

Tower of Babel II

(Revelation 18:1-24)

A well-known Christian personality recently made an interesting comment. He said, “If I had it to do all over again as a parent, there is one thing I would do differently. I wouldn’t raise my children in Southern California.”

Does that surprise you? After all, Los Angeles is sunshine, beautiful beaches, Disneyland, and some of the finest schools in the country! So how could he say such a thing? Because Los Angeles also means Hollywood values, rock video role models, pornography, cults, drugs, witchcraft, gang violence, greed, and peer pressure in mega-doses that few young people are able to resist.

Of course, it isn’t Southern California only that challenges our family values and Christian faith. Today, any city of moderate size poses the same temptations. And not only for children! The same forces are at work seeking to undermine our integrity and lead us away from Jesus. Paul warned in Romans 12:2, “Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.” (Phillips paraphrase)

How powerful is this pressure to conform? e.e. cummings, the American poet and painter, wrote: “To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

In fact, thanks to television and the internet, the smallest hamlet can now play host to big city values. But the point is, they originate in the city. 150 years ago, most Americans lived on farms and didn’t face these pressures. We were innocent and naïve. Three cheers for innocence and naïveté! But today, with 95% of our people living in cities, the pressure to conform has become almost unbearable.

In this study, we examine the causes and cures of this problem. The original cause is Babylon the Great, mother of big-city wickedness. The cure, on the other hand, is two-fold. Our duty in the short term is to separate from evil. But the final solution is God’s – the destruction of Babylon the Great. Listen carefully, then, as we read this chapter for we are about to hear four cries from heaven. The first is –

I. The Call for Condemnation

John reports in Revelation 18:1, “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!’”

A. The Certainty of Babylon’s Fall

The first fact this angel emphasizes is the judgment of Babylon the Great. This is in effect the end of Antichrist’s kingdom. Like many commentators, I find two “Babylons” revealed in Revelation 17 and 18. In chapter 17, it was “spiritual Babylon,” the false religious system that Antichrist used to unite his kingdom. But once he gained full power at the midpoint of the Tribulation, he destroyed it and took his seat in the Temple pretending to be God. That brings us to chapter 18 where political Babylon is in view. Here we are given a glimpse of the capital of Antichrist’s kingdom which will be destroyed at the end of the Tribulation. You can find evidence for these two “Babylons” in the phrase which begins Revelation 18:1. John writes, “After this (that is to say, after the events of chapter 17), I saw another angel coming down from heaven.” In other words, the events of chapter 18 follow the events of chapter 17. In chapter 17, religious Babylon is destroyed, followed by the destruction of political Babylon in chapter 18.

But someone may ask, if political Babylon is headquarters for Antichrist’s kingdom, what city is it? The passage does not say. The best we can do is piece it together from other passages of Scripture. For example, Daniel 9:27 identifies the Antichrist as the Roman prince, and since Rome was the great city in John’s day, known symbolically as Babylon (See this in 1 Peter 5:13, where referring to the church in Rome, Peter says “she who is in Babylon . . . sends you her greetings.”), it is my conclusion that the Babylon of Revelation 18 is the revitalized city of Rome, Italy. After all, how could Rome not be the capital of the revived Roman empire? Moreover, one fact is very clear. This is not the literal city of Babylon. Why not? Because, according to verse 17, this city is located near enough to the sea that the sailors can see the smoke of her burning, whereas ancient Babylon was located more than 200 miles from the sea.

The best guess, then, come on is that this is Rome, which becomes Antichrist’s capital, but is destroyed due to her pride, her greed, her violence, and her godlessness. The reason for her judgment is given in verses two and three.

B. The Reason for Babylon’s Fall

Verse 2 says of her, “She has become a home for demons, and a haunt for every evil spirit.” In other words, she’ll look like an angel of light on the surface. She will be exciting, glamorous, and beautiful. But her appeal will come not from God, but from Lucifer who will use her glamour to blind people to the glory of Christ. That should not surprise us. The same forces are at work today. When you think of Hollywood’s grip on man’s fantasies, Las Vegas’ appeal to his passions, and San Francisco’s impact on his morals, is there any question from whom these cities get their power? If we looked beneath the surface, we’d find multitudes of unclean spirits working feverishly to keep people from even thinking about Christ.

