

Babylon is Fallen
Revelation 18
By Gary R. May
First Baptist Church of Diana, August 3, 2011

Spending time in study of Revelation could be compared to peeling an onion. One layer is peeled off only to reveal another. Thin layers do not totally hide what is to be seen clearly in the next layer. Revelation 17 describes the fall of Babylon and once she is fallen, a greater description of her atrocities and the effects of her fall are more easily visible in chapter 18. The same has been true with the progression from seals to trumpets and finally to bowls. Even so, this chapter of Revelation stands as one of the strongest warnings to modern believers to separate themselves from the lure of this world as any in the entire Bible.

Once John grasped the vision of chapter 17, he was now in a position to look deeper into the mystery. To guide John in the process, another angel appears who possesses great authority and who actually lights up the earth with his presence. Perhaps this is a reference to the enlightenment allowing John and others who study the book to see deeper into the purposes and plans of the Lord. God's truth and understanding are often referred to as lights or lamps in Scripture.

When this angel speaks in verse 2, his voice carries the authority of heaven and is described as mighty. He is speaking of the future as though it was present and the authority in his voice allows for no doubting in the hearts of his hearers. His announcement would be hard to believe since he was claiming the fall of what was known as the greatest city on earth.

Babylon or Rome

The angel calls the city Babylon. Several times in this study it has been mentioned that Babylon was often a code name for Rome. The similarities of the two cities separated by several hundred years are striking. The parallels in Jewish history allow for such an understanding. In the days of the Babylonian empire, Israel was basically a vassal state. Slavery was common and thousands of Jews had been exiled to the city of Babylon against their will. Luxury at the expense of a lower class was a prominent feature of the empire. Jeremiah was the prophet selected by the Lord to announce her fall. In minute detail he prophesied and eventually his prophecies came true. The early church would have recognized the connection between John's vision and the old city of Babylon. They would have no doubt seen the prophecy of chapter 18 as dealing with the powerful city of Rome who was the sources of their own persecution.

Who could imagine this plush and prosperous city of Rome to soon be one inhabited only by wild animals and unclean birds? The swiftness of her fall would be amazement to many but believers should not be surprised. Supposedly great economic powers are often swiftly dismantled. Americans easily recall stories of the collapse of Wall Street in the 1920s. In one day the fortunes of thousands simply vanished into thin air. At the root were many unscrupulous business tactics that had created a false sense of wealth. Anger cried in the streets from the common man who had trusted the brokers with their wealth. In a sense they too had participated in the cheating of the financiers who actually caused the collapse.

In the common period many have vivid memories of the great recession of the 1980s and again the collapse of the financial institutions of the first decade of the 21st century. The swiftness of financial ruin has revealed itself time after time in history. The early church was to be comforted by these words that reminded them evil will not stand forever.

The genre of this chapter is prose but John is clearly speaking prophetically. A prophecy usually contains a warning and a consequence if the warning is not heeded. The warning had already been given and in this prophecy the consequence is realized. While the immediate context for the first century church is the destruction and fall of Rome, the larger context for Christianity is the eschatological significance. John was not just speaking of Rome; he was speaking of a world economic system and political systems that will utterly be destroyed just prior to the coming of Christ. This destruction is easily recognized as none other than the judgment of God. In chapter 19 Jesus will appear taking firm control, however, in chapter 18 the works of his hands in judging the immorality and idolatry of the satanic world system is evident.

The justification for her judgment is found in verse 3. Her sin is that of idolatry rooted in pride and immorality as she committed adultery with false religions. Her great sin is not that she failed in these measures, but that she exported her sin to the whole world. John clearly has in view here the overarching reaches of the satanic world system used for many generations to deceive mankind. When the primary tool of Satan's deception is brought low in judgment many others suffer ill effects.

Come Out

Prior to the judgment a warning is given to those who serve the Lord. They are to come out of her prior to her destruction. The same warning was given to Jerusalem before she was destroyed by Titus in about 70 AD. The call for believers is one of holiness and the cry from Scripture, be holy as I am holy. The call is not so much to totally separate oneself from the economic activities present in this world. It is more to make sure that your ethics are representative of the teachings of Scripture. "Come out" might simply mean do not participate. Primarily, however, it is to make sure you have your priorities correct. As we move on to the last part of the chapter we will see mourning worldwide because of the fall of this city. While once only those who took the mark could buy and sell, at the fall of Babylon there will be nothing to buy and sell. The economic system of the world will have totally collapsed because it was built on greed and selfishness.

