialism and self-centeredness. The act of giving is a tangible reminder that it’s all about God, from whom all things come, not about us. Giving is a tangible surrender to a greater person with a greater agenda than our own. Giving is a tangible action that breaks the strong hold that acquisitiveness can have on us. Paul puts it this way in his first letter to Timothy:

Command those who are rich in this present world [which is all of us in the West] not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain [sounds like he’s talking about Babylon!], but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

In other words, materialism and self-centeredness, immorality and injustice, are no foundation for real life. If you bank in Babylon, one day you’ll find that the market will crash. Instead, Paul calls us to invest in the New Jerusalem by giving generously for the work of God’s everlasting kingdom. Jesus calls it storing up treasure in heaven (Ma. 6:19-21). That investment will last, will always pay dividends, and will bring life.

And do you know what? Even the Wall Street Journal agrees with this kind of investing! In an article in last week’s *Journal*, entitled “Can Money Buy You Happiness?” (11/10/14), research by a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia named Elizabeth Dunn was reported on. Her research was quite extensive, drawing on data from 100 countries, both poor and rich, as diverse as Canada, South Africa, and Uganda. What she discovered was what the writer of the article calls the “paradox of money.” That is, although earning more of it tends to enhance our well-being, we become happier by giving it away than by spending it on ourselves. She says,

The fact that we were able to observe the same effect that we’d seen in Canada in places like South Africa and Uganda was probably the biggest surprise of my career. A lot of us think we’ll give to charity one day, when we’re richer, but actually we see the benefits of giving even among people who are struggling to meet their own basic needs. What moves the needle in terms of happiness is not so much the dollar amount you give, but the perceived impact of your donation. If you can see your money making a difference in other people’s lives, it will make you happy even if the amount you give was quite small.

Jesus, Paul, and John would all agree, and it would not be the biggest surprise of their career! For they know that a life of luxury, a life of material pursuits, a life lived in Babylon may look good on the outside, but it ultimately will not satisfy. What Professor Dunn has discovered is simply the ancient biblical and Godly wisdom that cultivating the habit of generosity, no matter how rich or poor we think we are, will help us to resist that pull of the prostitute that is Babylon. So may the exercise of filling out a pledge card this week help orient you toward the New Jerusalem, and the life that is truly life.