

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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"Rome in Babylonian Clothing"
7th in the Series *Between Egypt and Babylon*
Revelation 17:1-6; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:13
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The Bible was written by the marginalized, those on the edges of their society, not those in power.

Sitting by the rivers of Babylon, the prisoners of war, the exiles, started to write down their ancient stories and piece them together into what we now have as the Old Testament.

And about 600-700 years later, the Church, persecuted and scattered on the margins of the Roman Empire, began writing down the stories of Jesus and writing letters to one another... They were writing what we now have as the New Testament.

The Bible was written by the marginalized.

This is one of the major reasons why White American Christians, including many pastors, read the bible wrong. We naturally read it from the perspective of those in power in our culture.

But if we want to read the Bible faithfully, then we have to learn to read it from the perspective of those who wrote it... We have to read it from the perspective of the marginalized.

That's part of what I hope is becoming clear in this series *From Egypt to Babylon*. We've been tracing the story and the experience of what happened in Egypt and the story and the experience of what happened with Babylon shapes the imagination, and the ethics, and the spirituality of the entire bible.

Just a moment ago we heard a few clear echoes of that in 1 Peter and Revelation.

But before we get into that, I want to tell you a personal story.

From the 4th -6th grade, I went to a private Christian school. And I really loved being in that school. Part of being in a Christian school meant that one of our subjects was the bible.

Each week we had to memorize certain bible verses.

And we also studied different portions of the bible as a subject... just like reading and math.

And by the 6th grade, that meant studying the mysterious book of Revelation.

As we did, our teacher began to map out this whole timeline of things that were going to happen in the future that Revelation was prophesying about.

“There is going to be a tribulation,” our teacher explained. “seven years of great suffering.”

And somewhere during this tribulation there would be a rapture, where all the faithful (at least those who had not taken the mark of the beast) would be taken up into heaven with God.

And there were different versions of this story, he explained. There was the pre-tribulation rapture... where the faithful didn’t have to suffer.

and mid-tribulation, and post-tribulation rapture.

It all depends on how you interpreted the symbols in the book of Revelation.

And in addition to the seven years of great suffering, there was going to be a great global war, a war to end all wars... and it’s coming. It’s coming sooner than you might think.

The “great whore Babylon” that we heard about? Well, that’s probably referring to the Soviet Union.

Revelation must be describing a great war that is coming between the U.S. and Russia... the two global powers. It’s going to be a war to end all wars.

And, then there will be a thousand years of peace... where Christ will reign on earth with all the faithful. And that sounds great, right?

But don’t forget. Before that can happen, there will be some real suffering...

and people will start disappearing,
and, boys and girls, being a Christian might mean being
tortured...

**And you can imagine our 11 & 12-year-old eyes got bigger and bigger.
We were both fascinated and terrified all at the same time.**

I mean, this was an epic story, and that was cool.
But, it could happen at any moment. And so you couldn't help but wonder if
you'd come home and your family was all raptured but you were left behind
because somehow you'd gotten the mark of the beast without even knowing it.

Now some of you are thinking, **"I can't believe they taught that to 6th
graders."** And some of you that have been around Christianity for quite a while,
you've been there with me, right?

This whole way of reading Revelation grew with wild popularity in the 70's
and 80's and culminated with the Left Behind books in the 90's. And some of you
read those books, didn't you? It's OK, a lot of people did.

But here's the thing... this interpretation of Revelation... well, it was right in
a small way, but it was also fundamentally misguided. It's why you don't hear
much of that anymore.

You see, what they had right is that the book of Revelation is highly
symbolic. There are dragons and horses and a great beast and horns and swords
and winged creatures.... and all of it is poetically describing some profound
suffering and hopes for Christians.

