
She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son.

(1 Peter 5:13)

Introduction

Our text for this study points us to the reality of hardship in the life of the Christian. It points us to how to face suffering as a Christian. The more I have considered this text, and the theme of this message, the more I realise how relevant it is on the cusp of a new year.

It is all too easy to slip into a syrupy sentimentality when it comes to Christmas. But when you study the Christmas story, examining the passages of Scripture surrounding the incarnation, it is evident that the birth of Jesus was associated both with joy and also with sorrow and suffering. This was so not only for those who refused him (Herod), but also for those who received him. Simeon spoke of Jesus being “opposed” and warned Mary that a sword would pierce her soul (Luke 2:34–35). Joseph and Mary did indeed experience great turmoil.

All one needs to contemplate is the weeping of Rachel for her children to see that Christmas brought with it a lot of sadness. But we often don’t see this. In fact, we don’t *want* to see this. We would rather be sentimental than real. We sing sentimentally, “Away in a manger,” not considering the accompanying poverty, social rejection and fear that Joseph and Mary experienced. And so we bury our heads in syrupy sentimentalism. Maybe that is why one journalist recently noted that “the Christmas season has more ‘jingle’ than it does ‘Jesus.’” Jesus coming into our world—with all the grace and glory that attends such salvation—is coupled with the entrance of suffering as well. It was with this reality before him that Paul wrote, “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, also to suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).

The apostle Peter, the writer whose words we will examine in this study, understood quite well that following Christ demands following him even to the hard places (see John 21:18–19). It was a lesson that he first failed (Matthew 16:21–23), but one that he eventually embraced and exemplified. And so the student became the teacher. May we learn well from him today.

Christian, as we stand on the brink of a new year, I trust that you are encouraged to make progress. And my prayer is that we will make progress together. But let us not be naïve: 2018 will bring some challenges. Some of us have already tasted them. Therefore, my in this study is that we will be fruitful where God *has* and where God *will* locate us. In the words of another, that we will “bloom where we have been planted.” — even if that is in Babylon.

It is because we live in a world broken by sin that we face difficulties relationally, vocationally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Such brokenness highlights the relevance of our text.

The past year was a year of hardship for many. In one way or another, we will all face some hardships in 2018. We will find ourselves at times feeling that we are living in Babylon.

The Purpose for which this was Written

The book of 1 Peter is a book addressing suffering, and you don't need a study Bible to know that. The word "suffer" or "suffering" occurs fifteen times. There are a further 22 references in this short epistle to trials, hardships, and the like (1:6, 7; 2:12, 18; 3:6, 7, 9, 14, 16, 20; 4:12, 14; 5:7, 8).

Peter writes to shepherd the flock of God through their suffering. But who were these people?

The People to Whom this is Written

The believers to whom Peter wrote were suffering away from home. They were victims of the dispersion, the Jewish *Diaspora*. We know this from the opening verse, where Peter addresses "the pilgrims [those in exile, better, resident foreigners] of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia [Minor], and Bythina."

Peter wrote to Christians who were dispersed in various parts of the Roman Empire, particularly in the region which we today refer to as Turkey. It is clear that these were *Jewish* Christians who had been forced to leave Jerusalem, and perhaps Rome as well (see Acts 18:1-2). Since Peter had a particular ministry focus on the Jews (Galatians 2:7), this Jewish focus is not surprising. In fact, this ethnic peculiarity helps us to understand Peter's closing words: "She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you" (5:13). In this penultimate verse, the mention of "Babylon" points again to the theme of suffering.

Try to imagine their predicament. Imagine having to flee your home and the land of your birth. Imagine then locating where you are an outsider. There may be people reading this who can relate to this. I think of those who have fled Zimbabwe, and perhaps from other places as well, to find refuge in South Africa. Being an immigrant is often accompanied with a lot of pain. Oppression is often the lot of the stranger. Within this very epistle, there is mention of harsh masters, mocking gentiles, and unbelieving spouses.

These suffering Christians missed their homeland. They missed the familiar surroundings and the comforts of their culture. Peter knew this. He wrote to feed these sheep (John 21:15-17).

The Place from which this was Written

According to 5:13, Peter wrote this letter from “Babylon.” Of course, “Babylon” is used symbolically of another city, for Babylon, as the Bible knows it, did not exist in the New Testament era. The identity of Babylon is of vital importance. To what location is Peter referring? That is, where was he when he wrote this?

The majority of interpreters identify “Babylon” as Rome. With due respect, there is little evidence for this conclusion. The identification of Babylon with Rome is largely because we have accepted the *tradition* that Peter died in Rome. Many therefore have concluded that Peter had moved there; some even conclude that Peter was the first bishop of Rome. Again, the problem is, we have neither biblical nor historical evidence for this. It is because of this *a priori* bias that, when many read “Babylon,” they think “Rome.” That is wrong. Rome was not Babylon; *Jerusalem* was Rome.

