

Revelation 18:9-24  
Ezekiel 27  
Psalm 83

“The Lament Over Babylon”

December 8, 2019

Ezekiel 27 describes the beauty, the power, the wealth of Tyre –  
the great trading city of the ancient world.

The Phoenician empire spanned the Mediterranean –  
as their mariners controlled the seas

(they decided not to try to compete against Babylon and Assyria and Egypt –  
instead, they ruled the seas,  
thereby controlling trade throughout the ancient world).

Not surprisingly, they grew in wealth, beauty, and influence –  
prosperity, pleasure, and power.

In the days of David and Solomon, King Hiram of Tyre had helped them to build the temple.  
Hiram and David had made a covenant.

(Not all foreign alliances in the OT were bad!

Israel was forbidden to make alliances that made them *dependents* –  
but Hiram and David made a covenant as *equals*.)

But for a couple generations, Tyre and Israel were allies.

But after the division of the kingdom of Israel,

Tyre went its own way.

King Ahab married Jezebel – daughter of Ethbaal the king of Tyre.

And as Tyre grew in power and wealth and beauty –

the kings of Tyre forgot about Hiram’s treaty with David!

They became proud.

Understandably so!

The House of David had dwindled into an insignificant tribal kingdom in the hill country.

The House of Omri – the northern Kingdom of Israel – was by far the more powerful.

Although, compared to Babylon or Assyria or Egypt?

Israel was nothing.

For an upstart kingdom banking on commerce,

it was time to trade up in the world!

That cute little temple we helped build in Jerusalem?

that doesn’t really matter!

We have bigger fish to fry!!

If you turn the page over to Ezekiel 28 –

you hear in verses 11-19 a lament over the king of Tyre.

Some people have thought that this is really referring to Satan –

because it talks about the King of Tyre being in Eden – the garden of God.  
But it is referring to how Tyre had been the ‘guardian cherub’ of the temple!  
When Solomon built the temple,  
    Tyre had guarded and protected Israel –  
        they had provided cedar and craftsmen and all sorts of help!  
But now, Tyre had turned away – Tyre had become proud.

“Your heart was proud because of your beauty;  
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.  
I cast you to the ground;  
    I exposed you before kings to feast their eyes on you.  
By the multitude of your iniquities,  
    in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries;  
    so I brought fire out from your midst;  
    it consumed you,  
    and I turned you to ashes on the earth in the sight of all who saw you.” (28:17-18)

And that is what Psalm 83 asks God to do.

    Psalm 83 asks God to do what he has promised in defeating all his and our enemies.

Sing Psalm 83 (TPH)

Read Revelation 18

### **Introduction: The Fall of Babylon (v1-8)**

Last time we focused on how Revelation 18 weaves together the OT pictures of Babylon, Tyre, Sodom – and rebellious Jerusalem! –

    in order to weave a tapestry of Babylon the Great –  
        Mother of Prostitutes and of all the abominations on earth.

Today we hear three laments over Babylon.

    The lament of the kings of the earth (verses 9-10).

    The lament of the merchants of the earth (verses 11-17a).

    And the lament of the shipmasters and seafaring men (verses 17b-19).

Each of these laments is heard in the cry, “Woe, woe!”

    which in Greek is “*ouai, ouai*”!

    and in Hebrew is “*oy, oy*”!

It is less a *word* – and more of a cry of despair!

    Like when you get hit in the gut, you say, “oof” –

        because of the gust of air that bursts out of you!

In the same way, “Woe, woe!” “oy, oy!”

    is more like the ululating that you hear in many cultures –

weeping over the death of a loved one.

There are some in our day who think that *beauty* is the way to lead people to God.  
We just need a more attractive story – a more “winsome” approach –  
and beauty will draw people to Jesus!!

That sounds good – but the problem – as we have seen over the last few weeks –  
is that *beauty* is not a neutral thing.  
To the kings and merchants and seafarers of the earth –  
Babylon is beautiful!

We are tempted to say, “Ah, but *really* Babylon is ugly!!!”  
If only that were true!