How they are able to do this is explained in verse 3. John describes to weapons in the enemy’s arsenal: adultery and luxury. In our last study, we found that adultery is a symbol of false religion. Luxury, on the other hand, refers to the materialism which the city inspires. But then there is nothing new under the sun. In the Garden, it was the appeal of the forbidden fruit. In Gethsemane, it was the glitter of 30 silver coins. Today, it’s whatever new digital device money can buy. This is why Paul warns, “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (1 Timothy 6:10)

Howard Hughes is a sad example. Having become one of the world’s richest and most powerful man, he died mentally impaired and utterly alone. His scraggly beard hung down to his waist, his unkempt hair reached to the middle of his back, his fingernails were 2 inches long, and his toenails hadn’t been trimmed for so long they looked like corkscrews. Most tragic of all, when he passed out of this life, he entered a Christ-less eternity. Why? Because he loved money more than Jesus. So be careful! If you’re looking for real riches, try switching kingdoms. As Jesus said, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” (Matthew 6: 33)

II. The Call for Separation

In light of Babylon’s judgment, God calls for separation in verse 4. “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.’”

A. The Reasons for Separation

Two reasons are given for separation. The first is temptation. God warns His people that if they do not “come out of her,” they may “share in her sins.” Sin is

nothing to fool with. Many think, “I could never be tempted by that!” only to find themselves drawn toward the very thing they claim to hate. Our daughter was quick to learn this lesson. Invited to a party at age 15, her Christian friends chose to watch a video she knew we wouldn’t approve of. So, when it became clear they weren’t going to change their minds, she called us for a ride home. That didn’t win her any points with her friends at the party, but it multiplied our trust in her, knowing that she was willing to stand up for her convictions.

Compare that to the well-known Christian writer who was caught in adultery. He was heard to say for years that this was the one sin he could never be tempted to commit. Why was he vulnerable to it even after years of serving Christ? Because contained within our fallen nature is the desire for every wicked thing this world has to offer. Not until we reach heaven itself can we afford to relax. In his book, The Best Is Yet to Be, Henry Durbanville issued this warning:

With the mind at rest regarding the past, and the heart reveling in the consciousness of being at peace with God, you may have entertained the thought that all dangers are over, and that you will have no more problems as you journey to the Better Land. But that is not so. Scripture and human biography alike testify to the fact that old age has its perils. Noah, after long years of faithful walking with God, failed ignominiously. Moses, near the close of his career lost his temper. Samuel, the man of prayer and the prophet of God, put family interests before loyalty to God and His people. Solomon began magnificently, but ended disastrously. The records of all these good men, temporarily drawn aside from the path of fellowship with God, give point and urgency to the apostle’s warning, “Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall.” The fact is that youth, adulthood, and old age – each period of life – has its own temptations and hazards.

Not only is there danger of sin, there is also the danger of judgment. To remain in Babylon will mean death for God’s people. Think of Lot in Sodom. 2 Peter 2:8 says he was “righteous,” which means his eternal salvation was secure. But had he remained in Sodom, he would’ve died with the Sodomites.

The same principle is just as true today. In your case, it may not be a city you’re asked to flee, it may be a church that no longer teaches the word of God; a romantic affair with someone who does not love the Lord Jesus; or a business partnership with someone who does not share your Christian ethics. No matter. Whatever compromising situation the Spirit calls you to leave, do it immediately

and without delay! For fellowship with evil always carries within it the seeds of judgment – lost jobs, broken homes, sexual disease, even death. Don't assume that eternal salvation will shield you from the present consequences of sin.

Many years ago, we attended the funeral of a young man who was involved in our junior high youth group. But in high school, he became involved with more "exciting" friends. After an evening of drinking, they began to chase one another in their cars at high speeds. Coming around the corner, our young Christian friend rolled his car in the ditch. He was the only one of the group who died. How happy we were to reassure his parents that he was in Heaven! But that didn't spare him the shame nor them the pain of his needless death.

The call for separation leads, in turn, to another warning. Verse 6 says, "God will pay her back double for what she is done." Why? Two additional reasons are given for her judgment in verses 5 to 7.

B. The Reasons for Condemnation

The first reason is **the persistence of her sin**. Verse 5 says: "Her sins have reached to Heaven." The word "reached" originally meant to *put bricks together with mortar*. This play on words is a reminder of the first Tower of Babel. God never forgets our sins unless they been covered by the blood of Christ. As verse 5 emphasizes, "God has remembered her crimes." The truth is, what began at Babel with Nimrod's rebellion has deceived mankind in every age culminating with the final wicked reign of Antichrist during the Tribulation. But God will put an end to her rebellion in this chapter, freeing the world from her sin.

