

SESSION ELEVEN

Peter in Babylon

1 Peter 5:1-14; John 21:18-19; Revelation 17

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover where Peter's "follow me" ended: writing from "Babylon," the early Church's code for Rome, shepherding to the last, and finally stretching out his hands under Nero as Jesus foretold. They weigh the evidence for Peter in Rome, the unanimous early testimony, the coded greeting, the tomb no other city ever claimed, and see why the steward's succession runs through that see: the keys stayed where the keybearer fell.

Catholic Touchstone: The see of Peter. Rome's primacy is not geographic vanity but a martyr's estate: the church "which presides in charity" (St. Ignatius, quoted in CCC 834) is the church where the shepherd of the whole flock followed his Lord all the way (CCC 834; 882; 936).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Tonight is a detective story, and the group has the clues in hand from their reading. The question sounds simple, was Peter in Rome and did he die there?, but a great deal stands on it: Session Ten showed succession running through Rome's list, and if Peter never sat where the list begins, the list is a genealogy of a ghost. So the evidence must be weighed honestly, and it can be, because it is remarkably strong.

Clue one, the coded greeting: "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark" (1 Peter 5:13). "She" is the church where Peter writes; the question is where "Babylon" is. Mesopotamian Babylon in Peter's day was a much-diminished place with no tradition, ancient or modern, connecting Peter to it; the same is true of the Egyptian fortress-town of the same name. But "Babylon" as a code for Rome, the new world-empire that would soon destroy the Temple as the old Babylon had, is the standing cipher of the era: Revelation uses it repeatedly for the city on seven mountains "which has dominion over the kings of the earth" (Revelation 17:9, 18), and Jewish writings of the period do the same. Nearly the whole ancient Church, and most scholars across confessional lines today, read 1 Peter 5:13 as Rome. Present it as the overwhelmingly probable reading, hedged exactly that much.

Clue two, the prophecy: "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go. (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.)"

(John 21:18-19). John records the prophecy and its meaning, writing decades after the fact, for readers who evidently already knew how Peter died: stretched-out hands, girded by another, glorifying God by death. John is not predicting; he is confirming what his churches knew.

Clue three, the unbroken early testimony, and the dates matter more than the details. Clement of Rome, about AD 96, writing in the city itself, recalls Peter and Paul's martyrdoms "in our own generation" and immediately joins to them a great multitude of martyrs whose example was "among us" (1 Clement 5-6). He never names the place outright, but a Roman writer joining the apostles' deaths to Rome's own martyrs, within living memory, is the earliest witness that they died where he writes. Ignatius of Antioch, about 107, writes to the Romans "I do not command you as Peter and Paul did," assuming they had commanded that church in particular. Irenaeus, about 180, calls Rome the church "founded and organized by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul." Around 200, the Roman presbyter Gaius (in a fragment preserved by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.25) offers to point visitors to the "trophies" (the monuments) of the apostles on the Vatican hill and the Ostian Way, and Bishop Dionysius of Corinth writes of Peter and Paul teaching in Italy and being martyred "at the same time." St.

Jerome later gathers the tradition: Peter, head of the church at Rome, crucified under Nero, head-downward at his own request, counting himself unworthy to die as his Lord. Hold the head-downward detail with an honest "the tradition adds"; hold the Roman martyrdom itself with confidence, because antiquity is unanimous.

Clue four, the argument from silence, and it is louder than the documents: no other city, in any surviving ancient source, ever claimed Peter's tomb. In a Christian world that contested relics ferociously, where cities were made by possessing an apostle, Antioch, where Peter demonstrably ministered, never claimed his grave; Jerusalem never did; Alexandria, Ephesus, no one. One city claimed it, from the beginning, and built successively grander shrines over one spot on a Vatican hillside to say so. Unopposed claims of this kind, in that world, are how you find real graves.