We want to think that beauty and truth and goodness all go neatly together!  
And therefore ugliness and falsehood, and evil all go neatly together!

But we forget that *God made all things*.  
And all that he has made is beautiful and true and good.

What about evil?

Evil isn't a *thing*.  
Evil is the absence of a thing.

We're used to talking about this when it comes to truth and lies.  
What happens when people *love a lie*?  
It's is rare to find someone who *loves that which is evil*.  
Usually they love something *true* – but a truth that has been distorted – twisted.

The reason why the lie sounds so good – is because it sounds like truth.  
It is so close to the truth – because there is *some truth* in every lie!  
Our problem is that we lack wisdom.  
Our “truth receptors” are damaged by sin –  
and so we confuse truth with lies.

In the same way, the reason why Babylon looks so attractive is because *she is*.  
Think of Tyre in our OT lesson –  
“your builders made perfect your beauty.”  
God didn't say “they faked it” –  
he says “they perfected it!”

The perversion of beauty is *morally hideous* –  
but the beauty is still *there*.

Does beauty lead to God?

If so, then why did Isaiah say that “he had no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men...” (Isaiah 53:2-3)

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us –  
it was not his *beauty* that attracted people to him!

In the same way that the wisdom of men is foolishness to God –  
even so, beauty is not a reliable path to God.

You cannot reason people to God – neither can you win them by attraction!

It is *God* who saves!

Salvation belongs to the Lord!

And he has told us that faith comes by hearing,  
and hearing through the Word of Christ –  
the message that God has acted in history –  
that God has come in the flesh in the person of his only begotten Son,  
that through the death and resurrection of Jesus,  
he has defeated the powers of sin and death and the devil,  
and that Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father in glory –  
and he is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

And when he comes in glory – when he comes in beauty – when he comes to overthrow Babylon  
the kings and merchants and seafarers of the earth  
will mourn.

Because their eyes have been captivated by Babylon.

Their hearts and their minds are fixed on earthly power, pleasure, and prosperity!

### **1. The Lament of the Kings of the Earth (v9-10)**

#### **a. Power, Prosperity, and Pleasure Personified**

<sup>9</sup> *And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning.* <sup>10</sup> *They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,*

*“Alas! Alas! You great city,  
you mighty city, Babylon!*

*For in a single hour your judgment has come.”*

This echoes Jeremiah 51 and Ezekiel 26-27.

The fall of Babylon has been prefigured many times –  
think of the sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric –  
which caused widespread panic in the Roman world;  
or the stock market crash of 1929 –  
which had a similar effect in the modern world!

Any sudden crisis reminds us of the fact that *judgment day is coming*.

Notice also the *earthly* nature of these kings.

We have seen throughout Revelation that “earth-dweller”  
is contrasted with “heaven-dwellers” (see verse 20 in our own passage).  
If a Christian should become a ruler,  
the great challenge is how to remain faithful to God  
in the midst of the pressures of *earthly* life.

Augustine wrote *The City of God* in the aftermath of the sack of Rome,  
reflecting on the two cities –  
and what it means for a Christian to live in the midst of the earthly city  
while remaining focused on the heavenly city.

What does it mean for us?

As we’ll see more next time,  
for us, it means that we *rejoice* in Babylon’s fall!  
Because Babylon has been trying to destroy us!

When the stock market collapses, do you rejoice?

Remember that Babylon is *not* some foreign power far away!  
Babylon is the political-economic-commercial power that *you* are embedded in!

It was the Roman empire in John’s day –  
and if we were living in China today, I would say that it is the Chinese empire!  
But since we live in America, I will say that it is the American empire!

Because we are being lured away from Jesus by the siren song  
of pleasure, power, and prosperity!

Whether you love music or sports or movies or games –  
all these things are part of Babylon’s stranglehold on human hearts!

And that is the focus of the central section of our passage – the lament of the merchants:

## **2. The Lament of the Merchants (v11-17a)**

### **a. The Economic Power of Babylon – at the Cost of Human Souls (v11-13)**

<sup>11</sup> *And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore,*

The merchants weep and mourn for Babylon because no one buys their cargo anymore.

