

“Fallen Is Babylon” (Revelation 18)

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It’s easy to be captivated by wealth. It’s hard not to be fascinated by things that are expensive, things that are beautiful, things that cost a great deal of money, time, and effort to build or fashion. If you flip through the glossy pages of certain magazines, you will see ad after ad displaying pictures of jewelry, watches, shoes, suits, dresses, and cars that are luxurious and depicted in the most glamorous ways. If you walk or drive through cities—at least certain parts of cities—you may see some of those objects in person, as well as beautiful buildings. It’s easy to see ostentatious scenes of glamour and luxury on Beacon Hill or in the Back Bay, or in certain parts of Manhattan. Or you can go to Newport and tour the mansions, monuments to days past when the ultrawealthy could afford to have massive summer homes that look more like museums than cottages. The same could be said for Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California, William Randolph Hearst’s monument to his own glory. When we’re around such places, there’s a tendency to feel a bit of awe, to be overwhelmed by the power of money.

However, we need to be reminded by a simple fact, which is that all that does not glorify God will not last. Hearst no longer lives in his castle, because he has been dead for many decades. The wealthy New Yorkers who once inhabited those mansions in Newport are long gone. The rich and famous who live in penthouses of luxury or sprawling estates, who travel by private jet and the sleek cars, adorned with the finest clothes, jewelry, and accessories, will also breathe their last and die. Their beautiful homes will someday rot, crumble, or be destroyed, only to be replaced by something else. Their luxurious cars will eventually break down and be scrapped. And, in the very end, on that great day when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead and to make all things new, everything will come to an end. I suspect that the truly beautiful things that people have created in this world will be transformed and find their way into the new creation, but whatever endures forever will not be a monument to the glories of selfish and proud human beings. Whatever endures forever will be a monument to God. Whatever remains will glorify God forever. That is why we exist.

So much of our lives are dedicated to glorifying ourselves or other people. But God made us to glorify himself. We were made to make much of God, to worship, praise, and honor him. We were made to have our lives orbit around God. Yet we place something or someone else at

the center. But God’s message to us is that this will be fixed one day. And on that day, there will be joy for those who love God and lament for those who don’t.

We’re going to see some of this today as we continue to study the book of Revelation. We’re looking at chapter 18 today, which depicts the fall of Babylon. As I’ve said many times in this series, Babylon represents the city of man, which is to say the realm of humans who glorify themselves instead of God. Babylon represents idolatry, the worship of false gods. Babylon could be the Roman Empire, as it was in the time when Revelation was written, nearly two thousand years ago. But it could also represent any culture that is opposed to God, that is dedicated to the deification and glorification of human beings. This city will one day fall.

We’re going to begin this morning by reading verses 1–3:

¹ After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. ² 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.

³ 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.”¹

Last week, we looked at chapter 17, where Babylon is called a great prostitute, and John, the human author of this book, is told that Babylon would be judged. Babylon was once in league with the kings of the earth, who were engaged in “sexual immorality” with her. This immorality is idolatry, which could include distorted sexual acts, but also anything other acts of worship that don’t have God as their object. We were also told that the kings of the earth turn on her. They will hate her and devour her and destroy her. So, empires come and go, destroyed by other empires that arise. But all empires opposed to God will one day end.

In this image that we just read about, a glorious angel, reflecting the glory of God, tells John that Babylon is fallen. It is announced in the present, and not future tense. Of course, as

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

John heard this, that fall had not yet occurred. But the certainty of Babylon's end is such that its fall is depicted as if it already occurred. In fact, this line, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great," has already appeared earlier, in Revelation 14:8. And the line is actually taken from Isaiah 21:9, which was a prophecy about the ancient kingdom of Babylon. That verse says,

Fallen, fallen is Babylon;
and all the carved images of her gods
he has shattered to the ground.

Historical Babylon fell because of its idolatry, and "Babylon," the symbol of all idolatrous people, will also come crashing down. God will shatter its idols. Babylon will become like a wilderness, a haunt for wild animals. The language of an empire being deserted, populated by wild animals, also comes from Old Testament passages (Isa. 13:21–22; 34:11, 14; Jer. 50:39). The point is that kingdoms like Babylon and the Roman Empire are no more. The Christian faith endures, but these kingdoms centered on human pride will not.