Clue five, the bones, handled with exactly the Church's own care: twentieth-century excavations under St. Peter's high altar uncovered a first-century pagan and Christian necropolis, a mid-second-century shrine (matching Gaius's "trophy") built over a simple earlier grave, surrounded by Christian graffiti invoking Peter, and human remains that Pope St. Paul VI announced in 1968 had been identified "in a way that we can consider convincing." Say it the way the Church says it: not laboratory certainty, but a simple early grave over which a shrine was raised by the mid-second century, veneration at that spot demonstrable within about a century of Peter's death, on the spot the basilica's altar has marked for seventeen hundred years. The altar was not placed over the bones by luck; the basilica was built, at absurd engineering cost on a hillside, to put the altar over that grave.

Why it matters doctrinally, said precisely: primacy attaches to Peter and his succession, not to Italian soil; Rome is the see of Peter because Peter's ministry and martyrdom planted his *cathedra* there, sealed in blood, exactly as "follow me" promised. And do not miss the letter itself: 1 Peter 5:1-11, written from that Babylon in Peter's final years, is the shepherd of Session Six still tending: elders exhorted to shepherd willingly, the flock entrusted to the chief Shepherd, and Peter's promise using the very verb of Luke 22:32: God "will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you" (5:10). The strengthener of the brethren, strengthening to the last line.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Psalms 137:1 and Jeremiah 50-51. Babylon as the archetype of the proud world-empire that exiles God's people: the name was ready-made as a cipher for Rome, the empire that would burn the second Temple as Babylon burned the first. When Peter and John write "Babylon," they are praying Israel's oldest political theology.

Daniel 4:30. "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built?" The king's boast names the city's essence: human glory enthroned. Peter dies at the hands of exactly that spirit wearing Roman dress, and his letter from Babylon tells the exiles how to live holy inside it (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11).

Genesis 11:1-9. Babel, where the nations scattered in pride, is where the name begins. The Church's memory loved the reversal: at Babel tongues divided mankind; at Pentecost tongues gathered it; and in new Babylon the fisherman's grave became a gathering-place for every nation on earth.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Romans, 4*

On the road to his own martyrdom about AD 107, Ignatius begs the Roman church not to interfere with his coming death, and drops the sentence historians treasure: I do not command you as Peter and Paul did; they were apostles, I am a convict. Writing to Rome alone does Ignatius speak this way, assuming as common knowledge that Peter and Paul had taught and commanded in that church.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies, Book III, 1*

Irenaeus states the founding as settled fact: while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church, Matthew issued his Gospel, and after their departure Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down Peter's preaching in writing. For Irenaeus, Rome's apostolic foundation by the two chief apostles is the fixed point from which his whole succession argument runs.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome *On Illustrious Men, 1*

Jerome opens his catalogue of Christian writers with Peter: prince of the apostles, who governed the church at Rome until the last year of Nero, when he was crucified, and, the tradition Jerome records, fastened head-downward at his own request, declaring himself unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was. The steward's final act, in the Church's memory, was one more deferral to the King.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 834 joins two patristic voices: St. Ignatius, who calls Rome the church "which presides in charity," and St. Irenaeus, who adds that with this church, by reason of its preeminent origin, the whole Church must be in agreement.

CCC 882 names the present tense of tonight's history: the pope, bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful.

CCC 936 compresses the study so far into one line: the Lord made St. Peter the visible foundation of his Church and entrusted the keys to him; the bishop of the church of Rome, successor to St. Peter, is head of the college of bishops.

THREAD WATCH

The Follow Me thread resolves tonight. Planted at the end of Session Six, it lands at the Vatican hillside. Read John 21:18-19 again at the summit and let the room be quiet; the prophecy and the grave are the same fact seen from both ends.

The Rome question closes. Session Ten asked why the succession runs through Rome; tonight answers: because that is where the keybearer's following ended and his chair remained. If the group connects Isaiah 22's "throne of honor" to the word *cathedra*, celebrate them.