The Proof

We know that when persecution arose, as recorded in Acts 8, the whole church “was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Damaris, except the apostles” (v. 1). Peter was an apostle, who stayed in Jerusalem. Besides the occasional visit to Caesarea (Acts 10) and Syrian Antioch (Galatians 2), there is no indication that Peter ever ventured elsewhere.

If that is the case, why would Peter refer to Jerusalem as Babylon? After all, that is neither much of a compliment nor a way to endear oneself to loyal Jews!

Historical Context

We need to step back in time for a bit and consider what Babylon would have meant to a first-century Jew.

The first reference to Babylon is found in Genesis 11 in the root word “Babel.”

“Babel” means “confusion by mixing.” Of course, this is exemplified by what took place there. This etymology will find fulfilment in the later Babylon. Babylon came to represent the natural result of rebellion to God: spiritual and moral chaos and confusion. (It is interesting that, on the heels of the Babylonian confusion of Genesis 11, God began to bring order once again by the sovereign selection [election] of Abraham as head of a nation through which God would bring the King of kings and Lord of lords.)

The first mention of the full term “Babylon” is in 2 Kings 17:24 and it is in the negative context of the Assyrians, who ruled Babylon at that time, forcing upon northern Israel pagan immigrants. It was the beginning of what would become pejoratively known as “Samaria.” From this first mention will follow another 257 references, most of them in a foreboding,

destructive context. The subsequent history is one of intrigue, intimidation, invasion and incarceration – of captivity.

Babylon came to represent all that is opposed to God, including a plethora of idols and various idolatries. Babylon was the epitome of the arrogant rebellion of man. Much like its etymological namesake, Babylon was committed to a Babel-like unified defiance against God.

Historically, this seems to be a characteristic of that region, politically speaking. For Babylon was also later known as Persia (Iran) and Iraq.

As the southern tribes were carried away to Babylon for their prophesied seventy-year captivity, we read of the likes of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel and his three friends. Babylon would prove to be a difficult place for lovers of God. And yet—and don't miss this—Babylon was also the place where God had providentially placed them. We will return to this theme later.

Strategic Mention

Peter's use of Babylon as he closes his epistle would have conjured up images that, for the most part, would be dark to the average Jew. And it would have been an alarming epithet for their once beloved city of Jerusalem. Whatever Peter meant, he was making a poignant point as he concluded his first epistle. In his second epistle, in fact, he would make it clear just how much a Babylon Jerusalem had become.

In that epistle, we read of the impending judgement that was to befall the city of God. The religious elements would melt with fervent heat as the Romans, in fulfilment of the Olivet Discourse, would invade and destroy Jerusalem, culminating in the 70 AD.

This theme of Jerusalem being Babylon is seen as well in the book of Revelation. Jerusalem had so apostatised by 70 AD that it had become an Egypt and a Sodom (11:8). In the same prophecy, John clearly identifies Jerusalem as Babylon (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:1, 2, 10, 21; 19:1).

The many exegetical attempts throughout history to identify Babylon with either an ever-present, culturally-transcendent, evil politico-materialistic system on one hand, or to identify it with the historic Roman Empire or a future revived Roman Empire on the other, is simply not tenable. The only legitimate conclusion to be made is the one that first century Christians—especially Jewish Christians—would have made: that Babylon was code for apostate, God-rejecting Jerusalem, and all the malice and suffering that went with it.

We can conclude that, when Peter wrote to dispersed Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, he was drawing attention to his location: "Babylon." But the larger question is, why? Simply, Peter was being pastorally strategic. His intention was to help them to make some

connections between what they knew about God's people in exile in Babylon under the old covenant, and their present exile under the new covenant. And what Peter meant for them, God means for us as well. Let's learn.

The Principles from what was Written

The answer to the question, "Why did Peter use the term Babylon?" is primarily a pastoral one. (He was an elder after all [5:1-5]) for these dispersed Christians. Specifically, there could be at least three pastoral motivations for closing this letter with this geographical-metaphorical nomenclature.

Your Former Dwelling

First, don't make too much out of where you once dwelt.

In a subtle way, perhaps Peter was warning Jewish Christians not to romanticise the city that had been so significant to them. They should beware of idolising what had been known as the city of God. (As an aside, Donald Trump, misled by a lot of poorly-informed evangelicals, would do well to pay attention to this point.) They could and should make their Christianity work wherever they are.

In other words, their former location was not nearly as important as their present *devotion*.

Believer, don't romanticise your past dwelling places. Too often, we put our confidence in earthly cities, as did Israel of old. The result is that we are less than faithful where God has ordained that we sojourn. Let's apply this metaphorically.