We might be tempted to gloss over the list –  
but the list shows the luxury and extravagance of Babylon:

<sup>12</sup> *cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of*

*scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, <sup>13</sup> cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.*

Fifteen of these 29 items are found in Ezekiel 27.

The cargo of the Phoenicians has now become the cargo of Rome.

Same story – different names.

Why do we pursue luxury?

Why do we pursue extravagance?!

Because our eyes and our hearts are pursuing *beauty!*

We want it –

or to use Gollum’s twisted phrase,

*‘we wants it, my precious!’*

It is fitting, I suppose, that I am preaching this during Advent –

a season where so many people are fixated on *what I’m going to get for Christmas!*

The giving of gifts is a fine Christmas tradition.

After all, God gave us his only-begotten Son on Christmas!

So it is a worthy custom that we give gifts in remembrance of that greatest of gifts!

But how easily and how quickly Babylon distorts and twists beauty!

Our hearts are lured away from reflecting the Giver and his precious Gift –

and we become fixated on “what am I going to get?!”

And that is why the list in verses 12-13 is organized the way it is.

In Ezekiel 27 slaves were mentioned relatively early in the list.

Here slaves comes at the end – with the livestock! –

but also with a twist...

‘slaves, that is, human souls’

We’ve seen over the last couple of weeks that when our hearts are set

on power, pleasure, and prosperity,

then we are willing to harm others in order to get what we want.

In one sense, this last line in verse 13 is almost a throwaway line –

and yet, the way that it highlights “slaves” – with the pointed reminder –

“that is, *human souls*” –

leaves us thinking about those countless multitudes who have been enslaved

simply for the convenience of those who seek power, pleasure, and prosperity!

I don't want to diminish the horrors of *actual* enslavement at all.  
The experience of slavery throughout history has been awful.  
I catch glimpses of it in my research on R. J. Breckinridge –  
especially in the occasional letter written by a slave to his or her master...

but whenever we pursue our own pleasure, power, or prosperity,  
we are participating in Babylon's slave system.

When I am impoverishing others to gain wealth –  
When I am harming others to pursue pleasure –  
When I am trampling on others to obtain power –  
I am treating human souls as though they were less than animals.

And the result will *always* be the same – in the end:

**b. Longings and Luxuries Lost (v14-17)**

<sup>14</sup> *“The fruit for which your soul longed  
has gone from you,  
and all your delicacies and your splendors  
are lost to you,  
never to be found again!”*

The luxuries you longed for –  
the delicacies you desired –  
the splendors that you sought –  
  
have gone –  
they are lost –  
never to be found again.

Why do we hunger for vanity?  
Why do we long for luxuries that can never satisfy?

Because we were *made* for something better!  
And we feel it.  
We know it.  
We hunger for something *better*.

And Babylon offers you the *best* that creation has to offer!  
Wisdom, truth, beauty, power, pleasure, wealth, prosperity!!

Sounds pretty attractive, doesn't it?!  
You want wealth and prosperity?  
Babylon has got it!

You want wisdom and knowledge?  
    Babylon knows it!  
You want beauty and pleasure?  
    Babylon will give you all that you desire!

If you don't see the attraction of Babylon –  
    then the response of the merchants makes no sense!  
The reason why they *lament* her fall  
    is because they were *in love with her!*  
She *gave them what they wanted!*

But remember what we heard when we first glimpsed the heavenly throne?! (5;12)  
“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,  
    to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

The quest for earthly power and pleasure and prosperity is doomed to fail –  
    because we were made for something *better*.

Babylon is a mockery of the heavenly city.  
    Our Mother is the heavenly Jerusalem!  
    Babylon is just the mother of prostitutes and abominations.

And those who buy into Babylon's façade –  
    and are willing to follow Babylon's path to self-advancement –  
        (again – doing harm to others in order to advance themselves) –  
    they will also share in Babylon's judgment:

*<sup>15</sup> The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her  
torment, weeping and mourning aloud,*

Notice that they fear her torment –  
    because they have been allied with her against God!  
Perhaps they are beginning to see that if the path they have followed leads to destruction,  
    then this will soon be *their fate* as well...

