

Series Revelation

This Message #28 Revelation 18:1-24

It is good to remind ourselves from time to time that the book of Revelation was given to John as a series of visions — pictures in the mind. The visions are primarily presented in symbolic ways, with the descriptions rooted in the Old Testament. It is also helpful to remember that the main concern of the book is not chronology and sequence, which many commentators and students of the book get hung up on, but ultimate realities, presented in such ways that believers throughout the centuries have been able to understand and be encouraged in their faith.

We are presently in the section of the book which is focused on two cities. One of those cities will be the object of God's wrath at the end of the age, the other of His blessing. One city has been a source of evil throughout human history, the other will represent the fulfillment of God's eternal purposes.

The city of Babylon was mentioned in chapter 16. "God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath."

In chapter 17, the angel revealed to John that the city of Babylon was like a "great prostitute, and that this "great prostitute" was sitting on the beast which has seven heads and ten horns and names of blasphemy;" and that she "ruled over the kings of the earth." John was informed that the prostitute is the source of "the abominations of the earth" and that it has been her mission throughout human history to turn people away from the truth of God. John observed that the prostitute "was drunk with the blood of the saints." For these reasons, the "great prostitute," the city of Babylon, will be a special target of God's wrath at the end of the age.

God wants the readers of this book to clearly understand what the prostitute/city represents. That's why several lengthy visions about this were given to John. These visions are a warning to us. God does not want His people to have any association with Babylon.

Babylon is a very ancient city. Genesis chapter 10 informs us that it was the center of what was likely the first human political “empire.” The citizens of that ancient city were deliberately disobedient to the commands and expectations of God. They attempted to build a tower and establish their own religion. God disrupted those efforts, but the city retained its reputation for spiritual perversions through the centuries. In Scripture, Babylon is associated with rejection of God and His ways, idolatry, immorality; extravagance and luxury; the use of sorcery and magic; pride and arrogance; cruelty and oppression. The influence of Satan and the Antichrist were/are behind the attitudes and behaviors of Babylon.

Babylon was the subject of numerous Old Testament prophecies. The conquest of Judah by the Babylonian empire was predicted many decades before Babylon became the dominant power in the Middle East. The ungodly character of Babylon and its rulers was described by the prophets. The fall of the historical Babylon in 539 BC was the subject of several prophecies. There are numerous similarities between the demise of the ancient city of Babylon and the end of symbolic Babylon in the book of Revelation.

In chapter 18 there are two viewpoints concerning the destruction of Babylon. One is the holy perspective from heaven — the destruction is a cause for rejoicing. The other perspective is from earth, from whence there is much lamenting. Chapter 18 describes the destruction of Babylon from these different viewpoints.

We’ll divide the passage into three parts. The opening statement is by an angel from heaven. This is followed by an application for believers. In the next section kings, merchants, and sea captains lament the loss of their prestige and income. In the final verses of the passage, there is a kind of melancholy recollection of the pulsing life that once filled the great city and a restatement of the reasons for the judgment.

Read Revelation 18:1-8

Chapter 18 is an extension of material we learned last week. The angel offered to show John “the punishment of the great prostitute” (*Revelation 17:1*). Today’s reading provides more details about that event. In chapter 17, the emphasis was on the evil spiritual influence that Babylon had in the world. Her abominations influenced the thinking and ambitions and religious practices of the inhabitants of the earth. The spirit of the city assisted the dragon/Satan in his efforts to “make war against the Lamb.”

The destruction of Babylon will have a great impact on the political and economic systems of the world. These systems are means through which the abominations of the prostitute influence the attitudes and behaviors of the people of earth. Her influence turns the political and economic systems into unjust, discriminatory, and exploitative practices. Throughout human history, power and wealth have been misused by enterprising individuals to gain control over other people. Corruption and evil permeate the political and economic systems everywhere in the world, all because the spirit of Babylon is at work.

John saw a special angel coming down from heaven. This angel had great authority and a special kind of brilliance about him. His mission was to declare “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!” At face value these words indicate that the destruction of Babylon had already occurred. This is not an unusual way of describing events in Revelation since several of the visions depict the outcome of events before they happen. On the other hand, I think the angel is here referencing the destruction of Babylon which occurred many centuries in the past. I hold to this interpretation because another angel in verse 4 calls the people of God to “come out of her ... so that they will not share in her sins nor be afflicted with her plagues.” This would not be an option if Babylon was already fallen. It is my opinion that this passage is a special instruction for all the followers of Jesus up to our time.