One session remains. The office founded, exercised, failed-and-restored, transmitted, and located; all that is left is its exact protection and its true style. Tell the group plainly: bring every remaining objection next week, especially the word infallibility. The last session exists for it.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Crack the Babylon code from Revelation's own clues, with the honest hedge stated and then weighed.

2.

Assemble the early testimony chronologically, Clement to Jerome, and feel the force of unanimity plus the silence of every rival city.

3.

Handle the excavations with the Church's own careful language: a venerated first-century grave under the altar, announced as convincing, not oversold.

4.

Read 1 Peter 5 as the shepherd's last letter, and catch the Luke 22:32 verb in 5:10 with their own eyes.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 6, the excavations, into the leader's summary and trim the Dig Deeper. Protect Build 2, the Babylon discovery, and Build 7, the 1 Peter 5 reading; the night should end on the letter, not the forensics.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you told your friend how his following would end, and he followed anyway. Give us tonight the sober joy of the martyrs' Church: eyes open, price counted, love undeterred. And when our own following costs us, gird us and carry us where, on our own, we would not wish to go. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Where would you want to be buried, or what place on earth would you want your life associated with forever, and why that place?

2.

What is the strongest claim you believe on testimony alone, no photograph, no document you have personally verified? What makes testimony trustworthy to you?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Open the case. Read 1 Peter 5:13: "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings." "She" is the church where Peter is writing. So the whole question is on the map: where is Babylon? Before any clues: what are the candidate readings, honestly listed?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Three candidates deserve the table: the literal Mesopotamian Babylon; a Roman fortress-town in Egypt also called Babylon; or a code name for some other city. Honesty first: the literal reading has a real case. Mesopotamia held one of the largest Jewish populations in the world, a natural mission field for the apostle to the circumcised; every other place-name in the letter (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, 1:1) is literal; and serious interpreters, John Calvin among them, have defended taking this one literally too.

But the literal candidates have a shared problem: silence. Old Babylon in Peter's day was greatly diminished, and no tradition anywhere, in any century, in any church, east or west, connects Peter's ministry or death to either Babylon. Traditions attach to real footsteps; apostles leave churches, tombs, and memories where they actually go. Both literal Babylons have none. So we go looking for the code,

and Peter's own circle wrote the codebook.

2.

LIVE DISCOVERY. You read the codebook this week. Someone read Revelation 17:5, 9, and 18 aloud. Revelation, from the Johannine circle, names a "Babylon the great." What two identifying features does chapter 17 give her, and what city in the first century do they fit?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Feature one: "the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated" (17:9). Feature two: she "is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth" (17:18). A city on seven hills that rules the kings of the earth: in the first century that is an address, and every ancient reader knew whose. Rome celebrated her own seven hills on coins and in festivals.

"Babylon" as code for Rome was the standing cipher of the age, in Revelation repeatedly and in Jewish writings after the Temple's destruction, for the same reason the code worked instantly: Rome was doing to the second Temple what Babylon did to the first, the proud world-empire of Daniel 4 in new dress. So when Peter greets from "she who is at Babylon," the overwhelmingly probable reading, held by nearly all ancient and most modern interpreters across confessions, is: the church at Rome sends greetings. Hedged exactly that much, and no more.

3.

Reread John 21:18-19, the prophecy from the beach: stretched-out hands, girded by another, carried where he does not wish, "to show by what death he was to glorify God." John writes this decades after Peter's death, for his churches. What does that timing tell us about what John's first readers already knew?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

John is not making a prediction his readers must wait to verify; he is recording a prophecy whose fulfillment they evidently knew, which is why he can add the interpretive gloss "by what death." You explain a prophecy's meaning to readers who know the ending. Stretched-out hands girded by another was read from the earliest centuries as crucifixion described from inside; John himself says only "by what death," but the unanimous tradition supplies the cross, and John's churches, hearing it, evidently needed no more.

