

Know Your Spiritual Enemies: The Babylonians

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

2 Kings 20:12-18 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

¹² At that time Berodach-baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a gift offering unto Hezekiah; for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick. ¹³ And Hezekiah was attentive to them, and showed them all the house of his treasures – the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the good oil, and the house of his vessels, and all that was found in his treasures; there was not a thing that Hezekiah did not show them, in his house, and in all that he ruled.

¹⁴ And Isaiah the prophet came unto King Hezekiah, and said unto him, "What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?"

And Hezekiah said, "From a far-off land they came, from Babylon."

¹⁵ And he said, "What have they seen in your house?"

And Hezekiah said, "All that is in my house have they seen; there is not a thing that I have not shown them in my treasures."

¹⁶ And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah, "Hear the word of Jehovah: ¹⁷ 'Behold, the days are coming, and all that is in your house, and that which your fathers treasured up to this day, shall be carried to Babylon; not a thing shall remain,' says Jehovah. ¹⁸ 'And they shall take away some of your sons who shall go forth from you, whom you shall beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'"

2 Kings 24:8-10, 13,14

⁸ Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem; and the name of his mother was Nehushta, the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem. ⁹ And he did evil in the eyes of Jehovah, according to all that his fathers had done.

¹⁰ At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon went up to Jerusalem, and the city came under siege. ¹³ And Nebuchadnezzar brought out from there all the treasures of the house of Jehovah, and the treasures of the house of the king, and clipped off all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of Jehovah, as Jehovah had spoken. ¹⁴ And he exiled all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the heroes of valor; ten thousand were exiled, and all the craftsmen and the smiths; there was no one left except the poor of the people of the land.

Revelation 18:1-5 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

¹ And after these things I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having great authority, and the earth was enlightened by his glory. ² And he cried out in strength with a great voice, saying, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a habitation of demons, and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful fowl. ³ For all the nations have drunk from the wine of the wrath of her harlotry, and the kings of the earth have committed harlotry with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich from the power of her delights."

⁴ And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "Come out of her, My people, so that you do not become partakers of her sins, and so that you do not receive of her plagues. ⁵ For her sins have reached even to heaven, and God has remembered her injustices."

The Last Judgment 54

"Babylon" means everyone who wants to use religion to control others. The reason these kinds of people are referred to as Babylon is that religious tyranny first began in ancient times, although an immediate halt was put to it. That beginning is described as a city and a tower whose top would be in heaven; its being shut down is described by the muddling of the language of those people that led to its name, "Babel" (Genesis 11:1-9).

We can see in Daniel that a similar tyranny began again in Babylon, but this time became established: it says of Nebuchadnezzar that he set up an image that everyone had to worship (Daniel 3:1-end).

It is important to know that a church becomes a Babylon when its charity and faith come to an end and self-love takes charge instead. The more free rein self-love is given, the more it rushes headlong into ruling not only over all the people on earth it possibly can, but even over heaven. Even then it does not rest; it climbs up to the throne of God and transfers God's divine power to itself.

Introduction

- We've been doing this series of sermons on different enemies for a while now and this is the last one.
- Today we're talking about the last, big enemy: the Babylonians.
 - They really are like the big, bad guy at the end of a book, or movie, or video game.
 - The Babylonians were the biggest and strongest enemy that the children of Israel had ever faced.
 - And the evil that the Babylonians represent is, in many ways, the biggest and strongest evil that any of us will ever have to deal with.

Outline

- First, we'll talk about what the Babylonians represent.
- Then we'll look at a couple of stories that show what the Babylonians are like.
- Last, we'll talk about how to watch for the influence of the spiritual Babylonians in our lives and how the Lord can keep us safe from them.

What the Babylonians Represent

- Let's talk about what the Babylonians represent in us and in the world.
- The lesson we read from the teachings of the New Church said that "Babylon" means everyone who wants to use religion to control others (*The Last Judgment* 54).
 - There are two pieces of this:
 - (1) wanting to control other people
 - and (2) using the things of religion as the tools for doing that controlling.
- Here's a passage that spells out a little bit more how those two pieces interact.
 - The worst kind of self-love is the love of dominion over others for selfish reasons, that is, the love of possessing dominion solely for the sake of position and gain. Those in whom that love predominates may, it is true, make profession of faith and charity, but they do so with their lips, not with their heart; indeed the worst among them look on the things that belong to faith and charity, thus the holy things of the Church, as means to their own ends. (*Secrets of Heaven* 10038:2)
 - The people meant by Babylon might appear to be very religious outwardly but they're just using those religious things as a tool for controlling people for their own selfish reasons.
- Did you notice that that passage said that this is "the worst kind of self-love"?