Perhaps you long for a former Jerusalem of a particular relationship, or of strong physical health. Perhaps your longed-for Jerusalem is a past glorious time of ministry, where you enjoyed great fruitfulness in teaching or evangelism. Perhaps your longing is for a former place where you lived and you find yourself now in Johannesburg! Perhaps you had a great job but now you are stuck in a not-so-great one. Like these dispersed Jewish believers, who doubtless longed for what they previously enjoyed in the familiar, Peter subtly reminds us that perhaps things are not as good back there as we might think. He is perhaps helping to straighten out their and our somewhat skewed memories. For, in fact, our romanticised past may in fact be a Babylon – at least, in comparison to where God has us now.

But further, Peter *was* in Babylon, and he was being faithful. As much as he exhorted his readers that they should be faithful where *they* were, he was committed to being faithful where *he* was.

Your Current Dwelling

Second, don't make too much out of where you currently dwell. As is clear throughout this letter, the reference to Babylon is intended to convey the concept of exile (1:1; 1:17; 2:11). That is, Peter realised, and wanted to remind his readers, that as long as they were in this world, they were, in a sense, living in exile from their true home. You see, regardless of your circumstances, ultimately your place of sojourn is a Babylon.

Perhaps you are familiar with the line of the old hymn, "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through." That is not completely, though it is somewhat true. Yes, this world will one day be glorified as the curse is lifted. In that sense, this world *is* our home. But the world as it is *now* is *not* our home. It is a Babylon. The New Jerusalem has not yet fully arrived. In the words of theologians, we live in the already-not yet. Our present Babylon one day will be transformed into glory. In the meantime, we must remain faithful. And this brings us to the next pastoral concern.

What do I mean by "exile"? This is important, for there are nuances to be noted: First, what did the idea of "exile" mean to them, and then, second, what does it mean for us? How does God want us to apply this to our own lives?

Clearly, the church has not fully arrived. The New Jerusalem, the new covenant church, is the means by which God's kingdom will increasingly come to earth. And when Jesus returns, it will fully come. Until such time, the church will live as a sojourner – believers as aliens – in a land that will one day become fully ours (for the meek will inherit the earth).

There are parallels between the church under the new covenant and Judah under the old covenant as they were in exile in Babylon. Yet there are also important discontinuities. True, we are surrounded by those who worship false gods. But unlike Judah of old, the true church remains faithful. Our remnant is much larger than hers was. And this is important to note.

Several years ago, the gifted and usually helpful Carl Trueman wrote a four thousand-word essay titled, "A Church of Exiles." In it, he argued that the church is "exiled." He meant something different than what Peter meant. He argued that the church in the West (he especially addressed the American church) no longer has any significant voice in the public square. But further – and this was the point of his article – we should not expect to have one. "We are indeed set for exile, though not an exile which pushes us to the geographical margins. It's an exile to cultural irrelevance." In other words, the church should abandon any hope of having an impact outside of the church. We should not expect to influence the worldview shaping institutions of our day.

At this point, I must part company with Mr. Trueman. I agree that we are indeed in exile, but our exile is much different than that experienced left of Matthew. The King has come.

He rules and reigns. And that matters. It should matter to the church, for he rules majorly through his people – the church.

Without becoming sidetracked, let me simply say, in disagreement with Mr. Trueman, that the exiled church is not culturally irrelevant. However, in agreement with him, and more importantly, in agreement with Peter, the church sojourns in a land in which we are not completely at home. And here is why this matters: We need to recognise that where we dwell is difficult and challenging. We must not embrace a false eschatological over-realisation. We live at the same time in both the already and the not yet. The fullness of the kingdom has not yet been realised (contra pantelism). In other words, though we are home, we not yet *fully* home. We should therefore be careful that we do not feel completely at home.

Recently, our church was privileged to host Dr. William VanDoodewoord, Presbyterian minister and Professor of Church History at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. Dr. VanDoodewaard, a Dutch Canadian, asked me how long I have lived in South Africa. I told him that, in May, it will be 28 years. I told him that we have raised our family here and that this is home. But I added that there are times when I still feel like a foreigner. He responded, “That can be a good thing. We should all be reminded that we are not home yet.” This is precisely the point that Peter wants his readers to embrace (1:1, 17; 2:11). It is not the only thing, nor is it the dominant thing that he wants them to remember, but it is a *major* thing.

Christian brother and sister, we need to keep before us that we are not yet fully at home. Our citizenship is in heaven. And while we must be careful of over-emphasising this, at the same time we must keep this before us.

