

THE GHOST TOWN OF EVIL

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 18
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Revelation 18

There is a town on the border of California and Nevada about 75 miles southeast of Lake Tahoe by the name of Bodie, California. Bodie was one of many towns which seemed to spring up overnight in the mid-to-late 1800s following the discovery of gold nearby.

The population exploded. The town had over two thousand buildings, several daily newspapers, a Wells Fargo Bank, and 65 saloons. But then things changed. In 1912, the last Bodie newspaper was printed. By 1915, Bodie was described as a "ghost town." Today, Bodie is a California Historical Landmark.

You can visit this authentic wild west ghost town. You can stand in the town square of Bodie and imagine what used to be there: the gunslingers and the gold miners, the shops and the saloons, everything bustling with excitement. But you have to imagine it. It's gone. What's left is a dusty silence.

Today we're continuing our series in the book of Revelation that we've called *Wake Up*. Instead of standing in the town square and looking backward at what used to be, this book gives us visions of what will be in the future.

This morning we're in Revelation 18. In this chapter, we will look forward to the future of the great and idolatrous city of Babylon. By the end of this chapter, the city which once ruled the world will have been turned into the ghost town of evil.

We've said throughout our study of Revelation, that Babylon is a way to reference the Roman Empire of the first century. You couldn't criticize Rome; you had to do it in code. So for the original first-century readers, talking about Babylon was a way to talk about Rome.

Our job this morning is to read this text and to ask whether it says anything to us today. Listen to this article which appeared in *Newsweek* in June of 2016. The article, "Why the World Hates Silicon Valley," opens this way:

*Silicon Valley is the new Rome. As in the time of Caesar, the world is grappling with an advanced city-state dominating much of the planet, injecting its technology and ethos everywhere it lands and funneling enormous wealth back home.*¹

So this vision of God judging Babylon which really refers to God judging Rome should be sobering to us because it might mean that God will eventually judge Silicon Valley.

In the first verse of Revelation 17, an angel says, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters." Our chapter this morning is a fulfillment of that promise. Could it really be that in our day and age, Silicon Valley is the "great prostitute who is seated on many waters"?

Let's see what Revelation 18 has to say and find out for ourselves.

At the very least, we need to be willing to ask some difficult questions of the world we live in. What's really going on around here? Where is it all headed? What will the future be? And the most important question: what does that mean for me and the kind of life that I choose to live in this place?

Babylon is fallen

Throughout the book of Revelation, angels have been showing us dramatic visions. Our passage begins in the same way.

Revelation 18:1-3:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. 2 And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast.

3 For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.”

Scholars call this type of declaration a prophetic woe. They occur all throughout the Scriptures. A prophetic woe is a warning to a group of people who are headed down a dangerous path to consider the consequences of their choices. This vision in Revelation collects together several Old Testament judgments against Babylon and re-applies them for the sake of saying that God will act in the same way against Rome.

Just as Babylon fell, so will Rome. And the reasons are very clear. Listen to the criticisms again: "the passion of her sexual immorality", "kings have committed immorality", and "the merchants have grown rich."

In the ancient world, they had problems with sex, power, and money. We are faced with the same problems in the Silicon Valley.

The image of the Silicon Valley as a place where everyone only cares about doing good and making the world a better place is falling apart. This is from an article in TechCrunch from December 2018:

Tech companies have always branded themselves as the good guys. But 2018 was the year that the long-held belief that Silicon Valley is on the right side of progress and all things good was called into question by a critical mass.

As startups grow bigger and richer, amassing more power and influence outside of the Valley, a reckoning has played out in government and business. Mission statements like “connecting the world” and “don’t be evil” no longer hold water. ²

The optimism and naiveté of the past two decades are falling apart. People realize that the 1% (the top 1% by income) aren't just on Wall Street. They are also on El Camino Real. The really famous and powerful people of our world are not as much sports stars or business moguls or even famous actors—they are CEOs and founders and investors.

