

What comes to mind when you hear the word “Empire”? If you are a fan of “**Star Wars**,” the word Empire conjures up something powerful, yet, dark and sinister. It that seems that all Empires—whether human or Galactic—are large, and always looking to expand. Empires have a massive reach; their influence is pervasive. Empires have power—they use power to further their own agenda.

While the Bible was written over a period of 1600 years, it addresses nearly 4000 years of human history. And while much of the Bible tells the story of particular people, these stories are often set against the backdrop of Empires.

Moses’ life was shaped by the Egyptian Empire, Jonah’s life by the Assyrian Empire, Daniel’s by the Babylonian Empire, and Esther’s by the Persian Empire. By the time we get to the New Testament, the Greek Empire has fallen and Rome had risen to take her place.

Was Great Britain was the last true Empire? It was said that the sun never set on the British Empire—so vast was its reach. The Empires of today have less to do with geographic boundaries and more to do with economics. One could argue that Capitalism is the great Empire of our day. But there is one historical reality that can be applied to all human Empires: though they may rise, in time, they will fall—no Empire, no matter how great and powerful, lasts forever.

At the time John wrote *Revelation*, the world as he knew it, lived in the shadow of the Roman Empire. Rome’s empire-building-strategy wasn’t unique, it had been tried and tested throughout history: destabilize or destroy surrounding nations, carry people into exile, bleed the conquered nations of their precious resources, and with newfound wealth, resupply the army, and repeat steps 1 through 4.

In order to maintain power, Empires look to eliminate threats. Christians didn’t come to be seen as a threat because of their numbers, their wealth, or their power; it was the central confession of their faith that undermined Rome’s authority—Jesus is Lord. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn’t. If Jesus is Lord, our first allegiance is to Him—not to the Emperor or to the Empire.

At the time of *Revelation*, Christians were facing persecution, arrest, and martyrdom; the worst was yet to come, and John wanted his churches to be ready.

Last week we looked at Revelation 15-16—the completion of God’s judgement against those who oppose Him. Sometimes, when we think about what is wrong with the world, our focus is too narrow—too personal—we attach the “wrong” to particular names/faces. But “wrong” takes many forms, and sometimes the wrongs committed exist not simply at a personal, human, level, but at the level of systems, organizations, governments, economic structures, etc.

Think about the issue of slavery. In the early 1800’s, William Wilberforce worked to have British parliament abolish slavery, but the wrongs committed went far deeper than the slave traders themselves. There was an entirely corrupt economic structure in place that required slave labour in order to run. Slave traders needed to be stopped, but the more fundamental issues of economic greed and power needed to be addressed, wrong thinking about the dignity of all human people needed to be addressed.

Mother Teresa was once quoted as saying, “When I care for the poor, people call me a saint, but when I ask why they are poor, people call me a Communist.” In the absence of greed, fear, and excessive self-

love, poverty would cease to exist. These things exist in the human heart, but they also manifest themselves in economic systems, structures, and governments.

In our text this morning, Revelation 17-18, we are confronted by John's vision—a vision filled with imagery and symbol that speaks a powerful message about God, His people, and the fate of the Empire. Not only will individuals face judgement, but God will oppose those systems, structures, government that have oppressed people—these too will fall.

Time will not allow me to address many of the details in this text, and so I am going to structure my message around 4 themes that emerge from chapters 17 and 18, beginning with the first:

1. The Woman and her Destiny¹: Revelation 17:1-6 says, “*One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. 2 With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’*”

3 Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand,

filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. 5 The name written on her forehead was a mystery: Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes, and of the abominations of the earth. 6 I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.”

John’s vision centres upon two images—a seven headed beast, and, a luxuriously dressed prostitute. We first meet this beast in Revelation 13—7 heads, 10 horns, 10 crowns; the majority of scholars agree that the beast is a personification of the Roman Empire. If the beast represents the Empire, the adulterous woman represents the Empire’s chief city, namely, Rome itself.

The question is, how is the Roman Empire, and Rome itself, captured by these two symbols—a beast and a harlot? In what way was the Empire like a beast? In what way was Rome like a harlot?

First, let’s look at the beast. *Why seven heads?* It’s well attested to in history that the city of Rome was founded upon seven hills. Both here and in Revelation 13, we’re told that on each of the seven heads, John saw a blasphemous name; these names likely correspond to the blasphemous titles taken by the Roman Emperors. Caesar Nero referred to himself as the “Saviour of the World,” while Caesar Domitian demanded to be addressed as “Lord and God.”²

Why is the **Empire** envisioned **as a beast**? Is it not because those who use power to enslave and destroy, become less and less human,

¹ This sermon is deeply indebted to my friend and mentor, Brian Buhler; he helped me to see these themes and to shape the way I have expressed them.

² Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation*, 245.

and more and more beast-like? When a person, or an Empire, thinks of themselves as being superior to others, it's only a matter of time before they abuse people made in God's image. A short survey of the 20th century provides a long list of beastly leaders: King Leopold of Belgium, Stalin of Russia, Hitler of Germany, Mao of China—their leadership led to the combined death of more than 70 million people.

