

When Death Feels Like Victory

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[0 : 00] So if anything is true of me, it is that I am very much the product of my parents. My mother has been walking with the Lord passionately ever since I can remember.

! On Sunday morning, she would fill our kitchen with gospel music. We would sing together as we made corned beef hash out of a can and eggs, scrambled eggs.

I love the woo! Yeah! She was the one that was yelling for us to get to church on time. And she was the one who led us in Bible study on Saturday mornings during the summer.

It was my mother's vast collection of Bible commentaries and religious books that first helped me see that faith and scholarship could be compatible. And while my father shared my mother's belief that the Christian faith should be the foundation of our family, he also had a keen interest in political analysis, especially if it centered on race and class.

My father was the one who passionately talked to us about the beauty of being black and the achievements of black people. He was the one who turned the dial away from my mother's gospel music and toward NPR so that he could stay up on international politics.

[1 : 29] When images of the first intifada in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip crossed our TV screen when I was a child, it was my father who would ask in a voice of someone hoping to drive home a point, Now, who has the tanks and who has the rocks?

It was my father, a military veteran who was drafted in the 1960s, who insisted that we never stand for the national anthem. He simply could not understand why we as black people would ever show deference to the symbols of America or celebrate the Fourth of July.

If you talk to him today, he will still rail against the Fourth of July. So when when clips emerged of then candidate Barack Obama's pastor saying not God bless America, God damn America.

For killing innocent people. God damn America for treating her citizens as less than human. God damn America, as long as she tries to act like she is God and she is supreme.

I don't know if y'all remember that. When those clips started just playing, I was just confused. I couldn't understand why the same kind of critical resistance to American injustice that I had just basically heard all of my life, from my father, in school, in churches, I was just confused as why it was so, so controversial.

[3 : 01] And while I didn't yet have a theology of like God damning and all of that, the comments struck me as expected resistance from people who had been consigned to the underside of history.

And I felt the same confusion when people began to respond in shock to the refusal of Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players to stand for the national anthem.

In refusing to show deference to the symbols of America, they were urging this kind of national interrogation of who America has been and who it is now.

They were refusing to accommodate to an image of America that they felt was untrue. I begin here because last week we started a sermon series on the book of Revelation, a book that is about resistance.

A book that is about comforting those on the underside of empire and challenging those who have the luxury of being complacent. While runaway bestsellers like the Left Behind series would have us believe that Revelation is about decoding the future in this kind of excruciating detail, the book is actually more about discerning the present.

[4 : 24] As Eugene Peterson puts it, Revelation is not prediction but perception. It is about leaning to the kind of prophetic imagination that helps us consider how to live now.

How to worship, how to witness, and how to resist. The book is an apocalypse, this genre of writing that first century hearers would have understood.

It claims to unveil this kind of supernatural reality that involves these otherworldly beings and these kind of strict black and white categories. It takes you into a visionary world of symbols and sensory experiences that serve to provoke and disorient and which you cannot boil down to kind of a one-to-one rational explanation.

Like Tuesday is the rapture. Yeah. Last week I also noted that the book's author is this person named John that we don't know a lot about.

It's a person who's been exiled to this island for, it seems like, preaching or testifying to Jesus. So you can also think of Revelation as a kind of prison letter full of kind of bold insight.

[5 : 46] The kind of bold insight that can only come from a person who doesn't really have much left to lose. But what I didn't get much time to talk about last week was who the apocalypse was written to.

And as we go through the weeks, that is an important thing to consider. The book is written to the seven churches in the province of Asia, now modern-day Turkey.

There probably wasn't literally seven churches, it's just the idea of a complete church is there. It's probably written during the last part of the first century.

And no matter the exact date, what you need to know is that the Christians living under Roman rule were marginalized within the empire.

The book probably wasn't written when there was like a widespread persecution. But there was like sporadic harassment, there had been really bad past persecution, and these people were anticipating what might lay ahead for them.

[6 : 48] And why were they marginalized and harassed? Because the Roman Empire demanded allegiance. It was a juggernaut of world domination and material acquisition that demanded religious and political reverence.

That demanded worship of its ideals and of its rulers. That demanded worship of its rulers. And if you didn't show deference, you would lose economic and social standing.

That demanded worship of its rulers. That demanded worship of its rulers. That demanded worship of its rulers. Now, I know that none of us know anything about this.

None of us know anything about career advancement based on holding the right opinions rooted in going along to get along. We don't know about that.

And I know that we definitely don't know anything about companies and corporations and comedians that need to toe the line lest they experience the fury of those in power.

[8 : 01] Now, I know we, you know, we don't know about that. John, in his letter to the churches in Asia Minor, is doing two things. He's encouraging these marginalized folks by telling them that in the end they're going to win.

And he's challenging those who are complacent and asking them to pick a fight. To pick a fight by witnessing to the Lamb, Jesus, with their lives. Like Reverend Wright's preaching or Kaepernick's protest.

It's a controversial form of resistance. And when we read Revelation, we have to remember that resistance art doesn't always conform to our sensibilities.