So by the 90s, the manner of Peter's death was common Christian knowledge, needing only allusion. The question the rest of tonight answers is the where, and the witnesses line up in order, starting with a man writing from the city itself.

4.

Now the testimony, in chronological order, and the dates are the argument. The leader will read the chain: Clement of Rome (about 96), Ignatius (about 107, in tonight's Voices), Irenaeus (about 180, in the Voices), the Roman presbyter Gaius (about 200), Dionysius of Corinth (about 170). What does each add, and what is the cumulative force?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Clement, writing from Rome itself within living memory, recalls Peter and Paul's martyrdoms "in our own generation" alongside a great multitude of local martyrs; he does not name the place, but the joining is a hometown witness, thirty years out. Ignatius, a decade later, tells the Romans "I do not command you as Peter and Paul did," assuming those two had commanded that particular church. Dionysius of Corinth writes of Peter and Paul teaching in Italy and dying "at the same time." Irenaeus states Rome's founding by Peter and Paul as settled fact and builds his whole succession argument on it. And Gaius, a Roman cleric (in a fragment preserved by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.25), offers to physically walk visitors to the apostles' "trophies," their grave monuments, on the Vatican hill and the Ostian Way: by 200, Peter's tomb is a place you can be shown.

Cumulative force: unanimous, early, geographically distributed (Rome, Antioch, Corinth, Gaul), and utterly uncontested. No surviving ancient source disputes it; antiquity, which argued about everything, has left us no argument about this. St. Jerome later gathers the tradition whole: crucified under Nero, and, the tradition adds, head-downward at his own request, counting himself unworthy of his Lord's exact death, the steward deferring to the King one last time.

5.

Now the argument from silence, and let the group construct it: in the ancient Church, possessing an apostle's tomb made a city. Relics were contested ferociously. Antioch could document Peter's ministry from Galatians itself; Jerusalem held the Church's first years. So the question: which cities, besides Rome, ever claimed Peter's grave, and what does the answer prove?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

None that any surviving source records. Antioch, with a documented Petrine ministry and every motive, left us no claim to his grave; neither did Jerusalem, Alexandria, Ephesus, or either Babylon. One city claimed it, from the beginning, and kept building over one specific spot on a hillside to say so.

In a world of contested relics, an unopposed claim of the most valuable relic in Christendom is how you find a real grave. False claims attract rivals; this one attracted a basilica. The silence of every other city is the loudest witness in the case.

6.

The forensics, held with exactly the Church's own care. The leader summarizes the twentieth-century excavations under St. Peter's high altar. What was found, what did Pope St. Paul VI actually announce in 1968, and what may we responsibly conclude?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Beneath the altar, excavators found a first-century necropolis; within it, a simple earth grave over which a small shrine was built in the mid-second century, matching Gaius's "trophy" almost too well; around it, Christian graffiti invoking Peter's name; and remains, kept wrapped in the monument, of an older man of the first century. Paul VI announced the relics had been identified "in a way that we can consider convincing": the Church's own carefully hedged sentence, and we should not say more than she does.

What we may responsibly conclude: the basilica was not built and the altar not placed by legend-drift or luck. Constantine's engineers cut into a hillside and buried a functioning cemetery, at enormous cost and against every convenience, to center the altar on one pre-existing venerated grave. Seventeen centuries later, excavation found beneath the altar the second-century shrine and the simple earlier grave it honored, the very spot the Roman church had marked as Peter's from at least the mid-second century. The identifications of the graffiti and the bones remain debated among scholars; the Church herself claims no more than "convincing." The X on the map was placed by a community certain of what it guarded, and it built a basilica to say so.

7.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Now leave the forensics and read the letter. Read 1 Peter 5:1-4 and 5:10-11 aloud: the shepherd of Session Six, writing from Babylon near the end. What is he still doing, near the end of his life? And look hard at the verbs of verse 10, one of them should ring a bell from Session Five.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He is still shepherding: exhorting the elders "as a fellow elder," not domineering, to "tend the flock of God that is your charge... willingly... eagerly," with the chief Shepherd's crown in view. The man given "feed my sheep" on a beach is feeding sheep in his final paragraphs, from the capital of the empire that will kill him, and he grabs no titles doing it: fellow elder, witness, servant.