**But what this interpretation forgets is that this was written in a particular
time and place... with a particular meaning behind all those symbols.**

**Revelation was not a vision of the future, but a subversive, poetic book
that would have been interesting in that time and place that is describing the
sufferings and the hopes of the church on the margins... in the Empire.**

“Babylon” doesn’t stand for the Soviet Union or for China. Babylon was a code word.... in the early church. In the New Testament, Babylon is a subversive nickname the Church gave... for Rome, the empire in which the church lived.

So, to translate that to our time, Babylon is not one global superpower vs another. Babylon is the name for whatever Empire in which the church happens to find ourselves living in...

Babylon is the name of the political and economic and military powers... in which we find ourselves living and stubbornly claiming that Jesus is our Lord, and those powers are not.

You see, that specific claim, that “Jesus is Lord,” got the church into all kinds of persecutions and sufferings in the first few centuries.

It was THAT claim that had dire consequences for people like Carpus and Papyrus.

It happened in the year 165.

Carpus and Papyrus were brought before a Roman Governor, in the town of Pergamum, and charged with the crime of being a Christian. And if convicted, it could mean their lives. They knew that.

But the Romans were relatively tolerant people. They didn’t want to kill Carpus and Papyrus. They just wanted them to be good, supportive citizens of Rome.

So, the governor gave Carpus and Papyrus a simple opportunity to go free. All they had to do was offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods... and they could keep worshipping Jesus.

But Carpus refused, saying, **“I am a Christian. I honor Christ, the son of God, who has come in the latter times to save us and has delivered us from the madness of the Evil One. [I cannot also serve the Roman gods].”**

So, the Governor tried to change his mind by having him tortured. But still, Carpus wouldn’t sacrifice at the altar of Rome. All he would say is **“I am a Christian.”**

Then the governor turned to Papyrus, hoping for a different outcome, but Papyrus wouldn't comply. **"I have served God since my youth,"** he said. **"I have never sacrificed to idols. I am a Christian. You cannot learn anything else from me. There is nothing I can say which is greater or more wonderful than this."**

Well... there was only one thing left for the governor to do. Because... this pesky religious cult called Christianity wasn't playing by the rules of the Empire, and that couldn't go unchecked. So, the governor had Carpus and Papyrus... burned alive.

As the flames began to consume them, all that could be heard was the voice of Carpus yelling out, **"Praise be to thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God."**

This kind of thing happened a lot in the early church, but don't get the wrong idea.

Rome was a relatively tolerant empire when it came to different religions. Remember they went around the ancient world bringing the Pax Romana, the stability and peace of Rome.

And of course, everywhere they went, there were different cultures and different religions. And the Romans were fine with that. They didn't mind people having their own religions.

In fact, the Roman Empire was way more religiously diverse than our culture is. Every new religion was welcomed into the fold of the diverse religious life of the Empire...

It was fine to worship whomever and however you wanted to worship... as long ***as that worship also included sacrifices at the altar of Caesar.*** It shouldn't have been too much to ask: Just a simple act of patriotism and gratitude for the peace and stability that Rome was bringing to the world.

Now here's where this gets fascinating. Here's what they don't teach you in Sunday School. Before any of the gospels were written, with the story of the birth of Jesus and the angels singing "*Peace on Earth, good will to all*", there were some sayings about Caesar Augustus.

Caesar... was called **“Lord and Savior.”**

Caesar Augustus was called **“the Son of God.”**

Because Caesar Augustus has **brought “Peace on Earth.”** All of those were common phrases and common knowledge, before there was ever a thing known as Christianity.

And when you know that, it changes how you read the gospels doesn't it?

Here's what NT Wright says about this:

“Rome had brought peace to the world, bringing them “salvation”, creating a new sense of unity out of previously warring pluralities, [And so,] there was a certain inevitability about Rome itself, and the emperor as its ruler, being seen as divine.

Rome had done —the sort of thing that only gods can do.

Rome had... [created] an extraordinary new world order.