Because these kingdoms will fall, Christians are warned to be part of them. Let's read verses 4–8:

- ⁴ 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;
- ⁵ for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
and God has remembered her iniquities.
- ⁶ Pay her back as she herself has paid back others,
and repay her double for her deeds;
mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed.
- ⁷ As she glorified herself and lived in luxury,
so give her a like measure of torment and mourning,
since in her heart she says,
'I sit as a queen,
I am no widow,
and mourning I shall never see.'
- ⁸ For this reason her plagues will come in a single day,
death and mourning and famine,
and she will be burned up with fire;
for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her."

"Come out of her." That language is also taken from the Old Testament, from passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah used to tell Christians to "come out of Babylon" (Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer.

50:8; 51:6, 45). Now, there will come a time when Christians are separated from everyone else, when Jesus will utter a command and the dead will be raised, when he will separate the sheep from the goats, from those who are his people and those who are not. The language of “coming out” of a city to be destroyed finds its roots in Genesis, when Lot and his family are told to come out of the city of Sodom, which was about to be destroyed.

But for Christians living before that final day of judgment, the call is to come out of Babylon spiritually, to not “take part in her sins,” so that we don’t take part in the judgment that will come against Babylon, the plagues depicted in chapter 16. The call to Christians now is not for us to remove ourselves physically from all cities and build our separate Christian commune in some rural area. The call is not for us to isolate ourselves from all businesses in the world and go live like the Amish. While we live in this world, we are not to be of this world.

On the night before Jesus died on the cross, he prayed to God the Father. Among the things he prayed for his followers was this:

¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world (John 17:14–16).

Jesus, the Son of God who has existed forever, became a human being when he entered the world. He didn’t live apart from sinful people. He came to sinners to save them (Luke 19:10). He didn’t tell his disciples to live in their own communities in the desert. But he knew that while they were in the world, they would be hated by many in the world. Ultimately, they were not “of the world.” Jesus’ followers have different heart commitments, a different allegiance. Instead of loving money and power and fame and pleasures more than God, they love God first and foremost. That kind of commitment will put you at odds with the powers that be in the world. That’s what Jesus meant. He wanted his followers to be in the world, to engage with other human beings in life, but not to be like those people in the way they love and, often, in the way they act.

But the call to come out of Babylon is not a command for us to remove ourselves from working in different vocations; instead, it is a command not to be infected by the spirit of Babylon. We are called not to partake in her sins.

Part of that call not to partake in her sins is the understanding that no matter how attractive Babylon may seem, it will one day be judged. Babylon’s sins are many, and God has

not forgotten those sins. He will repay her for what she has done.² What are these sins of Babylon? Verse 7 says that “she glorified herself and lived in luxury.” The problem was that Babylon failed to glorify God. Do you think that all that striving to make more money and create more luxury that we see in all the cities of the world is done in order to glorify God? No, it is done to glorify self. The monuments of human wealth, whether they are giant towers with one’s name on them, or massive mansions that no one could afford to live in now, or massive sports stadiums emblazoned with corporate logos, are not erected to glorify God. And that is no small sin. To glorify self instead of God is to turn our back on our Creator. It is to rebel against the very purpose for which we were made. This would be like an army that refuses to fight for its country and even starts to attack its own country. This is rebellion, and God will not put up with it forever.

We see the pride of Babylon come out in her claim that she is a queen that will never mourn. From her perspective, she will never lose. She has no need for God, or so she thinks. She is invincible. She’s not to be pitied, like some sad widow. She’s a queen who sits on her throne. Little does she know that God is the one on the throne, and she will be cast down from her false throne and judged. She lives it up now, but there will be a day of famine, of death, of mourning. She thinks she is mighty, but “mighty is the Lord God who judged her.”