And verse 10: "the God of all grace... will himself restore, establish, and *strengthen* you." There is the verb of Luke 22:32, the commission verb, "strengthen your brethren," in Peter's own blessing. He is doing, in his final sentences, precisely what the Lord assigned him at the table: turned again long ago, strengthening to the last line. The commission and the man's whole life have become the same thing.

DIG DEEPER · Quo vadis?

An ancient story, preserved in the apocryphal Acts of Peter and beloved by the Church without being asserted as history, tells that Peter, persuaded to flee Nero's persecution, met Christ on the Appian Way walking toward the city. Domine, quo vadis, Lord, where are you going? I am going to Rome to be crucified again. And Peter turned around. Hold it as the early Church held it: not a document, but a parable the community told about a truth it knew from documents, that Peter's courage failed once by a fire and did not fail at the end. The man who once fled a servant girl walked back into Nero's Rome.

8.

Close the case and open the meaning. Assemble tonight's verdict in one or two sentences, and then answer the deeper question: why does it *matter* that the succession runs through a martyr's grave rather than a conference decision, and what does it say about the kind of authority this office was always meant to be?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The verdict: by coded greeting, fulfilled prophecy, unanimous early testimony, the silence of every rival city, and a venerated first-century grave under the high altar, Peter ministered and was martyred at Rome, and his chair remained where he fell. Rome's primacy is Peter's primacy with an address: the

keys stayed where the keybearer laid them down.

The meaning: the see was purchased the way the flock was, with blood. The office's title deed is not a legal instrument but a crucifixion, which permanently defines the authority's character: the steward rules from a grave he accepted, under a King who died first. "Presiding in charity," Ignatius called that church, and charity there meant what it meant on Calvary. One question remains for this study: what, exactly, travels down that blood-bought line, what is protected, what is not, and what is it all for? Bring your sharpest objections. Next week we finish.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

"Another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." Peter's freedom was to consent. Where in your life right now are you being carried somewhere you did not choose, and what would Peter's consent look like there?

2.

Peter signed this letter from Babylon "fellow elder" and spent it strengthening others. If your last recorded words to the people you love were written this month, what would they be strengthening?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Read all of 1 Peter this week, one sitting if you can, hearing it as a late letter of the man this study has followed: from Babylon, near the end, still feeding sheep.

2.

Take a virtual walk through the Vatican necropolis this week (the Scavi; the Vatican posts a tour online) and pray at the trophy of Gaius from your chair: a first-century grave, still gathering the nations.

3.

Keep the daily Our Father for the pope, adding this week: "Lord, you led Peter where he did not wish to go; give his successor a martyr's freedom, and your whole Church a martyr's love."

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, chief Shepherd, you told him how it would end, and he followed you all the way to the hill. Thank you for a Church founded on witnesses who paid, and for a chair bought with blood. When our following grows costly, walk toward us on the road as you walked toward him, and turn us around. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you." (1 Peter 5:10, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Eleven, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Build 1: the coded greeting from Babylon

Revelation 17:5, 9, 18

Live discovery, Build 2: seven mountains, dominion over kings

John 21:18-19

Build 3: the prophecy and its knowing readers

1 Clement 5-6

Build 4: hometown witness, within living memory

Letter to the Romans 4 (Ignatius)

Build 4 and Voices: as Peter and Paul commanded you

Against Heresies III.1

Build 4 and Voices: founded by Peter and Paul

1 Peter 5:1-11

Live discovery, Build 7: the shepherd's last letter, the strengthening verb

Psalms 137:1; Daniel 4:30; Genesis 11:1-9

Leader background: Babylon's theology

CCC 834; 882; 936

Catechism Connection