Brian Blount, who's a New Testament scholar, he thinks of Revelation in terms of music. Specifically in terms of the black spirituals and blues and rap.

And he quotes Michael Eric Dyson in saying something I think is really helpful. The blues function for another generation of blacks similarly to the way rap functions for young blacks today.

[9 : 14] As a source of racial identity. Permitting forms of boasting and machismo for devalued black men suffering from social emasculation. Allowing commentary on social and personal conditions and uncensored language.

And fostering the ability to transform hurt and anguish. Revelation is doing something like that. Like rap. It is an uncensored way of validating the value and perspective of those on the margins while also critiquing the system. It provides this vivid way to transform pain and the experience of exclusion.

When I was thinking about this rap quote, I started thinking about trying to go back to the rap that I used to listen to.

Because I don't like rap. For me, there's no good rap post-2000. Which shows my age. But I started trying to think of what is a rap song that really encapsulates this idea.

[10:19] And then I realized, like, my mother didn't really let us listen to a lot of secular music. So I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't think of anything. But what did come to my mind was the way, I think I've shared about this before, that sometimes on my day off, I'll kind of put on my alter ego.

And I'll get in the car and I'll play music at a somewhat inappropriate volume. And then when Bukola gets in the car after me, she's like, what are you doing? She's just, like, shocked. And one of my favorite songs to play is Beyonce's Flawless, the song about female empowerment and self-worth. And it offers this soundbite on gender from the brilliant Nigerian writer Chimamande Ngozi Ndiichie. It has this kind of joyous swagger.

While it also demands that people that Beyonce calls something I cannot say up here, bow down to her. Again, the book of Revelation is doing something like that.

Creating a sensory experience that invites participation. That provides vivid images and commentary for both psychological effect and critical awareness.

[11:30] Yes. All right. So I want to get into our passage for today and just kind of thank y'all, because I know last week and this week, there's just been a lot of background.

This is one of those things like Revelation, you've got to kind of set the stage. So thank you for your patience. I've spent a lot of time trying to teach because I think that this is a book that the church needs.

No matter where you go from here, ever, ever, I never want to hear about you being like, I'm going to be raptured on this day, okay? Far from silencing this book, I hope that you are able to return to it again and again.

And to mine is riches. So today, for the rest of the time that I have, I want to draw us into one passage of the book that I think is pretty key to understanding what's going on inside of it.

And I'm going to warn you that the passage has some language in it that you might find difficult. So if you have children, I don't think I see any children, but you might want to look ahead at the passage to see if you're comfortable with it.

[12:36] It's Revelation 17, 1 through 8. While you look at that passage, I just want to remind you that this book is an explosive drama, and it has characters, basically.

On the one side, you have, I like to think, you know, the one scholar calls it Teen Dragon, which is, you know, on that side, you have Babylon. You have the dragon.

You have the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. And on the other side, you have Team Lamb. You have God. And you have the seven spirits, which is basically the Holy Spirit.

You have the Lamb. You have the Allegiant Witnesses, which is us, which I love the idea that we are Team Allegiant. Like, I love that name. You have the woman. You have the 24 elders.

You have the four living things. And you have the New Jerusalem. And the Lamb, Jesus Christ, is the center of the book. But you can't understand it without understanding the opposing forces to the Lamb.

[13:34] And the character you most need to understand to rightly interpret the book is Babylon. So we're going to look at Revelation 17, 1 through 8, for a description of that character.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, Come, I will show you the judgment of the great poor who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have engaged in sexual immorality, with the wine of whose prostitution the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.

So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.

The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with jewels, with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her prostitution. And on her forehead was written a name, a mystery, Babylon, the great mother of whores and of earth's abominations. And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

[14:51] When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. But the angel said to me, Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.

The beast that you saw was and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not

and is to come.

Now, I don't have time to talk about every part of this passage. It's quite layered.

There are lots of elements that are parody. A lot of the images like shift and morph and move. But what is clear is that John sees this vision of a woman named Babylon.

He describes her as a whore because of her intimacies with the rulers of the earth. She sits on this ghastly scarlet beast that embodies idolatry. The woman is clothed in these extremely luxurious garments that she has on all this fine jewelry.

[16:09] And she's intoxicated by the murder of the witnesses to Jesus and spreads that intoxication. Just as the English poet William Blake illustrated various parts of the Bible, he made a series of illustrations on the book of Revelation.

And here is his take on the woman sitting atop the beast. And just take a look at that for a second. Notice what the beast is doing and what's coming out of the woman's cup.

If you're interested, there's a whole series on the book. And before I go any further, let me just say, yes, the portrayal of Babylon as a female prostitute should make anyone who is a feminist pause. Just pause. You need to pause, okay? Women in Revelation are often either like pure or impure, bride or prostitute. prostitute, like it's, you know. And if you look carefully, some of these images actually are more nuanced.

So for example, if you read this passage in detail, the woman is pretty clear, is actually at the mercy of the beast. And so how do you think about oppression and those kinds of things where you think about women? So it's not quite as black and white, but yes, you should pause at some of the language here.