It's clear that money and power are driving a lot of what we do around the Silicon Valley. But it's also about sex. In February of 2018, *Vanity Fair* summarized a new book by Emily Chang called *Brotopia*. I'm going to apologize in advance for the crass language, but it's

important for us to take an honest look at the culture around us. Listen to the opening:

Some of the most powerful men in Silicon Valley are regulars at exclusive, drug-fueled, sex-laced parties—gatherings they describe not as scandalous, or even secret, but as a bold, unconventional lifestyle choice. Yet, while the guys get laid, the women get screwed. ³

And it's not just sexual activity. More and more the reality of sexual harassment and sexism are becoming evident as deeply rooted in the culture of Silicon Valley. Consider these recent headlines, "Silicon Valley finally faces a reckoning with sexism" and "Sexual Harassment in Tech: Women Tell Their Stories" both from CNN, and "Sexual Harassment and the 'Win at All Costs' Mentality of the Silicon Valley" from Forbes.

The supposedly noble and altruistic culture that we live in is just as consumed with sex, power, and money as every other empire that has come before us. We could rewrite Revelation 18:3 to read, "Silicon Valley has drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality and the CEO's of the valley have committed immorality with her, and the investors in our technology have grown rich from the power of luxurious living."

Several weeks ago, we saw the same phrase about Babylon being fallen in Revelation 14. We reinterpreted the phrase there to apply. When we hear the angel saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great", we should hear, "Fallen, fallen is Silicon Valley the innovative." Fallen, fallen is Silicon Valley the Innovative.

This is us. This is our neighborhood. This is the culture we live and work and play in.

If you know me, you know that I love living here. I'm a huge fan of technology. And I tend to be optimistic about how some of the things being done around here can help the world.

The Bible speaks of all of us as created in the image of God with a natural desire to reflect his character to the world. But we are also, all of us, fallen. Evil has permeated our beings, and we are naturally rebellious toward God. We are complicated creatures. We are created for worship but bent toward sin. Those tendencies war within every human.

Those tendencies mean that every empire built by mankind is going to be infected with the evil that lies within our hearts. We could be living in Paris, and I'd

be preaching that Paris is fallen. Or Beijing, and I'd be saying that Beijing is fallen. Or Ohio or Indiana or Texas. Each of these places would be fallen in slightly different ways, but they'd all be fallen.

So it's not remarkable to say that Silicon Valley is an empire of evil. But what makes us slightly different is the influence we have on the rest of the world. In fact, if we look again at these verses, we realize that Babylon is not only judged for her sin, but for the fact that she led the people of the world astray.

No single place in the world has as much influence in the world today as the Silicon Valley. We are living in the belly of the beast. So what does that mean for us? How do we live if all this is true? What does it mean to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley?

Come out

Fortunately, our passage continues with clear instruction for people who find themselves living in Babylon.

Revelation 18:4-8:

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; 5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. 6 Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. 7 As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.' 8 For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her."

The instruction is simple: "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins."

This has always been God's instruction to his people when they live in the midst of a broken culture (which is always the case). Separate yourselves. Don't participate in the evil around you. The ship is sinking and you don't want to be on it when it goes down.

A few weeks ago we saw the principle of *lex talionis*, the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" basis of law. It's the same thing in these verses. We read "pay her back as she herself has paid back others". Even the phrasing of "repay her double for her deeds" is better translated "repay her an equivalence for her deeds."

God will judge Babylon according to what she has done. She will reap what she has sown. You don't want to be there when she does.

We make decisions like this all the time. We know how to tell when companies are falling apart, and the standard advice is to jump ship—move on to something better. But it's hard for us sometimes to recognize where our culture is headed. How do you jump ship not just from a company, but from the whole culture of the Silicon Valley?

Live differently.

God's people are told to come out of Babylon. What does that mean? Do we leave? Quit our jobs at Google? Sell our houses and give the money to the poor?

One of the fascinating themes throughout Scripture is that there has often been a representative of God not just living in Babylon, but with great authority. Joseph was the second in command to Pharaoh in Egypt. Daniel was the chief of staff for Nebuchadnezzar in actual Babylon. Esther was the Queen of Persia.

