

THE
CHURCH
IN
BABYLON

STUDY GUIDE

ERWIN W. LUTZER

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CHICAGO

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All emphasis in Scripture has been added.

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SESSION 1

WELCOME TO BABYLON

Read introduction and
chapters 1 and 2 in the book

Summary

I'm writing at a time when America is polarized politically, racially, morally, and religiously. Common ground among Americans seems to have vanished. We are angry, hostile, even violent. Someone has said that we are a nation addicted to rage.

Yet it is into this atmosphere of shrill voices that we have been called to represent Christ. The message we have and the lives we lead ought to permeate society and be a beacon of light in the approaching darkness. The church of Jesus Christ is still the best hope for the world.

But how? How can we, followers of Christ, be the light amid

the darkness? Much has been made of the failings of the church and of Christians. And, we must humbly admit, we ourselves are often guilty of the sins we accuse those “out there” of.

Yet the church prevails.

I love the church. For thirty-six years it was my privilege to serve as the senior pastor of The Moody Church in Chicago—a church that has had a continuous ministry in the city for more than 150 years. I have witnessed many changes since the days when I was installed as the senior pastor back in 1980. At that time, the worship wars had hardly begun. In the past four decades, several great cultural changes have fed off of each other to transform our society and contribute to the moral and spiritual disarray we see today. The darkness is, indeed, very dark in our modern-day Babylon. Perverted views of sexuality, the insidious effect of technology, and the rapid rise of anti-Christian bias confront the church today. So, too, the church is threatened from the inside by false beliefs and wrong attitudes of some of God’s people.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Subsequent chapters will deal with each of these pressing issues. The message that I want to share with you, from my heart to yours, is that we serve a sovereign God who will accomplish His purposes through us—as He did through Jeremiah, as He did through Daniel, as He did through the Jews, His people, who found themselves in an alien land.

WHAT THE WORD SAYS

Whenever I think of the church, my mind gravitates to the introduction John gave to the seven churches of Revelation.

Jesus is seen walking among the seven lamp stands and He is “clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. . . . In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. . . . As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (Rev. 1:13–16, 20).

Visualize it. First John says Jesus was walking between the seven lamp stands (the seven churches), and then he says Jesus was holding seven stars in His right hand (the angels or “messengers” of the seven churches). Jesus both observes the churches as he walks between them and also holds the leadership of the churches in His right hand. He loves His people whom He died to redeem. He observes us and, like these seven churches, He commends us for what pleases Him and rebukes us for our failures, but always with a marvelous promise of reward given to the overcomers. And thus seven times He admonishes, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Here’s my premise. Jesus loves His people and carries them in His right hand. He who has been given all authority in heaven and Earth has made available to us all that we need, not merely to survive but to thrive in this hour of growing darkness.

We will not go into the future unprepared—if we are willing to hear “what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Back to Babylon—the real Babylon, where in 605 BC

thousands of Jews were captured by the armies of the pagan nation and forced to trek eight hundred miles to live among an alien culture. And it was not a peaceful journey. Some Jews were killed when Jerusalem was under siege, others died of starvation. Children were malnourished; babies starved for lack of milk. Those who survived and trekked to Babylon had relatives who died during the treacherous journey. Finally, those who survived settled in the city of Babylon, eight hundred miles from Jerusalem and about sixty miles from the modern city of Baghdad.

The prophet Jeremiah records his personal description of the suffering: “My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city” (Lam. 2:11).

But there they were, men, women, and children. How did they survive in a hostile culture? According to Jeremiah, the Jews were subject to “affliction and hard servitude” (Lam. 1:3). Discouragement, despondency, and depression were widespread. How would they react? And what can we learn from their response as we navigate our own “Babylon”?

The first option for the Jews was to angrily isolate themselves from the Babylonian culture and condemn their captors—who could blame them? Their anger would be justified because of the harsh treatment they and their families had received at the hands of these ruthless murderers. The second—and easiest—was assimilation. Just keep your head down, go along with the culture, and hope you and your family will be left in peace.

But God says, I want infiltration! Don’t withdraw—en-

gage. But without compromise; without contamination.

God says He sent the Jews to Babylon (Jer. 29:7, 20). Think about this: The Jews were in Babylon as a judgment for their own depravity, but now that they were there, they were to take advantage of their plight and be witnesses of God's grace to the evil people of Babylon! They were to see themselves as sent there as God's ambassadors.

We, as the church, will never be effective unless we see ourselves as sent by Christ into the world. He prayed, "As you [the Father] sent me into the world, so have I sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

We are pilgrims, out of step with the ever-changing culture—yet we are sent by Christ, the Head of the church. The church is the last barrier standing between the present moral breakdown and total chaos.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Do you agree with Dr. Lutzer's diagnosis of some of the ills that threaten society? What are some others you would add?*

- 2. How can we discern "what the Spirit is saying to the churches"? What gets in the way of our hearing His guidance?*

3. *Discuss the options of “isolation, assimilation, and infiltration” for dealing with an alien culture. What are the pros and cons of each? What would you say is your church’s approach?*
4. *“Selflessly meeting the needs of others—loving people without holding their sin against them and showing them a better way—has always been and always will be the most important doorway for sharing our faith.” Dr. Lutzer gives some examples of people who are doing this.*
5. *Can you cite any such situations you yourself have been involved with? What about your church?*

AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO PRAY

When confronted by foreign armies, King Jehoshaphat prayed, “For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you” (2 Chron. 20:12). Then when the choir sang praises to God, God gave them the victory.

Let us pray for wisdom to navigate the rough cultural waters we are experiencing. Here is a promise you can claim: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5).