The expansion of the Roman Empire was literally drenched in blood — historians estimate that millions died in war, millions died as slaves, more than 1 million people were killed in gladiator related games, and more than 100,000 Christians were put to death.³ Those who use power to enslave and destroy, inevitably, become less and less human, and more and more beast-like.

Now let's look at John's second image, **Rome as a harlot**. The harlot was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls. Note that this particular prostitute is the picture of privilege, wealth, and luxury. Most prostitutes in the ancient world—and in our world today—are not familiar with privilege, wealth, or luxury. More often than not, women and children are driven into prostitution by desperate need, or, because they have been the victims of slavery. John is not speaking generally about all prostitutes, he is making a pointed theological statement about Rome, the mother of all prostitutes. Rome has chosen the harlot's path, intent on seducing the nations through a display of power and wealth.

³ <http://necrometrics.com/romestat.htm>

⁴ Genesis 11:4.

Rome's military might made the way for her subsequent economic exploitation. The Empire demanded tribute from the conquered people in the form of money, imported goods, and skilled labour—this flowed back to Rome in a steady stream. Rome's power led to unimagined wealth. You may not like Rome's methods, but Rome was banking on the fact that people wouldn't argue with her results. In that day, just like our own, if you get into bed with the Empire, you can almost guarantee that you will wake up in luxury. Much of Revelation 18 describes the excessive wealth and luxury of Rome; this kind of wealth has a seductive force.

I've been saying so far that the harlot is a symbol for Rome; why then does the name on her forehead read: "*Babylon the Great*"? John is borrowing from Old Testament prophetic literature. When the Empire of Babylon existed, like Rome, it dominated the world stage. Like Rome, the Empire of Babylon was founded upon military conquest; like Rome, it became fabulously wealthy.

The first mention of Babylon in the Bible is Genesis 11; here, it doesn't refer to an Empire but to a city. We're told that people set out to build a city, with a tower reaching to heaven, "*so that we can make a name for ourselves.*"⁴ They were seeking to build a city with humanity planted firmly at the centre. Throughout the Scriptures, "Babylon" is much more than a place, it's a mind-set, a spirit—the desire to live life without God, the unchecked pursuit of pleasure, power and wealth.

Biblically speaking, there have been many Babylons throughout history, and when John looked at Rome he saw her wrapped in Babylon's seductive wardrobe. *I wonder, what would John say if he were to visit our city today? Does Vancouver embody the spirit and values of Babylon?*

One last thing to say about the harlot—*she is drunk but not on wine, she holds a golden cup filled with blood of God's holy people*. This is a clear reference to Rome's persecution of Christians.

What is the destiny of this harlot? Listen to the words of Revelation 18:7; here, the height of Rome's arrogance is on display: *"I sit enthroned as queen. I am not a widow; I will never mourn."* In other words, "I am invincible; untouchable." But Revelation 18:8, 10, 17, and 19 all emphasize how quickly she will fall—one day, one hour, one hour, one hour. When Rome eventually fell to invaders, it took less than a week.

With Holy Spirit insight, John saw that day from a distance and welcomed it. Revelation 18:6-7, *"Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Pour her a double portion from her own cup. Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself."*

2. The Sovereignty of God: There's a second theme that I want to address from Revelation 17 and 18, namely, the sovereignty of God. John's claim that the Rome would fall would have seemed ridiculous. In terms of the scale of Caesar's power and importance, John was a nobody; he was just enough of a threat to be exiled to a desolate

island. But in studying Israel's story, John was familiar with what happened to Empire founded upon idolatry, violence, and excessive wealth—they always crumbled.

Revelation 17:16-17 contains an important truth about the nature of evil. Brian Buhler writes, "Evil will always turn on itself. Evil will always self-destruct. Unlike God, evil never delivers what it promises." Once again, John affirms that God is in control, guiding history in the present—and future—to His appointed end. There is nothing we experience that is unforeseen or unaccounted for by God.

3. The Triumph of the Lamb: The third theme can be seen most clearly in Revelation 17:14, namely, the triumph of the Lamb. Revelation 17 talks about Rome and the vassal kings who have tied their fate to the fate of the Empire; they are the unnamed kings that we read about in verses 10, 12, and 13.

But this is what John writes in verse 14, *"They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."*

Only once in all of Revelation is Jesus described as a Lion⁵, but He is described as a Lamb more than thirty times. Jesus is like a lion in the sense that He is strong and mighty, but He is like a lamb in the way that He has conquered—in His death on the cross, Jesus defeated the power of sin, death, and the devil himself. Many kings and queens have sent people into battle, to die protecting the realm; Jesus—the

⁵ Revelation 5:5.

King of kings, the Lord of lords—died to rescue us and to renew all of creation. There is no one like Jesus.