How Bad the Selfish Desire to Control Is

- Here are some other things that the teachings of the New Church say about how bad this selfish desire to control other people is.
 - Emanuel Swedenborg, who the Lord called to write the teachings of the New Church, says this:
 - When I considered the love of governing stemming from a love of self, I was given to see that this love was supremely hellish, and so is found among those who are in the deepest hell.... (*Married Love* 262).
 - Another passage says this:
 - The most difficult battle of all... is with the love of ruling from a love of self. One who overcomes this love, easily overcomes all other evil loves, because it is their head (*Divine Providence* 146).
- And part of why this selfish love is so hard to fight against is because of how good it feels to give in to it.
- Swedenborg was allowed to experience the delight of this hellish love and this is what he said about it:
 - I have been given to feel the nature and extent of the delight of a love of ruling from a love of self. I was conveyed into it in order to experience it, and it was such as to exceed all other delights that exist in the world. It was a delight of the whole mind, from its inmost constituents to its outmost ones, while in the body it felt altogether as a pleasure and enjoyment swelling the breast. I was also given to sense as well that from that delight, as though from their fountainhead, gushed the delights of all other evils, such as those of adultery, taking vengeance, cheating, slandering – of doing evil in general. (*Divine Providence* 215:9)
- Controlling people for your own selfish purposes feels overwhelmingly good and it leads to delighting in all sorts of other evil, harmful things too.
- This is why, in the book of Revelation, Babylon is depicted as a harlot that commits harlotry with the kings of the earth, and who gets the nations drunk, and it's also why it says that "the merchants of the earth have become rich from the power of her delights" (Revelation 18:3).
 - Babylon offers some powerful, intoxicating, hellish delights.
- Can you see why the Babylonians are the big, final bad guy?

What the Babylonians Are Like

- Now let's get a better picture of what this evil love is like by looking at a few of the stories about the Babylonians.

The Tower of Babel

- The first story in the Lord's Word about this evil love is the story of the Tower of Babel from the book of Genesis.

- The people building the tower say, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower, and its head in the heavens; and let us make for ourselves a name, lest perhaps we be scattered on the faces of all the earth" (Genesis 11:4).
- They want to build up and up and up until they're in the heavens and that's a picture of how the love of ruling from the love of self wants more and more power all the way to wanting power over heaven and over God.
- We can see that same motivation in what the prophet Isaiah says about the King of Babylon:
 - 13 You have said in your heart:
 "I will ascend into heaven,
 I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;

 - 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
 I will be like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:13,14)
- If you met somebody who said, "I want to control everything and everyone – I will be God!" it would be pretty easy to say, "That person is crazy and they should not be in charge of anything."
 - But sometimes the Babylonians seem helpful at first.

Hezekiah and the Babylonians

- In the story of Hezekiah and the Babylonians that we read in our lesson, Hezekiah had been very sick and the son of the king of Babylon sent letters and a gift to Hezekiah.
 - How kind and sympathetic.
- But do you remember what Hezekiah then did?
 - He showed the son of the king of Babylon all the treasures in his house and probably in the temple too.
 - Bad idea.
 - And so the prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah that the king of Babylon would eventually come and take possession of all his treasures and even some of his sons.
- This is a picture of how, if we let it, the selfish desire to control other people can come into our hearts and take a good look at all the religious knowledge that we have and will use that to try to control other people.
- Unfortunately there are many examples through history of people doing exactly this.
 - There are people who would say things like this:
 - "We are the ones who understand the truth so we will tell you what the Word says and what you should believe.
 - "And the Word says that we get to decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.
 - "If you don't give us money and do exactly what we tell you to do, you and your whole family are going to hell!"

Babylon and the Catholic Church

- Those kinds of teachings might remind you of the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church from a couple of hundred years ago.
- And you might know that the teachings of the New Church do say that Babylon represents the corrupt Catholic Church, particularly Babylon in the book of Revelation.
- Something that you might not know that I learned just this week is that interpreting Babylon in the book of Revelation as a symbol of the Catholic Church is not unique to the teachings of the New Church.
 - It was a fairly common Protestant interpretation.
 - One passage says, "it is well known that [the present-day Babylon] exists among the Roman Catholics" (*The Last Judgment* 55; See also the translators note in the New Century Edition translation of *The Last Judgment* 53-54 and *Faith* 49).
 - But, while many Protestants at the time when the teachings of the New Church were written would have painted with a broad brush and said that all Catholics were the whore of Babylon, what the teachings of the New Church say is both narrower and broader.
 - It's narrower in the sense that the teachings of the New Church make clear that the Babylonians in the Catholic Church were the corrupt, controlling, abusive leaders but that many of the regular people were still good people.
 - One passage, for example, says this:
 - "The church,... despite the quality of its leadership, did survive among its subject people. All the people of that religion who turn to the Lord and abstain from evils as sins are saved; so they make up many heavenly communities in the spiritual world" (*Divine Providence* 257:4; see also *The Last Judgment* 63).
 - And the New Church interpretation of the Babylonians is also broader in the sense that anyone, from any faith background, from any point in history, could be a spiritual Babylonian.
 - As the passage in our lessons said, "'Babylon' means everyone who wants to use religion to control others" (*The Last Judgment* 54).
 - There are many, many non-Catholic pastors, church leaders and just individuals who have gotten caught up in using religion to control others and they have caused tremendous harm because of it.