The second reason is **the arrogance of her sin**. Verse 7 adds: "In her heart she boasts, 'I sit as a queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.'" Babylon is so proud of her renewed power that she can't imagine it'll ever end. But verse 8 says, "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." Again, this is a reference to Babylon's past, for after laying siege to the city for weeks, Cyrus the Great learned of a secret way. He diverted the course of the Euphrates River and in just one night he and the Persian army destroyed the great city.

Swollen with pride, Belshazzar, king of Babylon ordered his servants to bring the gold and silver vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem and defied the God of heaven by drinking from them at his drunken orgy. What was the result of this

blasphemy? Before the night was over, God brought the city down around his ears, and Belshazzar died upon his throne. Heinrich Heine tells the story:

***Midnight came slowly sleeping on; in silent rest lay Babylon.
But in the Royal Castle high, red torches gleam and courtiers cry.
Belshazzar there in kingly hall is holding kingly Festival. The vassals sat in
glittering line, and emptied the goblets with glowing wine. The goblets rattle,
the choruses swell, and it pleased the stiff-necked monarch well. In the
monarch's cheeks a wildfire flowed, and the wine awoke his daring mood.
And onward by his madness spurred, he blasphemes the Lord with a sinful word;
And he brazenly boasts, while the servile courtiers cheered and smiled. Quick the
King spoke as his proud glance burned; quickly the servant went and returned. He
bore on his head the vessels of gold, of Jehovah's Temple the plunder bold.
With daring hand, in his frenzy grim, the King seized a beaker filled to the brim,
and drained to the dregs the sacred cup, and foaming he cried as he drank it up,
"Jehovah eternal scorn I own to Thee, I am the monarch of Babylon.
Scarce had the blasphemy rolled from his lips, ere the monarch's heart was cold.
The yelling laughter was hushed, and all was still as death in the Royal Hall.
And see! And see on the white wall high the form of a hand went slowly by, and
wrote – and wrote on the broad wall white, letters of fire and vanished in night.
Pale as death, with a steady stare, and trembling knees, the king sat there; the
horde of slaves sat shuddering chill; no word they spoke, but were deathlike still.
The Magicians came, but of them none could read the flame-script on the wall.
But that same night, in all his pride, by the hands of his servants Belshazzar died.***

The lesson for us? It's as old as Proverbs 16:18. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

III. The Cry of Lamentation

In verse 9, a third voice is now heard – a cry of lamentation by three groups of people, each group deeply impacted by Babylon's fall. The first group are –

A. The Kings of the Earth

John says in verse 9, "when the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxuries. See the smoke of her burning, they will weep

and mourn over her.” The word “mourn” means to carry on weeping and wailing with no relief in sight. Why will kings be so upset? Because all the economies of the world rely on her. She will be the great financial center of Antichrist kingdom. In fact, given our global economy and the complex computer systems, tying them together, it’s not hard to see how the collapse of one great city could send the stock markets crashing and leave the governments of the world in total chaos.

B. The Merchants of the Earth

The second group of mourners are the “merchants of the earth.” They weep not because they are sorry for their sins or they sympathize with those who perish, but because they are materialists grieving their losses. Verse 11 explains, “The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore.” They’ve lost all their customers in just one day their life of the luxury will come to an end.

Even more interesting is the products they sell. John lists 28 items including, among other things: precious metals, expensive clothing, costly woods, imported food, and livestock. But the most alarming commodity is found in verse 13: “bodies and souls of men.” In John’s day, they were 50 million slaves in the Roman Empire. In fact, it wasn’t unusual for as many as 10,000 human beings to be auctioned off in one day in the slave markets of Europe. Is John saying this will again be the case during the Tribulation? I believe so! Even today, we see an ever-increasing loss of personal liberties – large corporations exercising more and more control over their employees; higher and higher taxes, giving government control over the private sector; private ownership of land becoming rarer and rarer. It is not difficult to envision worldwide slavery under the Antichrist. We’ve already seen that no one is allowed to buy or sell without taking his mark on their bodies. Henry Morris adds another explanation in his commentary on Revelation:

“This probably refers to the so-called ‘white-slave trade.’ The Greek word slaves is soma meaning ‘body.’ The international traffic in forced prostitution, both of men and women, is a tragic but lucrative business of modern times and will become even bigger in the evil days ahead. These vice barons are venomous not only amassing great wealth for themselves, but destroying both the bodies and souls of the helpless girls and boys who come under their control.”

The good news is that the wealth and security of this city will not last. Proverbs 23 warns, “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout

wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.” That’s a fitting reminder for modern, materialistic America. For what’s pictured on the back of the good old American dollar? An eagle with wings stretched out ready to fly out of our wallets. No matter how hard we try, no one can buy security. The tighter we cling to what we have, the harder we crash when it is ripped away. And that happens here. In one day all the riches of the wicked are burned up, plunging them into inconsolable grief.

