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**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD:  
*THE LOST CITY*  
*Revelation 17:1-19:3***

Of all the sites I have seen in my travels, none are as spectacular and mysterious as the city of Petra in modern day Jordan. For centuries, this was the capital city of the Nabataen Kingdom. You must walk through a long and narrow canyon to reach the city. Walls of stone rise up on either side of you, stone that reflects a rainbow of colors. Huge, intricate and impressive structures have been carved out of that stone: A treasury, an amphitheatre, temples, tombs and houses. Only a tenth of this huge city has been uncovered. But most remarkable is: It was absolutely lost to most of the world for centuries and centuries. Only within the last 150 years did someone from the outside world have the opportunity to cast their eyes upon what had been one of the great kingdoms of its time. It was, literally, a lost city.

The history of humankind is littered with “lost cities,” great civilizations that rose and fell. In some cases, all that remains is a hollow shell of its one-time greatness. Is Saddam Hussein’s Iraq really the heir of the once-great Babylonian Empire? Is modern day Cairo really the heir to the once-mighty Egyptian Empire? Where are the Medes? The Persians? The Assyrians? Where is Alexander the Great’s empire?

This morning John gives us a glimpse of another lost city: Babylon. The tragedy is, it doesn’t realize it is lost. The greater tragedy is, we are living in a Babylon of our own and may not even be aware of it. Again, this is a long reading. I invite you to close your eyes and listen.

This morning’s reading is divided into parts. The first is an incredible vision in a book full of incredible visions. The seventh angel invites us to turn our eyes upon a woman. The angel calls her the “Great Prostitute”. She is dressed in the finest clothing the world has to offer: precious purples and scarlets. She is covered with gold; jewels and pearls drip from her. She holds in her hand a golden cup filled with a horrible brew that has apparently

intoxicated the kings of the earth into an adulterous affair with her. And like others we have seen before, she, too, has a title written upon her forehead: “MYSTERY BABYON THE GREAT; THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”

What makes this vision even more remarkable is that the Great Prostitute is seated, not on a throne, but on a beast...a beast, in fact, that we have already met back in chapter 13: the Sea Beast. Remember, this beast represents idolatrous political institutions. We see him in all of his horrid glory: seven heads, ten horns, bright scarlet in color.

What a garish picture! This painted-up; decked out, drugged up, jewel laden whore straddling a hideous monster. We are shocked. So is John, in fact. It says he is astonished. But the angel proceeds to interpret this vision to him. Let’s see if we can make sense of this.

Babylon: There actually was a great kingdom called Babylon mentioned in the Old Testament. The word comes from “Babel,” the name of the great tower that was built in Genesis 11. The people decided they didn’t need God any more. They wanted to be somebody. They wanted to make a name for themselves. So, they decided to build this great tower. But throughout scripture, Babylon is the code word which means a great society that has turned its back on God and made itself its own god.

Seven heads: The angel says that the seven heads are actually seven hills. Any first century reader would have immediately recognized what this represented. What ancient city was built upon seven hills? Rome! In fact, every year, the Roman citizens celebrated a festival called Septimontivan...the Seven Mountains.

But the seven heads also represent seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come. And the beast himself is an eighth king. Commentators have labored endlessly and creatively to identify the seven heads as seven Roman emperors. Some have tried by starting with Julius Caesar and eliminating the less important emperors. Others tried starting with Augustus. Still others started with Caligula, the first Emperor to come to power after Jesus returned to heaven. The problem is,

no matter how you fiddle with the numbers, they just don’t work out.

But remember, numbers are symbols for John.

Ten horns. The angel says that the ten horns are kings who will receive authority from the beast and serve him. They will exist to fight the Lamb. But they will fail. Many saw the ten kings as representing a reconstructed Roman Empire. In fact, twenty years ago when the European Common Market was about to accept its tenth member, speculation abounded that this, finally, was the fulfillment of this portion of Revelation and that the return of Christ was imminent.

Remember...numbers are symbols for John.

Let me tell you what I think this means. Babylon represents the great societies down through history that have turned their backs on God and pursued evil. The seven kings ...the ten kingdoms...once again, those are numbers that represent completeness and power. Over and over again down through history, great kingdoms have arrayed themselves against God. One day, one final great world power will arise that serves the cause of the Beast in trying to destroy the Lamb and the Lamb’s people. And it will fail. It will fall.