[17:32] But here's the point. John encounters in this text a mystery. And it's a mystery that needs explaining. It's pretty clear that the city being described is Rome because Rome had seven hills.

The woman is seated on the beast, which has seven heads symbolizing the seven hills. And it's no accident that the goddess of Rome, Roma, was depicted as sitting on seven hills in the coins of the day.

The woman is a parody of Roma. See, Rome was the problem for Christians who first heard this text.

And yet Babylon is also more than Rome. It is any domination system that puts Christians at risk of being stupefied by its power.

And the vision, John himself is amazed. And the angel, it's the angel who has to basically pull him out of his days by asking, why are you so amazed?

[18:40] And that question, that question is one that every disciple of Jesus has to confront when faced with the overwhelming force and material abundance and technological know-how and superficial beauty of Babylon.

In what ways does the overwhelming power of Babylon stop you in your tracks?

In what ways does it shut your mouth? And in what ways does it stunt your imagination by making the radical way of Jesus seem impossible to actually live out?

This passage, along with the beginning of chapter 18, gives us a sense of the characteristics of Babylon. And here's a summary by Scott McKnight.

If you're interested in following along with this series in more detail, he has a couple of books that are really helpful and really accessible. So here's a good summary list. Characteristics of the Beast of Babylon, which actually merge if you look at this image more.

[19:48] So idolatrous. Babylon is extravagant. It is status conscious. It is murderous. It is militaristic.

It is economically exploitative. It is arrogant. Basically, we could do an entire sermon series on just these characteristics. Anybody want to do that for a minute?

No hands. Excellent. That's what I thought. But I want to zero in in just two of these characteristics. The first one is idolatry. The first rule of Babylon is that it must claim your worship.

And Babylon doesn't need you to renounce Christianity. It doesn't need you to stop saying Jesus is Lord. In our context, it just needs you to believe that Jesus is Lord and America is Lord and America is Lord or the state is Lord are the same thing.

That Jesus is Lord and having your political party in power is the same thing. That worship of God and worship of the state, whether that state holds conservative values or liberal democratic values or socialist values, that those things can be the same.

[21 : 02] This very afternoon, Charlie Kirk is going to be laid to rest, a man who was created in the image of God and was also profoundly racist.

And I expect his funeral to be a case in point of what happens when we fail to discern Babylon in our midst with her idols of power and profit. But Babylon also transcends the Christian nationalism that is on the rise in our country.

It is at work every time we worship obtaining power over others, believing that will solve our problems. It is at work every time we worship the end so that so much that the means no longer matter to us.

Babylon is at work every time we worship us and are content with the disposal of them. In the world of revelation, true worship of the slain lamb is revealed to be the only thing that can save us from the false worship of Babylon.

Second, arrogance. Arrogance is a defining characteristic of Babylon. When describing the judgment of Babylon in chapter 18, the writer says, as she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her like measure of torment and grief.

[22 : 33] Since in her heart she says, I rule as queen. I am no widow and I will never see grief. I think we have a slide. Do we have a slide for this? Okay. And when he says that John is riffing off of what the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah said about the first Babylon, you said, I shall be mistress forever.

So you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. Now, therefore, hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, Babylon is always an experience of ego, inflation, and triumphalism.

It resists self-reflection and self-critique and repentance. It does not have the ability to recognize its losses and to genuinely grieve them.

And it cannot stand the idea that it is not eternal. And thus will do everything in its power to convince you that this is the way it always has to be.

Too often the arrogance of Babylon lives inside of us. It is not the way it is. Simply because we are too afraid to admit that we are not in control.

[24 : 04] But the book of Revelation uncovers the lies we hide behind that prop up this false kind of security. And it loudly proclaims that God, God will overcome every Babylon with the strength of God's love.

We have several more weeks to let the beauty and complexity of Revelation form us as dissident disciples and faithful witnesses to Jesus. We have several more weeks to contemplate how Babylon is not just out there, but it is also in our churches, maybe even in this church.

We have several more weeks to think about how it exists inside of us. But as I prepare to take my seat, I want to make sure that one thing in our passage does not go unnoticed.

It's a very small thing. John says that he saw the woman Babylon riding the beast after, after he had been carried away in the spirit into the wilderness.

See, the recognition of the mystery of Babylon only becomes possible as we cultivate a wilderness place in our own lives, a place of solitude and prayer and silence.

[25 : 35] where we can commune with the spirit. While we can recognize and talk about historical patterns, and that is great, Babylon is so insidious that you can't think your way into seeing her present shape.

She is the air we breathe, the water we swim in, the norm of our world. To discern Babylon and to become New Jerusalem kind of people requires stepping away from the drumbeat that undergirds our daily lives.

Put simply, to talk about resistance to Babylon, we first have to talk about how we get outside of her long enough to see her clearly.

And the message of Revelation is that such a space only exists inside the worship of God and inside communion with God. So this week, my prayer is simple.

It is that you would seek a quiet place daily. A quiet place that will feel like a wilderness compared to the noise and activity of our world.

[26 : 55] A quiet place in which to worship God, to be carried away in the spirit, and to know Babylon for what it is. A quiet place to remember the good news that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.

Amen.