His triumph is certain; it has already been written—those who follow the Lamb share in His past, present, and future victory. Note what John writes, “*the Lamb will triumph over them...and with Him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”*”

I want to seize, for a moment, upon the word “chosen.” Though you may not think about yourself in this way, I can assure that God does. The word “chosen” is inherently tied to love—our choices reveal who, and what, we love. Listen to the words of Ephesians 1:4-5, “[The Father] *chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world... In love [the Father] predestined [chose] us...in accordance with his pleasure and will*”.

Before God made the world, He loved us and freely chose us; there was no gritting of teeth or twisting of arms. God chose you because you bring Him pleasure, and, because your life is a part of His glorious plan. What a difference it makes when we live by this truth!

Revelation 18:1-4 contains two voices: (a) an angel announcing the fall of Babylon, and (b) the voice of God calling to His people. And What does God say? “*Come out of [Babylon], my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues*”.⁶

What are we to make of this? Haven’t we just read about “the called, chosen, faithful followers”? The Empire knows how to seduce,

promising pleasure, power, and luxury; in the face of persecution and pain, the Empire’s offer is very tempting. In every age, then and now, God calls His people to “come out,” to remain loyal to Him and His call, knowing that Empire’s promises are fleeting at best.

4. The Saints and our Loyalty: I want to conclude this morning with the fourth and final theme—the Saints and our Loyalty.

Gordon Fee refers to the final chapters of Revelation as “a tale of two cities;” the city of Babylon—with all of its seductive charm, and the city of God. For ease of language, I’ve been using the terms “Babylon” and “Rome” interchangeably, referring both to these ancient cities, and to the Empires they represented.

As I said earlier, throughout the Scriptures, “Babylon” refers to more than a city, “Babylon” is a mind-set, a spirit—the desire to live life without God, the unchecked pursuit of pleasure, power, and wealth. Throughout history, many “Babylons” have come and gone; I suspect that if John were to visit our fair city, he would see Vancouver dressed in Babylon’s clothes.

What does God say? “*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins*”. God’s not making a general statement about living in the city vs. living in the country; He’s talking about the loyalty of our heart, and the direction of our pursuits. **Does Vancouver’s vision of the good life drive us, or, does a vision of the heavenly city—with God at it’s centre—shape our thoughts, desires, and pursuits?**

⁶ Revelation 18:4.

Jesus uses an interesting phrase in John 17 to describe our relationship to this world—*in but not of*.⁷ We clearly live in this world, in this city, but since we've been called and chosen, we are citizens of His kingdom, His city. *In but not of*.

What would it look like for us to live *in* Christ, *in* Vancouver? Let me offer three suggestions as I close:

1. It begins with a recognition that ultimate satisfaction cannot be found in this city, or any city. It doesn't matter what the city offers—freedom from restraint, adventure, pleasure, money, relationships—it will never be enough. A city without God at the centre is bankrupt.

But if we live *in* Christ, *in* Vancouver, we can enjoy this city without making it into an idol; true, deep, and lasting satisfaction flows from a deep connection to Jesus.

2. If we want to live *in* Christ, *in* Vancouver, we need to align our thoughts, desires, and behaviour with the city of God. Revelation 17:14 describes the church as those who are called, chosen, and faithful. We can't always choose *where* we live, but we can choose *how* we live and *who* we will serve. *Is your life consecrated to Jesus?*

What is having the greater influence on what you think and desire, is it Jesus (and His Word), or is it this city? Is your thinking on sexuality and gender being driven by the Bible, or, by the city? Are you bowing before Jesus on Sundays, and then chasing what this city offers on Monday through Saturday? What do you prize more, obedience to Jesus, or protecting your personal safety and comfort?

Is our church influencing the city, or is the city influencing our church? If we want to live *in* Christ, *in* Vancouver, we need to radically reorient our lives around Jesus.

3. Though we may belong to the city from above, God has given us a mission to *this* city. Jesus calls us to work, live, and bring blessing to this city.

In John 17:15, Jesus prayed, “[Father]...*My prayer is not that you take [my disciples] out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.*” Why doesn't Jesus just whisk us away to heaven? Because He has a mission for us in Vancouver. Why does He pray for our protection? Because the mission is going to be hard; we'll be opposed for standing with Jesus.

When Jerusalem was destroyed, in 587 BC, at the height of the Babylonian Empire, many Jews were deported to Babylon. They were far from home, discouraged, feeling alone, and unsure of how to go forward. But God sent the following message, through His prophet Jeremiah:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you

⁷ Cf. John 15:19; 17:16.

into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”⁸

We need to remain true to God, and, move towards the world that God loves. Jesus came to save. He was labelled a “*friend of sinners*,” a label He proudly wore. This is where we regularly find Jesus—standing between God and culture, with an arm reaching in both directions. And the Church has always been at her best, when it stands with Jesus and does the same.

The call to come out and be separate is a call to holiness, and, a call to mission—let’s invite the Holy Spirit to fill us, and let’s answer the call.

Pray

Worship

Benediction

⁸ Jeremiah 29:5-7.