*<sup>16</sup> “Alas, alas, for the great city  
that was clothed in fine linen,  
    in purple and scarlet,  
adorned with gold,  
    with jewels, and with pearls!*

*<sup>17</sup> For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.”*

Fine linen – purple and scarlet – adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls.  
    The clothing of wealth – it is true – but also the clothing of the high priest!

Babylon is a parody of Jerusalem.

We should not be surprised when we see the *church* acting like Babylon!

We should be horrified when the church acts like Babylon!

But we should not be surprised.

Remember that *five out of seven* of the seven churches in Rev 2-3  
were in serious danger of apostasy.

And no wonder!

It is so easy to say – the finest things on earth belong to God,  
therefore the children of God should have them!!

More than one Christian has fallen prey to that approach –  
it is a prosperity gospel that you find among Pentecostals, Roman Catholics,  
and Presbyterians!

Bernard of Clairvaux saw this problem in his day –  
where the grand cathedrals of the 12<sup>th</sup> century  
started to become more and more ornate and luxurious.

He had no problem with building massive cathedrals!

If you are going to build a building to hold a thousand worshipers in the 12<sup>th</sup> century,  
then it will be a very large building indeed!

And architecture communicates something!  
So communicate *well* in your architecture!!

(too much of modern architecture is merely “functional” –  
lacking in beauty and artistry!)

But Bernard saw how much gold and precious stones was being used as ornaments in the church.  
Build beautiful buildings with skilled craftsmen – yes.  
Spend lavishly to fill the church with luxury – NO!!

If you build a church building  
to make the wealthy comfortable and the poor feel out of place –  
then you have failed!

(Indeed, the medieval cathedrals *succeeded* in that way –  
they showed the majesty of God in a way that made *even the rich*  
feel out of place!

The problem came – as Bernard saw so well –  
that when you brought in the luxury items,  
you began to make the wealthy feel at home...

Because in a single hour all this wealth will be laid waste!

The final lament comes from the Shipmasters.

### 3. The Lament of the Shipmasters (v17b-19)

#### a. Prosperity, Power, and Pleasure Laid Waste

*And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off<sup>18</sup> and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning,  
“What city was like the great city?”*

One might think that the merchants have said enough.

Why does John include the Shipmasters – the seafaring men –  
sailors and all whose trade is on the sea?

You could just say, “Because Ezekiel does” –  
and that would be true.

But the point is that we are not just looking at the kings and merchants.

If you just look at the kings and merchants,  
it would be easy to say “Oh, the problem is those fancy rich people!”

But Babylon’s attraction is not just for the rich and famous.  
Babylon seeks to entice *everyone* –  
she wants rich and poor alike to delight in her charms.

Here we have the shipmaster – together with his sailors –  
the CEO together with the assembly line workers –

*<sup>19</sup> And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out,  
“Alas, alas, for the great city  
where all who had ships at sea  
grew rich by her wealth!”*

You might say that this is “supply-side economics.”

Get yourself a ship – start your own business –  
you can make yourself rich!

Notice that each of the three woes

focuses on their own selfish vision:

the kings mourned “the great city, the mighty city” –

focusing on the power of the city;

the merchants (those who were already rich)

bemoaned “the great city that was clothed in fine linen,  
in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold...”

and now the seafarers (who sought to become rich!)

weep for “the great city where all who had ships at sea  
grew rich by her wealth.”

Whatever it is you want from Babylon –  
she can give it to you – for a little while...

But...

*For in a single hour she has been laid waste.*

If you are setting your mind and heart on getting rich –  
if you are devoting yourself to seeking pleasure – power – prosperity –  
then you are setting yourself up for trouble.

And in contrast, we hear in verse 20:

**Conclusion: The End of Babylon (v20-24)**

<sup>20</sup> *Rejoice over her, O heaven,  
and you saints and apostles and prophets,  
for God has given judgment for you against her!*"

This is a restatement of Jeremiah 51:48 –  
but Jeremiah had said "Then the heavens and the earth and all that is in them,  
shall sing for joy over Babylon..."