Rome claimed to have brought justice to the world;

[So, the crowning] of the emperor, and also his birthday, were hailed as the gospel of Caesar, the good news of Caesar Augustus...” Yes, the very same word that these Christians were now applying to Jesus....

“The Emperor was the kyrios, [that is, the Lord], the one who claimed the allegiance and loyalty of subjects throughout his wide empire.”¹ Yes, the very same word that these Christians were now using about this criminal that was crucified, named Jesus.

You see, for Rome, the problem with Christianity was that it was not a new religion. There were thousands of new religions all over the Roman Empire. The reason the early church members began to face severe persecution was that they were subverting the claims of Rome over their lives and the world.

They took words that were applied to Caesar, like the good news of Caesar, and Caesar is Lord, and Caesar the Son of God... and were applying them to Jesus. They preached, **“The good news of Jesus, and that Jesus is Lord. And Jesus is the son of God. Jesus was the one to bring peace on earth.”**

¹ <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/paul-and-caesar-a-new-reading-of-romans/>

These were all profoundly political and subversive things to say.

And if that wasn't bad enough, these Christians were **living** in some ways that made their neighbors really uncomfortable.

They were breaking the social norms, **"corrupting the neighborhoods"** it was said about Christians. After all, they were letting women lead men. They were making slaves equal with Roman citizens. **"It's just not natural,"** It was said.

So, one of the great Roman thinkers of the 2nd century, a leader named Celsus, described Christianity as a **"repugnant religion, a religion of women, slaves, beggars, and children."**

The way Christians lived was a major social problem that couldn't be allowed to infest the stability of our families and our households. **"They definitely shouldn't be allowed to marry and have kids,"** Celsus wrote. **"If they won't worship our social and political gods, they should be put to death."**²

You see, religious diversity was tolerated and celebrated throughout the Roman Empire... all long as it honored the **real** religion of Rome: which was **Rome itself**.

I want to read to you how Gerald Sittser describes this, because it gets to the heart of this dynamics at work in the early church... dynamics that we heard in our readings from 1 Peter and Revelation:

"Christians were martyred because they would not bow the knee to Rome,

sacrifice to the emperor as a god

and treat the empire as if it has ultimate authority [over their lives].

Forced to choose between Jesus and Caesar, Christians for the most part chose Jesus, confessing him as Lord.

In nearly every one of the early accounts of martyrdom, this conflict between Christianity and the state surfaces as a major issue.

Christian belief had public consequences;

² Celsus quoted in *1 Peter*, Richard Vinson, Smithy & Helwys Bible Commentary, 187.

**Christian practice challenged Rome's quest for dominance.
Christianity made claims that threatened the empire."**³

Let that sink in for a moment.

Let me repeat that last line, because it's key to this whole series "From Egypt to Babylon To Rome" that we are in:

"Christianity made claims, that threatened the empire."

That's hard to believe, isn't it? The claims of Christianity, (this tiny little religion that was a fraction of 1% of the population) was a threat to the Roman Empire (the greatest global superpower of the day).

But it is certainly how Rome saw things.

Why is that?

Because if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar cannot be.

And If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,

then we might just discover that the Pax Romana is a false peace, because it's a peace for some, at the expense of others, a peace created with the threat of the sword.

whereas the Peace of Christ... is a peace created by working for shalom for all, the well-being of all, the embrace and inclusion of all, especially those on the margins.... and that really messes up the Empire's way of doing things.

And if Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,

then the peace of Christ becomes our allegiance, not the Pax Romana.

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,

then justice based on punishment and retribution

has to be replaced with justice based on restoration: on redemption and reconciliation,

And that flies in the face of the Empire.

³ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 41.

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,
then creation can no longer be exploited as an economic commodity,
because *“in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created”* (as it says in Colossians). So, if Jesus is Lord then we might start to rediscover our sacred kinship with creation. And that’s going to really mess up some of Caesar’s economic agendas.