How Tempting it is to Use Religious Teachings to Get What You Want

- You can probably see how terrible it is to use religious teachings to control other people.
- Can you also see how tempting it could be to use religious teachings to get what you want?
 - Imagine being in an argument with someone and that you could use something from the Word to make them feel guilty and let you have what you want.
 - It would be hard not to use that argument.
 - We need to not let the Babylonians see our treasures.
 - When we're trying to figure out how to get what we want, we need to stay far away from religious things that we might use to our advantage.

- When the prophet Isaiah question Hezekiah about what the Babylonians had said to him and where they came from Hezekiah said that they came "from a far-off land."
- It can seem like a far-off possibility that we would use religious things to get what we want – "That would never happen! I'm a good person!"
- But, if we now shift into the topic of how the Lord can keep us safe from the Babylonians, a good general principle is that we should consider the Babylonians to be a real, present, serious threat to our spiritual lives.

How Can the Lord Keep Us Safe from the Babylonians?

Believe That They Are a Serious Threat

- The love of controlling people from the love of self is not some distant, hypothetical threat: it is one of the biggest threats to every single person's spiritual life.
- Another prophet of the Lord, the prophet Jeremiah, tried really hard to convince the people that Babylon was coming to destroy them and take them into captivity and so they should repent, and start following Jehovah again and stop mistreating people but people mocked him and persecuted him and they believed that, because they had the temple and the religious things, that God would favor them and they would be fine.
- The Lord our God is warning us in His Word to take the threat of the Babylonians seriously.
 - We need to be on the look out for the selfish love of control coming into our hearts.

Pay Attention to How We're Treating Other People and Repent

- Now part of what makes this tricky is that not all desire to have influence on other people is selfish.
 - One passage says, "... dominion belonging to love towards the neighbor nevertheless exists, even in kingdoms, among those who are wise on account of their belief in and love to God; for these love their neighbor" (*Secrets of Heaven* 10814:3).
- So how do we tell the difference? How can we tell if we're wanting to influence other people for good or if we're trying to control people for our own selfish reasons? Listen to this passage:
 - A person can recognize the difference between the two loves with difficulty because a person does not know whether they are led by the devil or by the Lord. One who is led by the devil performs useful services for the sake of themselves and the world, whereas one who is led by the Lord performs useful services for the sake of the Lord and heaven. And all those perform useful services from the Lord who refrain from evils as being sins, whereas all those perform useful services from the devil who do not refrain from evils as sins.

By this and nothing else is the difference recognized. In outward form the two appear alike, but in their inward form they are totally unlike. (*Divine Providence* 215:13)

- If we are treating the people around us badly and breaking the commandments, then that's a pretty good sign that the Babylonians have taken us captive (*Divine Providence* 215:8).
 - But, if we're working hard to not hurt other people, not take their things, not get revenge against them, not mislead them, etc., then that's a good sign that we're on the right track, even if things are hard.
 - And, even if we have done some hurtful things, we can still turn back to the Lord.
 - In the book of Revelation an angel cries out "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen..."
 - And then another voice from heaven says, "Come out of her, My people, so that you do not become partakers of her sins, and so that you do not receive of her plagues" (Revelation 18:2,4).
- Even when we've been taken away captive by the Babylonians, the Lord can still bring us back to the promised land from that place.

Conclusion

- From the beginning of this series of sermons about spiritual enemies and all the way through it, the pattern has been the same.
 - When the people stopped following the Lord and started committing a certain kind of evil, then an enemy that represented that exact evil would attack them (*Divine Providence* 251:3)
- Jehoiachin and his people were conquered by the Babylonians who dominated them and took and misused their religious treasures because Jehoiachin and his people and their ancestors chose to dominate people and take and misuse the religious treasures that were given to them.
 - But it didn't have to be that way for them.
 - And it doesn't have to be that way for us.
 - Thanks to the Lord in His Word, we can know our spiritual enemies.
 - We can understand their tricks and how they can lead us astray.
 - We can understand the drastic harm that they can cause.
 - And we can know that, however strong our spiritual enemies may be, the Lord is even stronger.
 - The Lord can defeat even the biggest final bad guy.
- One final passage says that "people who are prompted by a love of ruling stemming from a love of self love nothing more than to lead themselves, and they want only themselves to rule," but "people who are prompted by love toward the Lord love nothing more than to be led by the Lord, and they want the Lord alone to rule" (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 142).
- May we all love to be led by the Lord and want Him alone to rule in our lives so that He can keep us safe from all our spiritual enemies and so that we can live in His kingdom which "shall be for ever and ever" (*True Christianity* 791; Daniel 7:13,14; Revelation 11:15).

- Amen.

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