God put each of these people in their roles for his purposes. They served God while it looked like they were serving Babylon. They didn't undermine or sabotage the kingdoms they served. Each of those empires thrived when God's people had influence. But the people's ultimate goal was to serve God, not their empire.

For some of you, living differently in Babylon may mean that you do have positions of significant authority in the Silicon Valley. But your goal is not to achieve success for Babylon. Your goal is not to achieve your own success. Your goal is to serve God's purposes where you are, always remembering that the empire you serve is Babylon. There is no future for Babylon. The only future is for the kingdom of God.

There is no easy answer to what living differently looks like. This is what it means to follow Jesus in the Silicon Valley: to listen to the Spirit and follow God's leading for what it looks like to live differently. Maybe you treat people differently. Maybe you spend your

money differently. Maybe your free time is used in different ways. Maybe you have a different reaction to the successes and failures to others around you.

The is the life of faith—to come out of the culture around us. When you worship sex, power, and money, you get what you want. But what you want turns not to be what you really wanted all along. As the passage continues, we see how different people react to the judgment on Babylon.

Responding to fallen Babylon

We meet four different categories of people and see how they react to the judgment upon their city. Listen to the first three types of people:

Revelation 18:9-19:

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. 10 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.” 11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12 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, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls. 14 “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!” 15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 16 “Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! 17 For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.” And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off 18 and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, “What city was like the great city?” 19 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! For in a single hour she has been laid waste.

There are three different groups of people described in these verses: the "kings of the earth," the "merchants of the earth," and several kinds seafarers: shipmasters and sailors, etc. Kings, merchants, and sailors.

These are the people who profited the most from the fabulous success of the Roman Empire. The kings of smaller nations who attached themselves to Rome rode the wave of power to see their own influence skyrocket. The salesmen who offered products from all over the empire made fortunes selling exotic goods. The sailors were the businesspeople of their day whose large fleets of ships enjoyed favorable tax status from Rome.

Who profits the most from the success of Silicon Valley? If this passage were written to us, maybe it would address the entrepreneurs, engineers, and investors of the Silicon Valley. Aren't many of us the ones who have profited the most from the fabulous success of Silicon Valley?

Each of these three groups has a similar reaction to the fall of Babylon. They all "stand far off." When things were going well, they were right in the middle of it. But as soon as Babylon starts to fall apart, they only look out for themselves. They all "weep and mourn." But their grief has nothing to do with what they've done to others or the suffering they've caused. They are only upset because their own success is being destroyed. They weep not for their sin, but for their lost power and luxury.

Finally, they are all surprised at how quickly everything fell apart. "In a single day" and "in a single hour" things went from buzzing with prosperity to the buzzards flying overhead. No one thought this could happen. Everyone expected things to keep going up forever.

If Silicon Valley falls apart, how would the entrepreneurs, engineers and investors respond? Wouldn't they be surprised? Wouldn't they weep and mourn? And wouldn't they stand far off?

But a better question is: how would we respond? Would we be any different?

The fourth group gives us an example of a completely different kind of response.

Revelation 18:20:

Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!”

The kings and merchants and sailors all weep and mourn. But heaven and the saints and prophets and apostles rejoice for the judgment given against Babylon.

Isn't it mean to celebrate when someone else suffers? This sounds vindictive to celebrate when people are judged. But is it vindictive to celebrate when a pimp in the Philippines who has been selling online videos of children is caught and imprisoned? When that happens, we celebrate that justice has been done and vulnerable victims have been protected. It's a natural response to celebrate when justice is done.

Here's what the people of God are invited to do: advocate for and celebrate justice.

We ought to rejoice whenever we see oppressive, sexist, money-hungry, insensitive people being held accountable for their hypocrisy and the hurt done to others. When people are only concerned with sex, power, and money, they hurt other people in the process. We can celebrate when justice is done.

But it's sometimes hard for us because when those people are held to account, it might end up costing us.

What would our reaction be if the housing market in the Bay Area crashed? Would those of us who own homes weep and mourn while the renters rejoice and celebrate? Would our reaction be tied completely to the effect on us and our financial security? Could we celebrate that lower-income workers might actually be able to live near the place where they worked?