A judgment on this city is called for that pays her back in the same manner in which she has treated others. Mounce points out that the eye for an eye judgment is one metered out by the Lord and not by believers. Some would question the justice in doubling the punishment as is called for in verse 6. However, one should remember the cumulative and compounding effect of evil. The consequences of her fall and the continuing consequence of her pride and selfishness has been multiplied as it pertains to those who have been trampled by her policies. Verse 7 makes clear her pride. She thought she was beyond judgment. Visible in this description is the evil of all the days since the fall in the garden. It often seems as evil has remained unchecked and as if she would never be overcome. John is giving us a description not only of her failure but in reality her total collapse due to the righteousness of God.

The final description of her judgment is found in verse 8. The city is lying in smoking ruins. Her strength is no match for the living God who judges the living and the dead. Plagues have come which she could not overcome and pestilence has found its destructive opportunities. Famine has replaced the extravagant coffers filled with the foods of the world. It is a pitiful city full of mourning where once there was laughter, dancing, and jubilation.

Lament for the City

The entire world is suffering with the fallen city as seen in evidence of those who mourn. Three classes of people are identified in verse 9-17 who feel the effect of her fall. The first of those is the ruling class. The kings of the world who were her partners in immorality and sensuality weep and lament when they see her burning. They are amazed such a strong city could fall so quickly. The second group of mourners is the merchants who grew wealthy in her unethical business methods. The extent of the fall is evident because there is now no one to buy the wares of the world. Babylon had been the trade center of the world and represents a society of greed. There is not a judgment here against wealth or prosperity except as it is accomplished in some of the methods which were common. Slave trade was an exceptional business and in ancient Rome they sold thousands of humans every day right alongside livestock and other commodities. The Babylonians also took advantage of other humans and in the day when this final judgment comes against Satan, these methods will finally be laid to rest forever.

The lament continues with the working class described as the shipmaster and passengers and sailors, or all that make their living from the sea. Of course the reference here is to the entire world economic system. In the last two years governments around the world have met consistently to assess the world's financial issues in order to prevent further deterioration. Corruption around the world has been discovered in various corporations and financial institutions. This is certainly nothing new and will continue as long as God's judgment tarries. A few years ago, at the collapse of an iconic American business, it was discovered that the greed was not just in the corporate headquarters but reached the lower levels of the company. Stock prices had been artificially inflated and the employees were enjoying stock options through bonuses on an annual basis. Most of the employees were so taken by their continual profits they failed to follow the basic rules of investing which include diversification. When the fall came, their nakedness was for the entire world to see. In many ways even the working class was contributing to the immorality and idolatry of this once great city.

The Victory of the Lamb

During the reign of ancient Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah stood consistently speaking against the empire. He predicted the fall of Babylon and cast a millstone into the Euphrates River to illustrate how quickly and how far she would fall. An angel appears in verse 21, takes up a millstone, and casts it into the sea. The illustration is clear, just as ancient Babylon was destroyed, so shall Rome be destroyed and so shall this evil world system under Satan's reign for thousands of years will finally and completely come to judgment.

Heaven, the saints, apostles, and the prophets are commanded to rejoice over her fall. The preaching and teaching of each of these groups had been against the injustices of the evil

systems. Some of them had experienced personal persecution. Others were commanded to stand alone and speak against the ways others were being treated. The early church sometimes lost their social standing when they chose to follow Christ. The rejoicing is not so much in vengeance as it is relief. The injustices of this world that have been in effect since the fall in the garden and witnessed in the relationship between Cain and Abel have now been defeated on the earth. The final statement of verse 21 says that when this judgment has come, it is final and the controls exhibited by this old city will never resurface again. This is reflective of the Old Testament proclamation that ancient Babylon will never be rebuilt. True to that prophecy she is not rebuilt although Bagdad is nearby.

The depth of the judgment is found in verses 22-23. The familiar sounds of a thriving city will be heard no longer. The sounds of commerce have disappeared. Even the sounds associated with families will be gone. No bridal parties and no buying or selling whatsoever. The justification for this judgment hinges on the total depravity and influence this city and system of evil have exerted on the entire earth. Her deception is as sorcery and has bewitched the entire world. Satan's primary weapon; the systems of this world, are utterly laid to waste with the destruction of this city. Further justification is given as this force of evil laid at the feet of Babylon is the responsible institution for the killing of the prophets and of the saints. As the church read these words, each member could likely think of someone who had been slain for bearing witness to the Gospel. From Stephen to Peter, so many had been killed in so few years for the witness of their faith.

The warning for believers is strong. All cities and societies have Babylonian tendencies. The lure is especially strong in America in our current age. This lure is easily seen in our financial systems. It is seen in the world of technologies. It is seen in all the ways Americans make a living. We must heed the call to "come out". Separate ourselves from the ways of this world and live at peace with the Lord.