Verse 7 is based on a passage found in Isaiah 47, a passage aimed at the literal kingdom of Babylon. God used Babylon to judge Israel because his people had forgotten him and worshiped idols. Yet Babylon didn’t realize it was doing God’s will, and the Babylonians didn’t learn the lesson that God will judge idol worshipers. This is Isaiah 47:1–11, which is worth reading in full because it speaks both to Babylon’s pride and to how she will be shamed and judged.

- ¹ Come down and sit in the dust,
O virgin daughter of Babylon;
sit on the ground without a throne,
O daughter of the Chaldeans!
For you shall no more be called
tender and delicate.
- ² Take the millstones and grind flour,
put off your veil,

² Again, there are many Old Testament verses behind the idea that her sins are heaped high (Jer. 51:9) and that God will pay her back for her sins (Ps. 137:8; Jer. 50:15, 29; 51:24).

- strip off your robe, uncover your legs,
pass through the rivers.
- 3 Your nakedness shall be uncovered,
and your disgrace shall be seen.
I will take vengeance,
and I will spare no one.
- 4 Our Redeemer—the LORD of hosts is his name—
is the Holy One of Israel.
- 5 Sit in silence, and go into darkness,
O daughter of the Chaldeans;
for you shall no more be called
the mistress of kingdoms.
- 6 I was angry with my people;
I profaned my heritage;
I gave them into your hand;
you showed them no mercy;
on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy.
- 7 You said, “I shall be mistress forever,”
so that you did not lay these things to heart
or remember their end.
- 8 Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures,
who sit securely,
who say in your heart,
“I am, and there is no one besides me;
I shall not sit as a widow
or know the loss of children”:
- 9 These two things shall come to you
in a moment, in one day;
the loss of children and widowhood
shall come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries
and the great power of your enchantments.
- 10 You felt secure in your wickedness;
you said, “No one sees me”;
your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray,
and you said in your heart,
“I am, and there is no one besides me.”
- 11 But evil shall come upon you,
which you will not know how to charm away;
disaster shall fall upon you,
for which you will not be able to atone;
and ruin shall come upon you suddenly,
of which you know nothing.

There are people today who act as though they will never die, as though they will never stand before God in judgment, as if they will never be held responsible for everything they have thought, desired, said, and done. On that day, no amount of money, no amount of technology, no amount of human power, will be able to atone for sin. The only atonement for sin is Jesus' death on the cross. Those who receive Jesus' offer of forgiveness, who are willing to deny themselves and follow Jesus, have their sins atoned for. Those who reject Jesus will pay for their sins, which is a terrifying thought.

In much of the rest of chapter 18, there is something of a lament given for Babylon by various people, including the kings of the earth. This is how they react to the fall of Babylon. Here are verses 9 and 10:

⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. ¹⁰ They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

“Alas! Alas! You great city,
you mighty city, Babylon!
For in a single hour your judgment has come.”

These kings, who committed idolatry along with Babylon, and who may be the same kings who devoured Babylon, lament for her. Notice that when they see Babylon burning with fire, as Sodom and Gomorrah were burned, they are standing far off. They didn't come to Babylon's aid. They didn't love Babylon. They didn't say, “I've lost my great love.” No, they are afraid of what happened to Babylon. They're lamenting because they likely realize that they will receive the same judgment. There is no hint that they understand that they have sinned against God. There's no repentance, no confession of sin, no plea for salvation.

It's hard to understand what this means in symbolic terms. I don't think there will be separate categories of judgment, such that “Babylon” will be judged apart from the kings of the earth. These groups are more or less one and the same, but John is given these images to show that those who put their trust in wealth will be judged. The kings, who put their trust in political power, will also be judged.

Those who put their hope in business will also be judged, but here we see them—“the merchants of the earth”—lamenting for Babylon. Let's read verses 11–20:

¹¹ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, ¹² cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, ¹³ cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.

¹⁴ “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!”

¹⁵ The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

¹⁶ “Alas, alas, for the great city
that was clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet,
adorned with gold,
with jewels, and with pearls!

¹⁷ For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.”

And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off ¹⁸ and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning,

“What city was like the great city?”

¹⁹ And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out,

“Alas, alas, for the great city
where all who had ships at sea
grew rich by her wealth!

For in a single hour she has been laid waste.

