

FOR SAINTS LIVING IN BABYLON

Revelation 18

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The Scripture today is a Scripture related to Babylon, the 18th chapter of Revelation. In the New International version it says, “After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted: ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.’

Then I heard another voice from heaven say: ‘Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes. Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup. Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, “I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.” Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: “Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!”

The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.

They will say, “The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.” The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out: “Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!”

Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, “Was there ever a city like this great city?” They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: “Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin! Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.”

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said: ‘With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again. The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No workman of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again. The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's great

men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth”” (Revelation 18:1-24, NIV).

If John were the director of a camera crew recording a news event, he would do pretty much with a camera what the Spirit has had him do with his pen. He would keep the cameras focused on a single event and from different angles give us a view of a scene which has happened. The event which is being shot from several different angles is noted for us in Revelation 16:19 and the treatment of the bowls of judgment. The seventh bowl of judgment, Babylon the great city has fallen. John takes another camera and another position of that and shows us in Revelation 17 that Babylon represents a woman sitting on a beast. Or the power of a great civilization sitting on the devil or the Antichrist’s power that in the end Satan is never loyal even to his own, even to the civilization which has been loyal to him. If you strike up an allegiance with the devil, ultimately you will get kicked off the horse.

Revelation 18 John positions the camera at another angle to look at Babylon. This time Babylon, represented as a harlot, is not pictured, nor is the beast in the picture in Revelation 18. Rather now John shows us the fall of Babylon from the perspective of kings and merchants, sailors and saints.

In this morning’s message I want to do somewhat of the same thing as John—take some cameras and look at Babylon, throughout the Scripture, in order to understand better what is being described in Revelation 18 and how we may personally apply it to life. As I go through Scripture I find five different Babylons in the Scripture.

I. The first Babylon is prehistoric Babylon.

It’s in Genesis 11 under the name of “Babel.” It represents the origin of human community without God. Or the origin of society without God. We think of society and we recognize it was

God who first created society. He made husband and wife, man and woman in the garden to enjoy unbroken communion with Him and with one another. When sin enters, immediately the communion that one man has with one woman is broken. The beginning of all domestic squabbling takes place. From an enjoyment of walking with God in the cool of the day, human society on its most elemental level, two people, begins to be fractured. Children come to this first couple, and it isn't many more years before there is the additional fracture of murder within the family. For his murder of Abel, Cain is told that he will be a wanderer on earth. But Genesis 4 tells us that instead, Cain built a city and named it after his son. The Lord said "Cain, you will be a wanderer" but Cain said, "I must live in society." A human society that is founded by people who cannot get along with one another is going to have problems. Cain is the first to build a city, built by a person who had committed the grievous sin of fracturing the human relationship through murder. The first empire was built afterward by another person called Nimrod, at Babel. It's in the character of Cain that Babel is built. Its story is told in Genesis 10 and 11. Nimrod, whose name means, "let us revolt" is a mighty hunter. The Babylon of Revelation 18 is a Babylon built on bodies and souls of men. This is really in character of Nimrod who perhaps is not only a hunter of animals but a hunter of men. The city he founds is consumed by the desire to build a tower that can reach to the heavens so that the city can have a name for itself and scattering can be prevented. It means "Gate of God." But God confuses the efforts of men and their languages so the place becomes known as "Babel." So what God is saying about the first attempts without Him to build society is, it is built and must be built upon confusion. What is built without God cannot stand.

The text in Genesis specifically notes that at Babel they used bricks and not stones. That's very deliberate of the biblical writer to note this. God builds with stone. Man builds with bricks.

God's building materials are definitely superior! When man builds society apart from God you have Babel or confusion. When you build a life without God, when you build a marriage without God, when you build a family without God, the end result from the Scripture is this same origin of Babylon. Confusion and scattering rather than unity and love takes place.

In contrast to prehistoric Babel, is Abraham who is called by God to wander. He is called out of the city, and it is God who says, "I will make your name great." Babel has said, "We will be great." But greatness does not come when it originates in our heart. It is God's gift to give.

Babylon's taste at the beginning is for power and for recognition. It is a society not founded upon love or service.

II. The second view of Babylon is Babylon the empire.

The city that rides atop the empire, ancient Babylon, is now a site in modern Iraq, a site, by the way, which consists of only few ruins. The city of Babylon, the historical Babylon, does not stand now. In the Old Testament, this historical Babylon is the place where God's people were chastised. In 586 B.C. the tribes of Benjamin and Judah are carried away into a seventy-year captivity in Babylon. The Psalmist can write "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps...How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1,2,4 NIV). What Babylon was used by God in doing was to punish His people for their sins and bring them into captivity until they had repented of them.