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,
then it won’t only be Roman citizens that have rights throughout the Empire, as it was in the first century.
Instead, all people will be protected and honored
and seen as equally and inherently valuable.

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,
then the traditional Roman family, the household, will start to break down
because Jesus never told women to “go home!” Sorry, John McArthur!

If Jesus is Lord,
Women cannot be disregarded... dismissed and used,
but instead, women will be recognized with equal dignity and equal power and equal calling... as men...
Because as Paul says in Galatians **“in Christ, there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female.** Gender identity doesn’t matter. What matters is that we **“all are one in Christ Jesus.”**
And that kind of talk is going to really upset the traditional Roman household.

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not,
then the economics upon which the Empire is built
and the sword upon which the Empire is built
and the stories of power upon which the Empire is built...
no longer claim our allegiances,
no longer inhibit our imaginations of what can be ...in this world,

and no longer allow us to ignore the marginalized in our community.

Because Jesus lived and taught and embodied a different way of being, with allegiance to a different kind of Kingdom,

a kingdom where a brokenhearted father chases after his prodigal son,
a kingdom where a woman bent over from years of shame is invited to stand tall again,

a kingdom where those who showed up to work at the last hour of the day, got the same full day's wages as the rest,
a kingdom where we stop worrying about what we'll eat or drink or wear, but learn to trust God for our daily bread,

a kingdom where the Samaritans will be found to be loving their neighbors better than the religious leaders,
a kingdom where prostitutes and tax collectors will enter first because they know more about grace than the well-kept CEOs and successful pastors do.

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, then we've been sold a bill of goods. The rules of the road are entirely different than what we've been led to believe. And we're going to have to turn around, do a 180, a *metanoia*, a repenting, as Jesus puts it, a changing of our minds.

And when that happens, Caesar's grip on our way of thinking,
and our way of living starts to come unraveled!

You see, the claims of Christianity are a threat to the Empire. Which meant that unlike all the other religions in the Empire... Christianity couldn't go unchecked.

Rome began to recognize it. So, Christians were burned.
and some were crucified.
and some were thrown into the Colosseum to be torn apart by animals.

... all because they believed deep in their bones that Jesus is Lord, Lord of heaven and earth. Lord of today and tomorrow. Lord over our private life and our public lives. Jesus is lord over it all. ...not Caesar.

The letter of 1 Peter that we heard earlier, is a letter written to a small church, trying to be faithful to that claim. And they are suffering some profound persecution in the Roman Empire.

But Peter tells them they shouldn't be surprised that there is some suffering when you're living faithfully to Jesus. Because Jesus' way is an upside - down way of living. It rubs people the wrong way.

And it threatens the status quo... and it will feel threatening for the people in power who benefit from the status quo. **"That's why they crucified him, remember?"**

"So, hang on," Peter writes to them. **"I know it's hard to be faithful, but your suffering is as beautiful as Jesus' suffering, because you're living as a light to the world around you, showing them a different way."**

"You're a holy people, a royal priesthood." Peter writes. **"Hang on, because there is something beautiful and healing taking place in your suffering."**

And then he closes out the letter by reminding them they aren't alone. **"Your sister church in Babylon sends you greetings."** They knew what he meant. They knew it was a reference to Rome.

The same kind of imagery is there in Revelation... a letter written to a bunch of little Christian communities scattered in the Roman Empire.

And so, by the time we get to Chapters 17, 18, and 19, you start to hear about this whore, riding on the beast... a whore clothed in wealth, drunk with power, and on her forehead is written "Babylon the Great." It's another reference to Rome and to Caesar.

And yes, Revelation is full of images of suffering and hope... because that's what the church was living through... ***Because claiming Jesus is Lord creates***

cosmic conflicts between the power of God and the power of this world. It creates a conflict between you and the Empire.

Perpetua and Felicity knew it well. They were two brave young women who believed deep in their bones that Jesus is Lord... and they paid an ultimate cost for it. They are pictured in your worship Guide.