And John *consistently* uses the term "earth" to refer to those who rebel against God.  
So John replaces "earth" with the whole company of believers –  
"saints and apostles and prophets."

This is the triumph of heaven over earth!

The saints have been praying since chapter 6 –  
"O Lord, holy and true – how long until you avenge our blood on the earth dwellers?!"

I can imagine that there may be someone out there who has about had it with me:  
"Pastor, will you please stop saying that prosperity is bad!!  
What is so bad about a little prosperity?!"

Did I say that prosperity is bad?

No.

I said that *seeking* prosperity is bad!

What is it that you *want*?

What is it that you *seek*?

If you are seeking first the Kingdom of God and *his righteousness* –  
and he happens to provide you with *all these things* along the way –  
well, that's great!!

Prosperity, pleasure, and power are good things.

As we heard just a little while ago –  
these are *good things* that *belong to Jesus!!* – the Lamb –  
who receives wisdom and power and wealth and might  
and glory and honor and blessing!

But those who follow Jesus must repudiate Babylon –  
because Babylon has usurped what belongs to Jesus!  
He made us for himself!

And yet Babylon would tell you that you can have your own little kingdom –  
she will give you all that you desire –  
if only you will pursue *what you want*.

At your baptism you are called to repudiate Babylon –  
Do you reject the world, the flesh, the devil?  
Will you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

Will you *want him* more than you want anything else?

Then watch what happens in verse 21:

<sup>21</sup> *Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea,*

What's going on here?  
This is fun!!  
Watch!!

This is language taken from Ezekiel and Jeremiah – but given a twist!  
Ezekiel 26 describes the fall of Tyre by saying “he will cast your stones...  
into the midst of the sea” and “you will never be found again” (v12, v21).  
In Jeremiah 51, the prophet tells Seraiah (Baruch's brother)  
to take a copy of his prophecy to Babylon,  
and tie it to a stone and throw it in the Euphrates River.  
And in the same manner, Babylon will sink down, and not rise. (v63-64).

So we've got Babylon and Tyre woven together in a picture of destruction  
that reminds us of how Egypt was cast into the depths of the Red Sea like a stone  
(Exodus 15).

But what is a millstone doing here?  
Jesus said something once about a millstone being cast into the sea.

Take a look at Matthew 18.  
The disciples are asking “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”  
They are asking about power.  
(And with power comes pleasure and prosperity).

And Jesus says that we must become like little children –  
and unless you become like little children  
*you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Indeed, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,  
but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble,  
it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck  
and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (18:6)

Perhaps you can see now that Jesus is saying  
that if you cause one of his little ones to stumble – to fall away from him –  
then *you have joined yourself to Babylon* –  
and you will share her fate.

And so the mighty angel declares:

*saying,*  
*“So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence,*  
*and will be found no more;*

And all the sound and sights – all the beauty and glory – of the great City  
will be no more:

<sup>22</sup> *and 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,*  
<sup>23</sup> *and the light of a lamp*  
*will shine in you no more,*  
*and the voice of bridegroom and bride*  
*will be heard in you no more,*  
*for your merchants were the great ones of the earth,*  
*and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.*

Why will none of these things be found in Babylon?  
Because:

<sup>24</sup> *And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints,*  
*and of all who have been slain on earth.”*

We saw last week that the first message of Advent is this:  
Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!

Repent, for the King is coming!

Today we see that the second message of Advent is this:

*We need Jesus!!*

We tend to live our lives surrounded by Babylon –  
influenced by Babylon –  
enticed by Babylon!

We need Jesus.

And that's not just a pious platitude.

We need Jesus –

but we also need to *seek Jesus first* –

and so therefore we need to organize our lives around the quest for Jesus!

What it is that you want?

Do you need Jesus?

Yes!!

But do you *want* Jesus?

Ah – now that *is* the question!

If you want Jesus then you will need to “come out” of Babylon,  
become like a little child,  
and organize your life around *Jesus*.

[with thanks to David Covington, “Can Beauty Lead us to God?”]