

Study 20: Revelation Chapter 18

Introduction

“...Rome was never completely destroyed as a city. It has had a continuous history of more than twenty-five hundred years, and present day Rome is a modern city built upon and around the ancient city. ... However, the magnificence and power of the Rome of John’s day was brought to nought. Rome fell from its position as the world’s leading city of commerce and wealth and as the capital of a world empire whose religious life centred upon pagan god-Caesar worship...”

Body of the Study

Introduction

The Fall of Babylon

Lament over the Fall of Babylon

Rejoicing Over the Judgement

Silence and Peace on Earth

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapters 17 & 18 together

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 19 in preparation for the next study

The recent financial crisis had had a significant effect on the way our society operates. Do you see any parallels between Babylon the Great and our society?

How would you react, if the structure of our society crumbled like Rome? Would your reaction be like those of 18:9-19, or like those of 18:20?

What is the message for us?

Notes for study 20: Revelation Chapter 18

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Introduction

Chapter 17 introduced a woman who was revealed as the antithesis of the church, and who stood in direct contrast and opposition to God and His people.

The fall of the great city of Babylon was predicted, and the city was revealed as Rome. Chapter 18 tells of its destruction and the effect on the world. Whilst John does not see or describe the destruction of the city, he assures his readers of the certainty of the event, and of the consequences.

The Fall of Babylon

John sees another angel, who was probably one of the seven, but different than the one described in the previous chapter. *“...After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor...”* (18:1 NIV). The angel has *great authority*, which suggests that he was empowered to act and to implement the destruction of the city. The description of *the earth illuminated with his splendour* suggests that his message informed the world everywhere.

The message was made with a strong announcement *“...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...”* (18:2 NIV). The message is prophetic (it had not happened when John wrote Revelation), and is reminiscent of the prophecy of the fall of (literal) Babylon. Hailey notes²:

A century and a half before the fall of ancient Babylon, Jehovah had said to Isaiah as the prophet looked from his watchtower, “Fallen, fallen, is Babylon; and all the graven images of her gods are broken unto the ground” (Isa. 21:9).

The NIV Bible Commentary adds:

Under the imagery of the destruction of the great commercial city, John describes the final overthrow of the great prostitute, Babylon. We stress again that he is not writing a literal description of the fall of an earthly city; rather, he describes God's judgment on the great satanic system of evil that has corrupted the earth's history. Drawing especially from the OT accounts of the destruction of the ancient harlot cities of Babylon (Isa 13:21; 47:7-9; Jer 50-51) and Tyre (Eze 26-27), John composes a great threnody that has some of the most beautifully cadenced language in the whole book. He combines the song of triumph and the wailing strains of lamentation into a noble funeral dirge (cf. 2Sa 1:17-27; Isa 14:4-21; Lamentations). (NIVBC).

Rome (and the Empire that embraced it) had become synonymous with evil, sinful, and detestable practices. *“...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*

¹ Harkrider, p. 207

² Hailey, p. 358

excessive luxuries."... " (18:3 NIV). The extensiveness of the sin and evil is revealed as the chapter unfolds, and the nature of the adultery is explained. Hailey notes³:

It was an unholy, idolatrous political and economic alliance of kings for business and commercial advantage, through which their pleasures were purchased. ... Such connections and associations are seen all over the world today as men seek to gain wealth by immoral, avaricious, and unscrupulous means. ... Introduced for the first time are merchants whose involvement is discussed later (vv 11, 15). These with the earth's great were made wealthy by the seductive power and influence which belong to riches, "ministering to luxury" and unrestricted desire.

Whilst Babylon (Rome) represented all that was despicable in the sight of God, and she was the antithesis of the church (as we have seen), God's people should not embrace her immorality. The warnings have been clear and continual right through the book of Revelation, and they are repeated here again "*...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..."*" (18:4 NIV). This was not a new message to the Christians, as Paul had instructed the Ephesians to "*...have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them..."*" (Eph 5:11). Hailey notes⁴:

A complete separation of the Christian from the sins of the world and the corruption in the world by lust is absolutely essential if he is to escape the plagues to be poured out into the earth and upon the earth by the harlot city, Babylon.