There are things that occur around us that make it quite clear that we don’t belong to the wicked world system. Much of this world still lies under the sway of the wicked one (2 Corinthians 4). And this reminds us that there is a better day coming. This should never lead to an escapist mentality (Peter willingly remained in Babylon). We should never cave in to the unbiblical pessimism that the church is culturally irrelevant. Yet at the same time neither can we be naïve about where we live and the limitations that exist because of man’s sinfulness, and because of God’s sovereign plan. Yes, we live in exile. Things are not as we would like for them to be. Things are not what we know they *will* one day be. In the meantime, we live as God intends for us to be; that is, faithful *to* him, because of our faith *in* him as our faithful Creator (4:19).

Don’t be entangled in the things of this world (2 Timothy 2:3–4; 1 John 2:15–17). Don’t be surprised, disillusioned or demoralised by the things of this world. Don’t behave or respond like the people of this world.

Making the Most

Third, make the most of where you are currently dwelling. Like Israel of old, these faithful Jews needed to be encouraged to remain faithful to Christ in whatever Babylon they found themselves. After all, just as Jeremiah had exhorted centuries earlier, even though believers had been exiled, they should know that God had great plans for them (Jeremiah 29:11).

This is similar to the previous point, but different in emphasis. If that point emphasised a *cautious* approach to our exile, this point emphasises a *constructive* approach to our exile. Peter is calling us to, and exemplifying for us, a lifestyle of faithfulness in a world fraught with difficulties.

Perhaps Jeremiah 29:11 is the most popular verse among Christians today – at least among Western Christians. The promise is confessedly wonderful: “For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace [welfare] and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Christians in more prosperous circles tend to materialise this promise into a guarantee that all will work out in this life, regardless of our trials. We sort of make it into the punchline of the joke: What happens when you play a country song backwards? You get your job back, your truck back, you get your girl back. Similarly, many Christians tend to think that Jeremiah 29:11 is a *carte blanche* promise that all will be well. But that depends on how we define “well.”

For the Jews in the Babylonian exile, to whom this promise was given, “well” meant that, even in their hardship, God was still for them; that, even though some of them would never see Jerusalem again, God was faithful, and therefore would fulfil his promises of a restoration. But more than this, Jeremiah was not concerned merely with a physical Jerusalem. How short sighted! No, he knew that one day God would establish his new covenant, through his Son with the true Israel of God (see Jeremiah 31:31ff with Galatians 6:16; etc.). He was exhorting the covenant people of God to remain faithful in their Babylon, knowing that God is faithful. This would motivate them to live fruitfully to the glory of God, regardless of temporal outcomes. Peter’s original readers needed such an exhortation – and so do we.

Believer, be faithful in a world of lust and sinful temptation (1:13–17). Be faithful in your difficult relationships (2:11–17). Be faithful in your difficult persecution (2:21–25; 3:18–22). Be faithful in your difficult marriage (3:1–7). Seek to be an agent of change, to be a source of blessing (3:9). Be faithful in midst of real church life (4:7–11; 5:1–5ff). Be faithful in the midst of deep heartache and suffering (4:12ff). Be faithful in midst of evil onslaught (5:8–10).

We Are Not Alone

Fourth, we must remember that we are not alone where we dwell. Peter greeted these scattered believers from the church at Babylon, “elect together *with you*.” This is so

important, and it should be deeply encouraging. Peter wanted his readers to know two things about the church in Jerusalem.

First, they were concerned about their dispersed brothers and sisters.

Misery may love company, but so does mercy. To whom are you showing it? Meaningful membership means merciful membership. It means ministering membership. It means mending membership. Will you be this kind of church member in 2018? Will you engage or will you merely attend? Will you help or will you merely critique? Remember, those who fall can be faithful again – like “Mark my son.” Help them to be so. Be encouraged – others do care. Give us a chance!

Second, the church at Jerusalem was also facing challenges. They too were “exiled.” You and I are not the only ones facing trials, heartache and even suffering. Let us think of others. Let us pray for others. Let us help others. Beware that your suffering does not blind you to the suffering of others.

The Means of Grace

Fifth, we must use the means of grace where we dwell. Peter wanted his readers to “stand” in “the true grace of God” (v. 12). He couched his exhortational salutation in the empowering language of grace (10–12). And this points us to the Lord Jesus Christ (see 1:25). This is the only way that we will make the most of where we are. This is the provision to make the most of your Babylon.

God’s gospel grace is what will empower us to be faithful and fruitful in our Babylon. His means of grace – his Word, his people, his ordinances, his shepherds – are to point us to the Lord Jesus Christ – the one who, in fact, also dwelt in Babylon. In fact, he died there. But he rose there and ascended from there as well.

Unbelieving friend, turn from your sins to the one who died as a substitute for all who will believe on him. He rose to make those who believe right with God; acceptable to him. You may still find yourself in Babylon, but you will find him there with you.

Christian, as you find yourself living in Babylon, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. The gospel provides you with all of the grace that you need.

AMEN