In fact, that is what comprises the balance of the reading. It is really a funeral dirge. A lament of the fall of this great society that considered itself impregnable. Onlookers are amazed at the speed with which Babylon is destroyed. The kings of the world...the merchants...the sailors are terrified, all stand far off, all cry out, “Woe, woe, woe” against this city that thought itself so great and, in the end, fell so violently.

As I said earlier, there have been many “Babylons” down through the ages. Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome and Nazi Germany. The thing about being a Babylon, though, is that you usually never realize that is what you are. People who live in the Lost City often don’t know that they are lost. I believe it is a fair and prudent thing to ask this question: Now that we, the United States of America, are the only remaining Super Power in the world, what is to keep us from becoming the next vehicle by which this evil influence will demonstrate its wretched power in the world? I believe the text reveals certain signs, certain

indicators to help us spot a Babylon in the making. Let's look at them.

**Materialistic.** One of the marks of Babylon is rampant materialism. We saw it in the way the prostitute was dressed and adorned. The best of everything. Clothed in finery, dripping with jewels. We heard it in the cry of the angel who speaks of her excessive riches. We saw it in the list of luxury items which the merchants would not be able to sell anymore because Babylon had fallen: gold, silver, jewels, linen, purple, scarlet, ivory, marble, cinnamon, incense, myrrh and so on.

At one of Nero's banquets he spent nearly \$100,000 on Egyptian roses. Another emperor, Vitellius, enjoyed the delicacies of peacocks' brains and nightingales' tongues. In his reign of less than one year, he spent \$20,000,000, mostly on food.

One of the signs that we are dwelling in Babylon is an absolute obsession with material belongings. And here, I'm sure all of you will agree, my Gig Harbor brothers and sisters, the knife cuts pretty close to the bone, doesn't it? For we are the consumers of the world. And I don't just mean we Americans. Is it not here, my Gig Harbor brothers and sisters, where we start to find ourselves fidgeting the most? Are we not the minority of this world that can afford to lavish upon itself ever-larger homes, ever more extravagant automobiles, ever more elegant boats? Will there ever reach a point where we start to feel ashamed of the way in which we consume, all the while turning a deaf ear to the cries of a world where thousands of children die daily of preventable disease and malnutrition?

Babylon is materialistic. It is also **idolatrous**. In 18:7, the Great Whore boasts, "I sit as queen." That is, she sets herself up as God. She seeks to displace the power of the one true God with her own power.

Idolatry is closely aligned with materialism. But it is something more and different. Idolatry is misplaced worship. It is hard for me to conceive of a better example in our own culture than our obsession with sports. I enjoy sports. I love to play. But if I ever saw the same level of devotion and passion exhibited toward Jesus and the work of the Church here on this earth that I see directed towards football and baseball and professional wrestling, I think I would faint. People who would never utter a peep in church, who

would consider it untoward to raise hands or shout "Amen" in praise to God, will jump up and down and scream like banshees for their favorite ball team.

There is something sick and crazy about blowing up a perfectly good-albeit ugly-building on which we still owe over \$120,000,000, in order to build yet another temple to our sports gods. We seem to be making a habit of it in this state. And now, our beloved Rainiers are threatening to leave us behind if we in Tacoma don't do the same thing for them. Can any discerning Christian person honestly deny that our modern obsession with sports is nearly as idolatrous as the temple worship against which John railed?

But we have other idols in this country. Our judicial system, for instance. I have watched with interest the unfolding debate about same-sex marriages in Vermont and New Hampshire. Disregarding thousands of years of tradition and religious teaching, these states are in the process of throwing out the traditional family as the building block of our society in favor of a social experiment, the consequences of which they haven't a clue. But even on conservative talk shows, appeal to anything like religious law or tradition is dismissed as irrelevant in this social discourse. Is it not idolatrous when our judiciary dares to make itself God?

Babylon is also **dehumanizing**. Did you notice, in that long list of material goods, the very last item on the list? "The bodies and souls of men." Slavery is pernicious enough. But Babylon had become so inured to the inhumanity of it that they viewed the slaves as just one more entry on a cargo manifest, and the last item to boot!