In the Old Testament, whenever Israel's fortunes are down, Babylon's are up. And whenever Israel's fortunes are up, Babylon's are down. When we live our lives in unconfessed sin our tents are pitched toward Babylon. The things God wants to do in our life are on the back burner. That

which Satan wants to do has preeminence. Babylon as a spirit is still place of captivity for God's people.

III. When we approach the Babylon of the New Testament period we find that Babylon now is a term which doesn't represent Babylon nor does it represent the kingdom which is now located in a place in Iraq.

But Babylon for the early Christian represented the realm in which God's people suffer. It is an allusion to Rome. In the Old Testament, God's people suffered when they had done wrong. But in the New Testament there is this turn of thought. God's people may be suffering even when they do right. They might be in Babylon and have committed no wrong. The Early Church is conscious of the fact that it is an exiled community, that is, members are exiled and strangers on earth. James writing to the twelve tribes—that's Christians, now, not Israel—he calls the Christians "twelve tribes scattered among the nations." Peter writes to "God's elect—strangers in the world, scattered." And in 1 Peter 5:13 Peter says, "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings" (NIV). Peter is writing 1 Peter to the exiles in the provinces, to the east or Rome. He says "she who is in Babylon greets you." Who is this, whom Peter is writing about from Rome? It's the church in Rome, called by others Babylon, a place uniquely fitted to describe the captivity of God's people, and in this instance, captivity that has not been brought on by sin. I think we don't really appreciate Revelation 18 until we understand how the Early Church would have had a tendency to look at Revelation 18.

I want to dwell some time there this morning, to say that, as the Early Church, the churches that are mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 received this word of Revelation through John the apostle, their instincts as they read and heard Revelation 18 would have been to associate these words with the Babylon that then was ruling the world, a city on seven hills, the city on top of the

waters, the empire of Rome and the city of Rome itself. To these Christians this chapter would have had these kinds of meanings. Verses 1–8 would have suggested to them that the future from God’s perspective has happened already. The first word that these first-century Christians would have learned about Rome was that from God’s perspective it is fallen. “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great” (verse 2). From the Christian point of view, the empire and the persecuting of Christians and the wealth and the extravagance of the Roman magistrate and power looks so exceedingly strong and the people of God look so exceedingly frail as they’re scattered through the world in their small communities under the threat of possible martyrdom in many cases. Yet looking at that from the eye of faith, the first thing that the people of God learned about Rome or any political power that is ever built is that from God’s eyes it’s already finished.

It’s as though you go out, find a fig tree that’s standing there full of life, you lay your hand on the tree and you say, “This tree is dead.” It may go on to live a while but it ultimately must come to a point of cessation of existence. There is word that comes to Christians in the first century to remember that whatever is manmade must go, that this city that claims to be a queen forever, a lady forever, is doomed. That it will one day be as desolate as the historical city of Babylon itself.

Babylon is fallen. And because it is fallen the saints must come out. They must not take part in her sins. They must not be a part of her power. They must not be a part of her quest for needless luxury. This coming out is not something physical as was Abraham coming out of Ur of the Chaldees. But it is coming out spiritually to be disassociated from the spirit of Rome, which becomes very open to us as we continue in Revelation 18.

Verses 9–20 have the Christian look in a new way at the prosperity of his or her persecutors, the prosperity of Rome. There are three figures represented here as lamenting over Rome. All of

them saying, “In one hour she is fallen,” representing the fact that an empire which has ruled for hundreds of years when God is through with it, it comes to an end. Presto!

The rulers, these persons who now seem so very much the center of calm and control are really at the mercy of forces beyond their control, so that what they have aligned to—their union with Rome’s power and wealth—only too late they see the handwriting on the wall and must mourn the loss from a distance.

John then also in Revelation 18:11–17 catalogues the merchants’ cry as they see Babylon fallen. These items of merchandise, which are noted, would have been familiar in the first century mind with the kind of thing that went into Rome. It was a great city of import. The wealth of the nations flowed into it. John gives us a little bit of the idea in verses 1–3. Items of jewelry such as gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. Luxurious clothing such as fine linen, purple, silk, scarlet cloth. Expensive and ornate furniture. Wood imported from North Africa, which was noted for its ornamental veining, used for costly furniture and inlay work. Ivory, costly wood. Building materials such as bronze, iron and marble. One only has to travel to the Mediterranean world today and look at the Roman period to find the extravagant use of marble. Perfume type cosmetics, incense, myrrh and frankincense. Food items, such as wine and olive oil and fine flour expressing luxury. Camels, cattle, sheep, horses and carriages.