The prophet Isaiah predicted the demise of Babylon. He said it would happen on a day he referred to as “the day of the Lord’s coming, ... the day of his burning anger” (*Isaiah 13:9, 13*). Isaiah made predictions like this one: “Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there; but desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about. Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces” (*Isaiah 13:19-22*). What is interesting is that Isaiah wrote those words about Babylon before Babylon became a world empire. The prophet Jeremiah used almost the same words when he wrote about the judgment of Babylon.

The physical city of Babylon was substantially deteriorated and totally abandoned by 140 BC. However, spiritually and symbolically, the city remained “a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit.” Spiritually, every “nation has drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries,” and every “king of the earth has committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.”

This is why the voice from heaven commanded, “Come out of her, my people.” God did not want His people, whether from the Old Testament or New Testament eras, to become contaminated by the traits of Babylon, nor compromise their testimonies through association with her. The people of God are to turn away from the deceptions and enticements of the spirit of Babylon.

The Apostle Paul restated the instructions of the angel: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Satan?” Paul then quoted the words of Isaiah, “‘Therefore come out from them and be separate,’ says the Lord” (*II Corinthians 6:14-18*).

God does not want any of His people to become ensnared by worldly qualities. There have been warnings about this throughout the book. For examples, when Jesus was speaking to the church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3, He warned the believers in one fellowship to reject the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. "Repent," Jesus said, "Otherwise, I will come to you and fight against" those who have been led astray (*Revelation 2:14-16*). To another fellowship Jesus said, "you tolerate that woman Jezebel. ... By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality. ... I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent" (*Revelation 2:20-22*).

Should believers not separate themselves from the sins of Babylon, they will receive the plagues which will be poured out on Babylon. This warning is addressed to all professing Christians, all those who, since the 1st Century, read this book.

Verse 5 states that the sins of Babylon "are piled up to heaven." In my mind I picture this as a mound of refuse and garbage that has grown to be like a new tower of Babel. The angel announced that the punishment of Babylon will fit "what she has done." She will be given "a double portion from her own cup." Her "torture and grief will be equal to the glory and luxury she gave herself."

Notice what Babylon thinks about herself, verse 7: "I sit as a queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn," phrases which imply "I am in the place of authority," "I am not bereft of people to support and take care of me," and "I have no regrets about what I am doing." These are phrases of boastful self-sufficiency.

The rulers of ancient Babylon had had similar thoughts. Nebuchadnezzar was caused by God to live like an animal for seven years because of his pride (*Daniel 4*). Belshazzar ignored the threat of the Medo-Persian army and felt safe enough inside the walls of Babylon to host a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles, but it was on that very night that the enemy forces entered the city and captured it with literally "no shots being fired" (*Daniel 5*). As verse 8 states, "In one day her plagues will overtake her, the plagues of death, mourning, famine, and fire." In spite of her many charms and seductive appeal, Babylon will be powerless to avert her destruction.

It is my intention to hurry over verses 9 through 19. Instead of explaining the verses, let me summarize. The first people to lament the demise of the city are the kings of the earth. Kings, more than other people, love the luxury life and the power afforded them by their positions, and it seems that all political rulers do everything they can to hang on to their power once they obtain it, whether their actions are ethical and virtuous or not. Kings acquire their worldly ways of thinking and acting from the influence of Babylon. They have symbolically engaged in adulterous relationships with the city, which is also known as the queen Mother of Prostitutes. The kings weep and mourn over the sudden change in their fortunes.

The merchants also weep and mourn. Babylon the Great was built on the luxury items they provided. Examples of these exotic items are given in verses 12 and 13. Notice that the last mentioned items are slaves and human beings. In verse 14, the merchants recognize that the objects that the great prostitute longed for are “gone,” “vanished,” and will “never be recovered.”

The third group to be mentioned is those who “earn their living by the sea” — those who handle shipping and transporting. It is implied that Babylon is a center of trade and commerce. This industry will suffer irreparable loss because of the destruction of the city.

