

Sermon 52: Revelation 18:1-24: The Fall of Babylon

OUTLINE

Babylon is judged
Babylon is mourned
Babylon is no more

INTRODUCTION

What will become of the vast amount of sinful humanities accomplishments? What will become of the Tower of Babel like pile of godlessness we have produced since the Garden of Eden? What will become of that world system that builds itself up at the cost of the church and humanity? Chapter 18 is the answer! Although 18:1 begins with the words, 'After this I saw...', this is not an indication of what happened next chronologically after 17:18, no this is an indication of a new vision that looks at the same content of chapter 17 from another perspective. God is not content to show the downfall of sinful humanities greatest accomplishment as a casualty of the devil's divided house, He goes on in this chapter to take up the prose and pictures of the OT judgements against other city-states; He seeks to show that this final fall of Babylon will be the cataclysmic fulfilment of which all other falls have been a mere shadow and type. This chapter uses powerful imagery to dramatize the final judgement on the city of man; it makes clear our duty in light of this judgement; and it clarifies the reasons for the judgement.

Babylon is judged

A simple way to understand this chapter is to note that there are 3 angelic voices of judgement in this chapter. The first angel speaks in verse 2, the second in v4, and the third in v21. V1 records the arresting arrival of the first angel, 'After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory.' This picture of the earth being made bright with God's glory comes from Ezek. 43:2 where in Ezekiel's vision the Lord is about to restore Israel. Think of it as a turning on of the lights after darkness has been prevailing for a while marking the end of the darkness. V2, 'And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast.' This language is taken from Isaiah 13 which announces God's judgement upon the original Babylon, v21. In Isaiah there is exclusively a mention of animals inhabiting a levelled city, this vision reveals a darker and more revealing picture talking about it being the habitation of demons. The picture is of a carcass in the wilderness and inside its ribs vultures have stripped away the meat and made a home. Now the destruction of Babylon will coincide with the end of all things and God making the New Creation so this must not be read literally as a literal city full of vultures and demons. It is an amplified picture of devastation more concentrated than that found even in the OT strongest denouncements.

Why such a strong destruction? V3, 'For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.' This reminds me of the words of Christ in Matt. 18:6-7, 'but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom

the temptation comes!' Babylon has been the source of so many people's sins. Nations have been seduced by her prosperity to partake of her idolatry and moral laxity. This false city which should have been God centred, and God glorifying will be levelled and replaced with the New Jerusalem. This fallen city which represents the place of government, the place of commerce, the place of culture, learning, art and religion will be destroyed. All the greed, the lust, the godlessness, the crass disregard for right and wrong, the lies, the celebration of sinful man defining himself, will all be utterly crushed.

If this is the fate of Babylon, how should the church respond? V4-5, 'Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.' Once again this vision is borrowing from God's exhortations to His OT people to leave Babylon when the time of the exile would be over and return to Israel. These exhortations can be found in Is. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 51:44, 47, 52. How are we to understand these verses? Some have understood them to justify monasticism, or separated communalism, how does this verse square with the Great Commission?

Firstly note that the idea of the church having been raptured from the earth does not stand for here God is speaking to His people.

Secondly, this call, put in OT terms agrees with and should be interpreted in light of all the other exhortations in Revelation. For example, look at the calls for holiness in the 7 letters in chapters 2-3. It is a call in light of first century issues to steer clear of Emperor worship, even if it costs your life; to not get mixed up in the false religions floating around in the first century, and keeping far away from the sexual immorality and moral laxity.

Thirdly, Babylon is a worldwide phenomenon and not a single city somewhere, her domain is on many waters, 17:15.

Fourthly, notice how Paul uses these same OT references. He does not use them to teach geographical separation but moral and spiritual separation. 2 Cor. 6:14-16, 'Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15 What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ...' There are false teachers in the church of Corinth, Paul has had to defend his apostleship due to their defamation of him. Due to their teachings and ways he calls upon them to not be unequally yoked together with them. We can see by the list he gives what his concerns really are. It is a case of righteousness versus lawlessness because the false teachers were encouraging actions that associated believers with idolatry and sexual immorality. Light versus darkness because it was truth against lies; Christ versus Belial and the spiritual influence behind the teachings; believers versus unbelievers because the false teachers are not converted; and the temple of God with idols, because believers are not to be misled by the false teaching that they can still participate in idol feasts. These were the same sorts of issues Revelation is addressing, and notice how the same OT verses are quoted in support of being morally and spiritually separate from the false teachers. We know from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that he does not mean a total removal from society, 1 Cor. 5:10, for then we would need to leave the world altogether. No in the context in 7:1, Paul tells us exactly how these verses are to be applied by NT believers, 'Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.' Stay away from idolatry not cities is the application.