But since I told their story a few years ago, today I want to tell you about Polycarp.

Polycarp was a well- respected Christian leader in Smyrna. After a mob in the town got worked up and killed several other Christians, they wanted to go after their leader. Town officials finally hunted Polycarp down and drug him into the arena where a huge crowd began to call for Polycarp’s death.

The local governor pressured Polycarp to deny Christ and swear to Caesar, but Polycarp wouldn’t do it. *“For eighty-six years I have been a servant of Christ, and He has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme **my King**? “*

You can imagine how that kind of language, kingship language, infuriated the Roman governor. “Swear by Caesar’s fortune!” the governor shouted.

“If you imagine that I will swear by Caesar’s fortune, as you put it, pretending not to know who I am, I will tell you plainly, I am a Christian.”

The governor threatened even more. “I have wild beasts. I’m going to throw you to them, if you don’t change your attitude.”

“Call them.”

“If you make light of the beasts, I’ll have you destroyed by fire.”

“The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished: there is a fire you know nothing about—the fire of the judgement to come.”

The governor turned to the crowd and announced: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian. This fellow is a teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, and our way of life!"

The crowd was enraged. They roared for his death. They bound Polycarp to a stake, stacked wood around him and set it on fire.

Claiming Jesus is Lord, has always meant that other powers in our world are not.

Now, I'm not telling you these stories because I think you will be burned at the stake. The real question for us is not, will we **die** like these early Christians.

The real question is, will we **live** like these early Christians?

Will we live... as if Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not?

To be a Christian... is to embrace the way and the life and the radical love of Jesus... even when it flies in the face of all the other things that pull on our desires.

**even when it costs us power and control
even when it costs us the esteem of our friends and neighbors and
we're lonely because we're making some strange decisions,
and even when it costs us our safety and security.**

That's what Polycarp, and Perpetua and Felicity did.

It's what Carpus and Papyrus did.

That's what it means to be a Christian.

You see, whether we're living in Rome or Babylon or Egypt... we all will face moments, again and again in our lives, where we ***will have to choose between Christ and something else that vies for our ultimate allegiance.***⁴ We're always choosing.

We will have to choose again and again between Christ,
and the other powers,

⁴ Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well*, 47-48.

between Jesus and Caesar,
between the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of Babylon,
Between an imagination shaped by the voice of Jesus,
and an imagination shaped by the voice of Pharaoh.

That's where this whole series takes us... it's how the whole bible comes together.

And so, to bring this series to a close, I want to invite you to put the pieces together:

Egypt and Babylon and Rome
Slavery and Sin, Salvation, Liberation of the oppressed, and Freedom. They all go together.

Crossing the Red Sea into the wilderness journey,
Crossing Over Jordan into the promised land,
Crossing death... into Resurrection and New Life,
The Waters of Baptism. They all go together.

God hearing the cries of the oppressed. Five women subverting Pharaoh.
The marginalized church subverting Caesar. Seek the Shalom of Babylon, the Shalom of your neighbors, not the control of your neighbors. They all go together.

Pharaoh, son of Ra. Caesar, Son of God. Jesus, Lord and Savior, the True Son of God, the one who brings peace on earth. They all go together.

**You cannot serve two masters:
God and Money, Yahweh and Baal, Jesus and Caesar.
Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give to God what is God's.**

Are you hearing how it all comes together?

If so, then choose this day who you will serve.

Who or what powers will be Lord of your life?

Because if you're not actively choosing, it will be chosen for you.

So choose. And tomorrow when you get up, choose again.
And keep choosing.

As for me, well... by God's grace and mercy... as best I can, even when it doesn't make sense, I'm throwing my lot in with Jesus.

Amen.

Reflection

***"The early Christians died because they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. His lordship challenged all other ultimate claims on their lives—wealth, status, power and Rome itself."*⁵ pg 28**

⁵ Sittser, 28.