At the bottom of the list, bodies. That’s what the Romans would simply look at them as being—bodies. But the Christian would understand not just bodies but souls, the bodies and souls of men. Human cargo. Barclay says it’s almost impossible for us to understand how much the Roman civilization was based upon slavery. There were some sixty million slaves in the empire. Or one out of every four persons, approximately, was a slave. It was no unusual thing for a man to have four hundred slaves and more. Almost every action and every craft and every art had its

slaves. Use your slaves like the limbs of your body, says a Roman writer, each for its own end. There were slaves to do menial work. There was an extraordinary subdivision of labor among slaves. Torch bearer, lantern bearers, sedan chair carriers, street attendants, keepers of outdoor garments. There were slaves who were secretaries and shorthand writers. There were slaves to read aloud and even slaves to do the necessary research for a man who was writing a book or treatise. There were slaves to remind a man of the names of his clients and dependents. There were even slaves to remind a man to eat and to go to bed. Men were too weary even to know that they were hungry, says a writer. There were slaves to go in front of their master and return the greeting of friends, which the master was too tired or too disdainful to return himself. A man unable to learn got himself a set of slaves. Their duty was to stand behind him as he dined and to prompt him with suitable quotations. Some slaves were beautiful youths who simply stood around the room at banquets to delight the eye. Others were cupbearers. Some were Alexandrians who were trained and encouraged in witty and often obscene repartee. The guests often chose to wipe their soiled hands on the hair of the slaves. Some slaves were, in a demeaning way, kept as “freaks,” dwarfs or giants. There was actually a market for such individuals. Sometimes dwarfs were artificially produced for sale. Rome gives us a grim picture of men being used body and soul for the service and entertainment of others.

In the list of the twenty-eight items of merchandise being imported into Babylon it is not accidental on John’s part that bodies were at the bottom of the list. From Rome’s point of view this is accurate. It did not value persons; it used them. It consumed them. It exploited them. It manipulated them for the sake of higher values of gold and silver and jewels and pearls. A great many historians themselves were slaves. The Christian message was an indictment against the kind of society founded upon cruelty to others where the material ranked above human life. The

shallowness of the merchants is shown in the fact that when the city falls they weep not for the city but for themselves. They've lost their income.

The mourning goes on in terms of maritime workers in verses 17–19. The transportation lanes are closed. Everybody is weeping for the fall of Babylon except the saints. Verse 20 calls the saints to rejoice because God has come with justice to the city to bring equity and establish righteousness.

Christians could take verses 21–24 as an admonition to get out of Babylon. It was a city that was going down. An angel picks up millstone and throws it into the ocean indicating that this civilization is going down with violence. It is going down with permanence. It is going down to become silent. And it is going down justly. Its great men were entrepreneurs rather than godly saints and prophets.

This is John's way of saying and the early Christians' way of understanding that if I were to offer you a free trip to Hong Kong—that's the good news. The bad news is it's only going to go 90 percent of the way. How many of you would get on?

That's the whole perspective of looking at Babylon or Rome or whatever godless civilization there is. From a biblical insight, it's going down so don't get on it.

You say, "But all this didn't happen to Rome. It's still a city. It's not now a haunt of demons and unclean birds. It still exists as a civilization."

Yes that is true. Therefore as you look at Revelation 18 you must understand that Rome did not exhaust the potential of this prophecy. Early Christians would have understood it to be Rome. But in God's providence Rome did not exhaust all that is in this prophecy. It is an event yet to come, an end-time civilization that will yet arise, that will have the character of an historical

Babylon in its cruelty, the character of a Rome in its cruelty. When will this civilization arise?
It's on the way. Where and what date? I think we're open to consider.

One thing that really strikes me. When godly people are in Babylon and given an opportunity to contribute to society, the horrible features of Babylon are diluted or held at bay. Daniel has a great calming effect on Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Had the Roman government allowed Christians to participate in the governing of the society, Rome would have not had those features that pushed men to the bottom of the list in terms of value.

I hear people say today "How can things get any worse?" I have to look at history, and say if you read the history of Rome you could see that things have already gotten worse. And they're going to get even worse. The one reason I think for Christians being involved in society and in culture in politics and government and the like is to say that where there is Christian presence the sharp ragged edges of Babylon have to be cut down and toned down because the presence of Christ brings dignity, brings respect for human life, brings justice.

Woe to the community of God that operates like Babylon, which in its efforts to get the work of the King done treats people like tools to be used and they wind up on the bottom of the pile, manipulated, and when used, disposed of. Such is the character of Babylon.

IV. I'm concerned about a fifth perspective of Babylon for today.

That is, Babylon is a present reality. Babylon really is every nation, every city, every community, and every person who shall become in God's sight what Babylon was. Be like Babylon and you are Babylon. Babylon can be in our hearts.