I know it's complicated. Many people would be hurt by a housing market crash. There's no perfect example. The point is to look at our hearts. Have we really come out of Babylon? Can we celebrate justice even if it means that we lose money? Or status? Or power? Can we hold people to account even if it costs us in the process?

God judges evil. Some will weep and mourn. Some will rejoice. What side will we find ourselves on?

The Ghost town of Babylon

Our passage ends with the aftermath of the judgment.

The final picture shows Babylon after the end has come.

Revelation 18:21-24:

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more; 22 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, 23 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. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.”

Several years ago my wife and I stayed a night in San Francisco for our anniversary. We had a small amount of time. We felt like doing something crazy, so we went to a movie that started at 10:00 pm. That's normally our bedtime! We saw "I Am Legend"—a post-apocalyptic tale of what happens when the world ends.

After the movie let out around 1:00 am, we walked back to our hotel. The streets were empty. We hardly saw anyone. We wondered whether the movie had come true. Where were all the people? Maybe the world really did end while we watched a movie about it.

This is the picture God wanted to give his people living in the midst of the power and gloat of the Roman empire. This is the picture we need to understand how to live in the midst of our generation.

Can you see it? Can you allow that picture to change how you live today? Live today in light of tomorrow.

None of the investors or venture capitalists or entrepreneurs or engineers paint that kind of a picture for the future of Silicon Valley. But God gives us a different picture of the future. And if we have learned anything from history, we know that God's prediction is far more likely than some kind of transcendent utopia.

Here is my invitation to you. Sometime this week, stop and look around you. Instead of standing in the town square of a ghost town and imagining what it

used to be like, stand in the town square of your life and imagine the future. Can you imagine an abandoned Apple spaceship (building)? A half-completed Google headquarters? Quiet halls of Facebook and absolutely no traffic on Highway 101?

Personalize it. Imagine the things you're involved in. Use this vision of Babylon to project into the future. No more harpists or musicians. No more craftsmen or mills. No more lamps or weddings or sales. What do you have left when you take away those things? Does your life still make sense?

If Silicon Valley becomes a ghost town, what is left for you? If you are a follower of Jesus, then the answer is Jesus. When you strip all of that away, you have Jesus. And the Kingdom of God. And a future of eternal life.

Allow that picture of the future to shape your life today. I can't tell you what kind of a difference it will make, but the book of Revelation gives us these powerful images to shake us up and change the way we live. How will the ghost town of Silicon Valley change your life today?

Conclusion

If you look up the ghost town of Bodie, California, you'll find that it is in a state of what they call "arrested decay." I looked up that term and discovered they actually invented the phrase it to describe Bodie, California. It means that they aren't renovating the place or allowing it to fall apart. They're repairing things as they break so that everything stays in a state of falling apart, but doesn't ever actually fall apart.

This could be one way of describing the world around us. Silicon Valley is for now in a state of arrested decay. Silicon Valley will fall. We aren't as good or nice as we claimed to be. We thought we were interested in "not being evil" and "connecting the world" and "making life better." But maybe that isn't so true anymore. Maybe it never was.

We are just as riddled with the basic temptations toward sex, power, and money in oppressive ways as every other empire before us and every empire which will come after us. We are Babylon. We are Rome. All earthly empires are essentially the same.

But the world around us isn't just in arrested decay. God isn't keeping things the way they were. His ultimate goal is restoration. Flourishing. Renovation. Life as it was meant to be. God will judge evil in order to get there. Our job now is not to get caught up in it until he does.

We have seen the future. Silicon Valley is fallen. Live today in light of tomorrow.

Endnotes

- ¹ Kevin Maney, "Why the World Hates Silicon Valley" (*Tech Crunch*, December 24, 2018), <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/06/17/silicon-valley-takeover-468182.html>
- ² Anna Escher, "Silicon Valley's year of reckoning" (*Newsweek*, June 9, 2016), <https://techcrunch.com/2018/12/24/silicon-valleys-reckoning/>
- ³ Emily Chang, *Brotopia: Breaking Up the Boy's Club of Silicon Valley* (In *Vanity Fair* February 2019)