It seems obvious that all three groups were consumed with materialism. Materialism and self-interest and godlessness go together. An abundance of resources is not inherently evil, but an abundance of material wealth often contributes to covetousness and selfish ambition. When the desires of people are primarily focused on the accumulation of money and goods, God is pushed aside and materialism becomes a form of idolatry. In the destruction of Babylon, the idols of commercialism and materialism, on which the kings, merchants, and sea captains are focused, are destroyed. It is interesting that these groups are mostly lamenting what the destruction of the city means to their income and careers. They are not concerned about the actual loss of lives and property of the city itself.

In the description of each group, it is mentioned that they “stand far off” because they are terrified at what they see. Another phrase which is repeated by each group is “in one hour.” This is a reference to the suddenness and unexpectedness of the destruction of the city.

The world on which these people pin their hopes is collapsed. In the end the prostitute is proven to be a bitter disappointment. The people who have interacted with her are utterly helpless. Babylon had seemed to be a city both great and mighty, before whose power and might the strength of the church was as nothing. In her vanity, she seemed able to defy God and destroy His saints with impunity. But “mighty is the Lord God who judges her” (*verse 8b*).

Before we think about the last section of the chapter, I want to explain my interpretation. Most commentators assume that the angels and John are describing Rome, that Rome will be the future iteration of Babylon. It is my opinion that there might be some allusions to Rome in this chapter, but this is only because Rome, like Jerusalem, Istanbul, Mecca, New York City, London, and every other major city in the world, possesses the traits of ancient Babylon. If Babylon is the mother of prostitutes, then all the other empires and cities of the world are her offspring. In my opinion, the purpose of the vision in chapter 18 is not to describe any one city, but to explain to us the prototype of the earth’s cities and the source of the evil influence which permeates our world. Believers need to be discerning people, understanding the times in which we live.

Now let’s focus on verses 20 through 24.

Read Revelation 18:20-24

In the previous verses we learned that there is sadness and shock on earth. However, there is joy in heaven. God is the One to take vengeance for the way Babylon has treated the saints, apostles and prophets. Notice that John attributes the deaths of the martyrs to Babylon the Great even though believers have been persecuted and killed in many countries. By the time John recorded the visions he had received, all the other Apostles, including Paul, had been martyred. John was the last surviving apostle.

The final explanation concerning Babylon was illustrated with an object lesson. John saw a mighty angel pick up a large boulder and throw it into the sea. The lesson here is clear: Just as the stone will quickly sink in the waters, so will Babylon disappear, and, just as the stone will not be retrievable, all traces of the wicked city, the source of evil influence, will be gone forever.

Previously, we read that the kings, merchants, and sea captains were witnesses to the burning of Babylon from outside the city. In the closing verses of this chapter we are given a view of the city from within. The phrase “never again,” appears six times. The words of the angel are not a lament, but more like a reflection on the lives of ordinary people who had lived in the city.

The sounds of music would never be heard again. No craftsman or tradesman would ever be found at work again. There would never again be food preparation, or the light from lamps, or the joyous voices of a bride and bridegroom.

Verses 23 and 24 are a final reminder of why the city had to be destroyed: It was the arrogant pride and self-exaltation induced by her wealth. It was also because of the sorcery by which all nations were deceived and led astray. The deceit of Babylon was like a drug which caused addiction. It poisoned the nations and kept them in Satan’s grip. The final reason was attributed to Babylon’s responsibility for the killing of prophets and saints and others.

The designation “Babylon the Great” has a much more significant meaning than the physical historical city of ancient Babylon. Babylon the Great represents the spirit of Satan. It is this spirit which turns the peoples of earth away from God.

The main point for us to recognize is that our pleasure-mad, arrogant world, with all its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its corrupt political and economic systems, with its antichristian philosophies and cultures, with its multitudes of people who have forsaken God and are living according to the lusts of the flesh and the desires of the mind, shall perish.

We must recognize that the spirit of Babylon is still highly functional today. And just like the believers in the 1st Century had to decide how best to obey the command, “come out of her” in order to avoid the corruption which comes from her, so must we. There are many ways by which believers can align themselves with Babylon: 1) living a luxurious lifestyle at the expense of human misery; 2) exercising power for selfish reasons; 3) assuming that success in the world provides security and significance; 4) believing that ultimate success is found in this life; 5) allowing false religious concepts to mingle with or replace the truth of Scripture.

We must not be accused of adultery with Babylon. We must show by our attitudes and behaviors that we say “no” to ungodly ways. We must say “yes” every day to God and His ways.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Romans 12:2