The time had come for God to bring about judgement, and He was right to bring it about "*...for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes..."*" (18:5 NIV). The prayers of the saints had long been going up to God (5:8; 8:3,4), but God had been patient in bringing judgments against the aggressors, rather wanting to bring them to repentance (the trumpet judgments, chapters 8 & 9). But instead of repenting, they had hardened their hearts against God, and cursed Him for their predicament (the bowl plagues, 16:9,11,21). God's patience was exhausted, and the oppressors were not going to repent. He was right and just to bring judgement against them. Hailey notes⁵:

When this point is reached, then "the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath" (16:19) is given into the hand of the offender. One wonders, How long until America's sins shall reach into heaven, and the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath is passed to it?

God's retribution would be fierce "*...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..."*" (18:6 NIV). In fact, it would be given back in *double measure*. She was responsible for woe and destruction, and now that woe and destruction would come upon her. She would get her just rewards! "*...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.'..."*" (18:7 NIV). Babylon was in denial about her state before God, and of her sin. She thinks of herself as a queen, but fails to recognise the reality that she is just a prostitute.

Wherever there are idolatry, prostitution, self-glorification, self-sufficiency, pride, complacency, reliance on luxury and wealth, avoidance of suffering, violence against life (v. 24), there is Babylon. Christians are to separate themselves ideologically and physically from all the forms of Babylon (chs. 2-3). If they refuse, they will "share in her sins" and in the divine judgments. This warning is addressed to professing Christians who were being seduced by Satan through the wiles of the prostitute to abandon their loyalty

³ Hailey, p. 359

⁴ Hailey, p. 360

⁵ Hailey, p. 361

to Jesus. If this occurred, Christ would be forced by their decision to blot out their names from the book of life and to include them in the plagues designed for Babylon when she is judged (cf. 3:5). (NIVBC).

The destruction will come swiftly "...*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...*" (18:8 NIV). Those who take an early date for the writing see the fulfilment of this verse in the great fire of Rome in AD 64. However as we have noted, Revelation teaches in *visions and images*, and we should not take the statement *she will be consumed by fire* to be literally fulfilled. In any event, the prophecy is concerned with the Roman Empire, rather than the city of Rome itself. Just as fire quickly and totally consumes all that is before it, so shall *the great city of Babylon* (the Roman Empire) be swiftly and totally destroyed. Rome might think that she is all-powerful, but she is nothing compared to the total and complete power of God.

Lament over the Fall of Babylon

Even though the nations that Rome had conquered hated her (17:16), yet they prospered under Roman rule. Whilst they were pleased to get rid of the cruelty that the Roman Empire exerted, there would be great lamentation over her demise. Three groups of people who are affected by her demise are considered – kings, merchants, and seafarers.

The first group who lament Rome's demise are the kings. "...*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...*" (18:9 NIV). These people depended on Rome and the Roman Empire for their trade and their livelihood. The lamentation does not come from the demise of Rome and the Roman Empire, but because of the effect that it had on them, and of their own loss! God describes these people as *the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury*. They deserve what they get, because they were the ones who had committed adultery with the prostitute. They were not innocent, and they also deserved to be punished. "...*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!"...*" (18:10 NIV). The destruction would be quick and sudden.

The second group of people affected by Rome's demise are the merchants or traders. "...*The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more...*" (18:11 NIV). These people had warehouses full of goods to sell, but no-one was buying 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;*¹³ *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...*" (18:12-13 NIV).