Notice how the history of man's combined sin is pictured as a Tower of Babel that reaches to the heavens and just as judgement fell on man then, final judgement must fall on man again. At the end of time the combined efforts of man to cast off God and persecute His

people will be answered by God. Notice as well the word remembered. Salvation is when God for Christ's sake forgets all of our sins, His judgement is remembering them.

Verses 6-8 speak about the justice of her punishment. Now there is a translation issue here that needs to be set right. The word 'double' is most likely a Hebraic use of 'duplicate' in other words, the final justice of God will be in proportion to her deeds. She will receive as she has given. And so the initial statement in verse 6, 'pay her back as she herself has paid back others' indicates an eye for an eye. Here we are reminded of the fairness of final judgement. Many are casting off the doctrine of hell as overkill, as excessive. But justice not vindictiveness is the driving force. Hell is exactly what our sins deserve, no more, no less. Hell is as long as God is holy. To sin is no small thing!

Notice her attitude before she is judged, 'in her heart she says, I sit as queen, I am no widow'. These are similar to the words Babylon says in Is. 47:7-8, and we know how it ended for her. A false sense of security and pride comes before a fall. I am more than I am, I am a queen, and I am impervious to loss, I am no widow. These are the self-deceptions we tell ourselves when we are in our sins. Sin deceives us about our true natures and position, as well as the true dangers of sin. But when we catch a sight of the infinitely holy God, then we know that we are unholy and unsafe and in desperate need of Christ.

V8 describes her judgement as one of plagues like Egypt receiving the covenant curses, and with fire. It will be sudden and it will be accomplished by our mighty God.

Babylon is mourned

The next section of our vision is one of putting ourselves in the shoes of those who would be most affected by Babylon's fall, Kings v9-10; merchants v11-17, and sailors v17b-20. This is not intended as a literal recording of the event, but a change of perspective to emphasize the totality of destruction.

Notice that all three stand afar off, the judgement is so bad that those who were once committed to her forsake her and stand at a distance for fear of receiving part of the judgement, v10, 11, 17.

Notice the words in their mouths which emphasize the swiftness of her judgement, 'For in a single hour your judgement has come,' v10, 17, 19. As well as the deep loss incurred, v14, "'The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again!'" This deep loss is felt by all those who had invested in her this is seen in the fact that all three weep and mourn their losses. We are reminded that those things we which we sell our souls for will also finally be destroyed in judgement and we will be left twice desolate, without Christ and without our idols.

When judgement comes we will see the pretty face, the luxury, the seductive aspects of her wares and ways exposed and destroyed, v16.

And like today we see that Babylon traded in human souls, v13. We see this in the selling of foetal matter and the sex slavery industry, porn, and many other institutionalised sins. Man enslaving man by force, ideas, seduction, or commerce, it is all the same.

As opposed to the mourning of those who sided with her and drank from her cup will be the rejoicing of the Christians, v20, 'Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!' We mourn now but rejoice then, they rejoice now but will mourn then. We mourn with hope and joy, they will mourn with hopelessness and despair. We will rejoice in justice, truth and holiness, they rejoice in sin and deceit. Our joy will not be in their pain but in God's holiness vindicated and the church rescued.

Babylon is no more

We move then to listen to the third angel, v21, 'Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more.' In the day and age of scuba diving and ocean salvage we don't think very much of a millstone being thrown into the ocean, but this is a picture of unsalvagability. A millstone which would weigh hundreds of kilograms would sink very quickly to the bottom of the sea which people in the ancient world had never conquered. The usual experience of the sea would be a swim at the beach but not a swim to the bottom of the deep sea, a millstone which you could not carry nor be found in the deep sea is a picture of being totally lost and impossible to save. The final verses of this chapter echo other judgements where no music means no joy, no craftsmen means no money, no light means no oil, no marriages means no children. All these gifts which are part of God's common grace and are given to all men will one day be taken away. Those things which are tokens of His goodness that He gives by His grace to humanity who do not deserve them, they will all be removed when God finally deals with us as we deserve. The list is climaxed with the greatest sins rehearsed, economic oppression, religious deception and waging war on the church.

This last sin is a very misunderstood one. The devil hates mankind because we are made in God's image and glorify Him. He seeks to steal this from God by destroying us. For the world to join with the devil in persecuting God's people is to join his rebellion against God and join hands with him in his main tactic. The devil has tried to destroy God's people from Eden, it is the mark of his handiwork, and the one of the highest handed actions we can commit. We cannot kill Christ who is resurrected so we seek to attack Him by His body. The world does not see how wicked this sin is, but one day judgement will reveal our dignity and the highhandedness of this sin.

The message is plain for us. Do not invest in the earthly city but the heavenly city. Do not partake of her ways but live out the ways of your heavenly citizenship as a stranger here. Keep yourself free from her lies, her seductions and her immorality. Judgement is coming and it will be final.