C. The Sailors and Ship Owners of the Earth

The third group of mourners are the shipowners. Like the merchants, they will be ruined by Babylon’s fall. In fact, this judgment will lead to skyrocketing unemployment around the world. For in verse 17, it is not just the ship owners who mourn; it’s also their employees – the sailors. The verse says, “Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors and, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim . . .Oh great city where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin.”

IV. The Cry of Celebration

While Earth is grieving, Heaven rejoices at the judgment of this great city. Notice two facts John emphasizes about her judgment in verses 23 and 24.

A. The Rightness of Judgment

Verse 23 reminds us that this is no ordinary city that is being judged. It is the Great Harlot who deceives “all nations” with her magic spells. That is to say, she deserves everything she gets and more. Her judgment will also be total and complete. Six times the King James version uses the phrase no more – no more music, no more craftsmen, no more grinding, no more marrying, no more trading, and no more light. It reminds me of Bill Gaither’s song:

***The Marketplace is empty, no more traffic in the streets,
All the builder’s tools are silent, no more time to harvest wheat;
Busy housewives cease their labors, in the courtroom no debate,
Work on earth is all suspended as the King comes through the gate.***

***Oh, the King is coming, the King is coming! I just heard the trumpet sounding,
and now his face. I see. Oh, the King is coming, the King is coming!
Praise God! He’s coming for me.***

B. The Reasons for Judgment

Someone may wonder, how can a Christian rejoice at this judgment? After all, didn't Jesus tell us to love our enemies? Yes, but when we think of the evil this city has caused, it's only right to be glad about its destruction. Verse 24 says this is the city in which "was found the blood of prophets and the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth." Our joy doesn't come from the pain of those being judged; it comes from the fact that justice is being carried out. It's the relief we may feel at the execution of a Ted Bundy or Wesley Allen Dodd. God doesn't want anyone to perish. That's why He has delayed His judgment so long. But when we realize this city can no longer hurt anyone, how can we not be glad? This is why God commands us to come out of her and rejoice at her destruction.

C. The Danger of Compromise

Have you heard of the friendship that exists between two little creatures living off Australia's Great Barrier Reef? One is the sea anemone, a little animal with a tubular body and a circle of tentacles. The other is the clown fish which attracts bigger fish to the anemone by darting in and hiding among its poison tentacles. The anemone immobilizes and devours all intruders except the clown fish which enjoys temporary immunity to its poison. Sadly, with time it too grows weak and loses its immunity. That's when the tentacles close in on it as well.

That, I believe, is a picture of the Christian who ignores the danger of this present world system – a system born and bred in Babylon. Her charms are so inviting many forget that within her walls are heartache, sorrow, and death. But you don't need to be fooled by her. You and I can remember who inspires these temptations and where she is inevitably headed. Babylon the Great is falling, is falling! And when she does, "All the king's horses and all the king's men will never put her together again." Praise his name forever!

Discussion Questions

1. If you had a choice between raising a family in the country or the city, what would you choose? Why? What are the pros and cons of big city life? Now read Revelation 18 and list the pros and cons of living in Babylon the Great.
2. Read Revelation 18:1-8. A) What do the results of Babylon's Fall indicate about the unseen forces within her? (v. 2) B) For what specific crimes will she be condemned? (vv. 3, 7) C) What do you think it means that "God has remembered her crimes"? (v. 5; Gen. 11:4)
3. Read Revelation 18:4-8. A) Some say the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of love. Do you see any basis for that distinction in vv. 6-8. Explain. B) Of these two attributes of God (love and wrath), which do you think is taken too lightly today, and what can we do about it? C) Can you think of a believer who was hurt by ignoring God's warning, "Be separate and come out of her!"
4. Read Revelation 18:9-19. A) What sort of people will suffer the most from Babylon's destruction? B) Why do you think they will have such a reaction? C) What do the commodities in vv. 12-16 reveal about this city's values?
5. Read Revelation 18:20-24. A) For whose sake and what reason is this city judged so severely? (vv. 20, 24) B) What should be our feeling in response? (v. 20; Rev. 19:1-6) C) How do you harmonize this with Matt. 5:43-45?
6. Look back on what you've studied. A) Name a prison city that resembles Babylon the great until why. B) Are there ways in which your city is leaning toward the same sins? Explain. C) Now share some steps you are taking to protect your family from this danger. D) Take time to pray a prayer asking God to protect you all from these sinful influences.