We may pride ourselves on having moved beyond the ignorance and evil of slavery in our own country. But we still readily consume goods that are produced by slaves in other countries, adult and children alike. And is not our insatiable appetite for pornography dehumanizing? Pornography is the biggest money maker on the internet. The web has made it possible for us to utterly degrade ourselves in the privacy of our own home.

In the last thirty years, our process of dehumanization has taken on an even more horrible face, if that be possible. We now legally kill those inconvenient members on the extreme ends of

our age range. We abort babies by the millions yearly and we are euthanizing an ever-increasing number of our elderly. We can't even pass a federal law against partial birth abortion, which is nothing more than a sanitized word for infanticide. Do we really believe that these margins of death that we have established will not begin to creep inexorably closer to the middle?

Babylon is something else. It is **cannibalistic**. Did you notice what happened to the Great Prostitute at the end of chapter 17? It is a horrible fate. In the end, she is turned on by the very beast she rode and the kings she lead. They bring her to ruin. They strip her naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. It is a horrible scene. Even in chapter 18, we are reminded of how treacherous the wicked really are. The kings, the merchants and sailors who made their living in their adulterous ties to the Great Whore, now weep. But they don't weep for her. They weep over what they have lost. And where do they do their mourning? Every one of them is described in the same way: they "stand far off."

Babylon is **cannibalistic**. Evil is cannibalistic. It turns co-conspirators into traitors. It turns on itself. It destroys itself. One of the ways that divers deal with aggressive sharks is to gut-shoot one shark with an underwater shotgun blast. Immediately, the other sharks will turn upon and savage the wounded shark. More bizarre still, the wounded shark sometimes will eat its own trailing intestines.

Great societies are not conquered from without. They are conquered from within. They die of rot. When Alaric and his buddies, the Goths, came calling on Rome in August of 410, A.D., do you know how long it took for them to overthrow and pillage that once great city? One week! One lousy week. Why? Because this once great society had become so rotten, so self-destructive, that it was all but done for. It just needed a little push.

I believe there are clear signs that we are living in Babylon. Sometimes things seem hopeful. Other times, things seem desperate. But this is where we are. The Lamb's lambs. Here is where we live. So what shall we do about these things? If this is true, what are we to do?

John offers two suggestions: Come out. In recent years we have heard a lot about “coming out.” Did you realize that this has Biblical roots? In 18:4, a voice pleads from heaven: “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven.” For two thousand years, one element of our Christian tradition has taken that call literally. The monastic movement has sought to retreat from society into a holy community.

But that is not possible or even desirable for most of us. We can’t run away from our society. We shouldn’t. But we can certainly “come out” of much of the behavior of Babylon. We can come out of our excessive spending habits and lust for more and more things. We can come out of our obsession with sports or other activities that is entirely out of balance with the rest of our life. We can come out of our political apathy and become involved in movements that seek to bring change. We can come out of our addiction to pornography; out of that adulterous affair; out of that alcoholism and drug addiction. We can come out of our protected community and build a Habitat house in Tacoma or dig a ditch in Guatemala. If enough of God’s saints choose to come out of Babylon’s seediest neighborhoods, Babylon begins to change.

We can come out. And we can shout. We can shout the truth just as the heavens did in chapter 19. In the face of a society that says God has no place in our decision-making, we can shout the truths of God. In the face of a society that leads us towards death and destruction, we can shout salvation. In the face of a society that leads us to hopelessness, we can shout, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, and only to him.”

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### THE LOST CITY

#### *Revelation 17 and 18*

*Pastor Mark Toone*  
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- *Have someone, or take turns, reading through the entire text. Listen for sections. What are the natural breaks in the passage? What are the key points as you hear them?*
- *Who or what is the Great Whore of Babylon? Describe her appearance. Her steed. Take a peek at Revelation 21:2 & 9. How is the Whore a counterfeit of what we find here?*
- *Pastor Mark suggests that Babylon is representative of all the societies who have turned against God, culminating in the final great opposing society. What are some of the features of that society as they appear in the text? In what ways is our own country at risk of becoming Babylon?*
- *What are we to do about it? What does 18:4 mean to us? Pastor Mark suggested that we “come out” and “shout.” What do we shout about? (Chapter 19)*

*It is only by a mighty work of God’s Spirit that we will turn that which it Babylon-like around in our own country. Please pray that God will do so in your prayer time.*