The description of the goods that now had no market provides a reference to the extent of trade of the Roman Empire. Many of these would be regarded as luxury items – gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. Purple dye was exported from Thyatira (Acts 16:14), and linen probably from Asia Minor also. Silk would have come from China via the 'Silk Road', citron wood was a fine and fragrant wood used for carving and for furniture and sourced from Nth Africa. Ivory would most likely have been sourced from Africa or India, and the spices from Southern China, India, or Sri Lanka. Rome was the centre of trade, and all roads led to Rome. With its fall, the effect travelled to many parts of the world. "...*They will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.'*" (18:14 NIV). The sense of lament over their loss stands out "*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*¹⁶ *and cry out: "Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!*¹⁷ *In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!"...*" (18:15-17 NIV)

The third group affected by Rome's demise will be the seafarers. "... *Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off.* ¹⁸ *When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?'*..." (18:18-19 NIV). Much of the merchandise that came from the far trade routes would have come by sea. There was much grain trade across the Mediterranean from the Nile delta and North Africa, and also from Palestine with grapes and olive oil grown in the area. The reaction from the seafarers was similar to that of the kings and of the merchants. Whilst none of them particularly cared about Rome, they all mourned their loss of income and wealth. "...*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!..."*" (18:19 NIV). Hailey notes⁶:

Trade and commerce of themselves are not wicked; they are good when used for the welfare of humanity. However, when used for selfish luxury and the gratifying of fleshly lusts, they become unrighteous, profane, and wicked.

Rejoicing Over the Judgement

Whilst the rest of the world has been lamenting the demise of Babylon, the opposite is the case with God's people. "...*Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.'* "..." (18:20 NIV). The rejoicing is not over the fall of Babylon, but rather in the fact that it's evil nature has been overcome and brought to justice by God. Hailey notes⁷:

God has now pronounced their judgement upon the harlot; that is, he has rendered judgement on their behalf – "God has imposed on her the sentence she passed on you" (Caird, p.238. cf. Also Deut. 19:16-19). The church has been avenged upon her great enemy and rival, the world, and justice has been fully rendered to that great destroyer of mankind.

God's judgement concludes with the symbolic act of casting Babylon into the deep with a millstone around its neck. "...*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..."*" (18:21 NIV). The destruction will be complete, and never more shall this once great city of Babylon rise again to fight against God and to persecute His people.

Silence and Peace on Earth

After avenging the oppressor of His people, there is a period of peace and silence. "...*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..."*" (18:22 NIV). The music is a sign of joy and happiness, but now it has ended. Also ceased was the trade and commerce work. The pursuit of wealth and gain (material wealth) was one of the key drivers of the empire. With its collapse, there was no work, and the wheels of industry were silenced. Even the mills that produced food (flour) would be silenced. The people had no money to buy food, as they had lost their income. The merchants who produced the food suffered, and were unable to work as there was no-one to buy it.

The Roman historian Tacitus describes how areas around Rome shone brilliantly with lights at one of Nero's banquets⁸.

⁶ Hailey, p. 368

⁷ Hailey, p. 369

⁸ The Annals of Tacitus, 15:37

[*Following the fire of Rome*] ... The next thing was to seek means of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books, by the direction of which prayers were offered to Vulcanus, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was entreated by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, whence water was procured to sprinkle the fane and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women. But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

Many christians were burned as a mock – they claimed to be “lights of the world”, and so Nero had them burned as human torches. With the judgement upon Rome, this would never happen 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...*” (18:23 NIV). The prostitute city is dead, and there will be no more merriment, such as marriage and the joy that comes with it. Babylon had worshipped the material, rather than the Creator. She had led away *all nations*, and now that she was dead, it was her turn to be led away!

The final verse reminds us of the martyrs who were slaughtered because of Jesus. James was killed by the Roman King Herod Agrippa 1st; Paul and Peter were killed by Nero; and John has already written about Antipas (2:13) who died “where Satan lives”. “...*In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth.*...” (18:24 NIV). But there is also a broader fulfilment of the statement, in that Satan was the one behind all of the unrighteousness, murder, and cruelty that was brought upon God’s people since the time of Adam.

Rome only *represented* those who are opposed to God, which is not to say that *all* who are opposed to God can be found in Rome (Babylon the Great). The message is, that God will (and has at the cross) overcome Satan. Satan was defeated, but he uses all in his power to deceive man.

But the story of Revelation is:

The Lamb Wins!