What are the marks of Babylon?

The marks of Babylon are building your life without God. Making a name for yourself without a disciplined obedience to God. When you build life without God, the Scriptures have to say of

you what they say here about Babylon: “Fallen, fallen.” Right from the outset the foundation is wrong and it will surely slip.

What is another mark of Babylon? When you must get your way regardless of what it does to other people, you are fallen like Babylon. When in close interpersonal relationship within family or within the church or work or whatever, when something becomes so important to you that you must grab it in power and push and shove to get it, here is Babylon expressing itself in terms of power and might rather than in love and humility and service. Babylon does not know the words “patience, gentleness, kindness, meekness, self-control.” Babylon only knows “power, luxury, unneeded wealth, seduction.” You become like Babylon when you measure the value of life in terms of money and material rather than in terms of human worth. Jesus always measured life in terms of great worth. “What shall it profit a person,” he says, “if he gains the whole world—all the material in the world—and yet loses his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26). One single solitary life in the Lord’s eyes is worth more than everything material.

Revelation takes us through the lenses of a writer inspired by the Spirit to see two cities looming on the horizon of which we are a citizen of one or the other. We cannot be citizens of both. One city is Babylon; the other city coming up shortly is Jerusalem. We either are citizens of Babylon or we are citizens of Jerusalem. The permanent city is Jerusalem. The temporary city is Babylon. The society that this world founds, it is passing. The witness of Revelation 18 is this: Babylon is going down! Revelation will go on to say that Jerusalem is coming down. One society is *going* down; another society is *coming* down. One society is built out of bricks and it cannot last. But the society that is coming down is permanent, bejeweled, made of rocks and gorgeous materials—permanent. It will never be cast down. One city is a city of confusion. At the very

root of its name, it means confusion. If that doesn't describe human society without God what does? Confusion. But the city coming down has, at its root, *shalom*. Peace, wholesomeness, life. We're invited to consider what city we belong to and what city is in us. These cities are not only something we go to but these cities represent the qualities of life that can dwell in us.

Babylon. Is that a term you'd use to describe the way you relate to other people? Or is it something you have come out of? As Paul says, "We have renounced disgraceful and underhanded ways. We have renounced as Christians, certain styles of life, because they are of this world" (see 2 Corinthians 4:2).

Closing Prayer

What a surprise to open the Scriptures and see this Scripture and immediately be caught in a frame of mind, "This is something future." But then to back off and to recognize that there is a spirit that is of this world and in this world which has been around a long time. It keeps re-expressing itself and re-emerging from century to century among differing nations, kingdoms, cities, rulers. It even can emerge in our own hearts. But you're telling us through this Scripture that if we will look at Babylon through the eyes of the Spirit we will see that it is fallen. It has been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Its days are numbered and it is coming to a conclusion. It will be judged by You. You have great strength to judge it and You will establish righteousness. We take our place as pilgrims who have heard the call of Ezra and Nehemiah to depart from Babylon and go back to a homeland. We see a throng coming out of Babylon heading toward another city far off to the south, a city that sits on a hill—Zion. We're on that trek to Zion—Zion within us, the songs of Zion on our lips. But we are passing through the wilderness that lies between Babylon and Zion. We want to thank You for calling us out of Babylon and for Your promise to bring us to a city whose builder and maker is God, where

righteousness and justice and truth and holiness and light forever dwell, a city that glistens and is beautiful because she is the wife of the bridegroom. She is the bride. Your body, Your people. We see ourselves as on our way to Zion. May none of us, like Lot's wife, look back at Sodom. May none of us wish to stay within Babylon— this world and its system and its way of relating and doing business and its way of conducting family life. But Lord, that we would come out and move toward the goals You have for us. I especially pray, Lord, for families here whose lives have been recently marked as though they were living in Babylon rather than Your city. Who have been struck deeply, mortally by the world and who because in this world they have forsaken the God of Zion and His ways and precepts have found themselves in captivity and in bondage to sin and the world. In place of love that once was, now there is emptiness and ashes, and a contest of will and a struggle for power. May by the healing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ You bring each of us to Zion. As we cast our sins upon You, may we leave that city of Babylon, that city which dwells in our own lives, which threatens to destroy us and confuse us and corrupt our values and taint us and seduce us. May we, Lord Jesus, be on our way to Zion, to the city of righteousness and peace. I ask through Jesus Christ our Lord that You will confirm this word in our experience by the works of Your Spirit and by the enabling power that is in the Spirit of God to cause us to live what we profess through Jesus the Lord. Amen.