²⁰ Rejoice over her, O heaven,
and you saints and apostles and prophets,
for God has given judgment for you against her!”

The merchants of the earth weep and mourn for Babylon. But notice why they're mourning. It's not because they loved Babylon. It's because there's no one left to buy their wares. Their list of wares includes twenty-eight items. That's seven times four. Seven, as I've said repeatedly, is the number of completion. Four is the number that represents the whole world—we're told about the four corners of the earth (Rev. 7:1) and how there will be people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue, a list of four categories, representing the whole globe, who are part of God's kingdom (Rev. 7:9). The idea is that this list of goods represents all the goods from across the

globe. These were valuable goods in John's time, and Rome was the center of trade. They could trade across the Mediterranean, reaching southern Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East by ship. They could trade across land thanks to the Roman roads and the peace that the Roman Empire had secured throughout military conquests.

If this were written today, perhaps the list would still include gold, jewels, and fine clothing. But it would also include luxury automobiles, fine watches, the latest computers and smart phones, and everything else that is bought and sold across the globe. Babylon today puts so much of its hope in these things, and today's merchants put so much of their hope in their ability to sell them.

One may wonder why all this luxury, this buying and selling, is so wrong. Well, for one reason, it takes our focus away from God. We could use such things to glorify God—after all, gold, frankincense, and myrrh were given to baby Jesus (Matt. 2:11). But we tend to look at the gift and ignore the Giver, or we take what God gave us and don't return a portion to him. Another reason is that it tends to corrupt our souls. And yet another reason is that it leads us to objectify others, to treat them as less than God's image bearers. And we see that in the last item that is sold: "slaves, that is, human souls." Slavery was a very large institution within the Roman Empire. It has been estimated that two-fifths of the residents of Rome were slaves.³ Slavery in the Roman Empire wasn't as bad as slavery in the United States. Slaves made money, had more responsibility, and could buy their freedom. But no one would argue that slavery is a good thing. And slaves were often treated like objects. They were certainly used to satisfy the sexual desires of their masters.⁴

Greed and pride lead us away from God, and they lead us to treat our neighbors as less than human. So, it is right for God to judge such things. It is certainly right for God to judge slave traders and slave owners. But there is the possibility of redemption for people who have been greedy and who have even been a part of enslaving others. John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," was one of those people. He had been part of the slave trade as a young man, but he came to faith in Jesus, he came to see the truth, he repented, and he found forgiveness. He

³ Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 54. He cites Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 461.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

devoted the rest of his life to God, serving him as a pastor, hymn writer, and author. But those who do not repent in this life will be judged along with Babylon.

Before we move on to the rest of chapter 18, notice that these merchants, like the kings of the earth, stand far off. They want no part of Babylon's destruction, though they surely must realize that they, too, will be judged. The sailors also stand far off. They mourn and lament at a distance, and they, like the kings and the merchants, say the same words: "Alas, alas, for the great city . . ." But, strangely, they call upon heaven and God's people to rejoice, because God is judging Babylon for them. God is repaying the ungodly for their wickedness, and he is vindicating his people. God will judge the world, the world that hated his people because it first hated him and his Son.

Let's move on to the end of the chapter. Here are verses 21–24:

²¹ 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;
²² and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters,
will be heard in you no more,
and a craftsman of any craft
will be found in you no more,
and the sound of the mill
will be heard in you no more,
²³ and the light of a lamp
will shine in you no more,
and the voice of bridegroom and bride
will be heard in you no more,
for your merchants were the great ones of the earth,
and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.
²⁴ And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints,
and of all who have been slain on earth.”

Like the rest of Revelation, there are many Old Testament passages behind the language here.⁵ But I won't read all those references now. The point of these verses is quite clear. Like a millstone thrown to the bottom of the sea, Babylon will be sunk and forgotten, never to be found again. There will be no music, no beautiful works, no light, no joy. Why? Because Babylon's merchants made themselves great, instead of glorying God. Because Babylon deceived the

⁵ For example, see Jer. 51:63–64; Ezek. 26:21; Isa. 24:8; Ezek. 26:13; Jer. 25:10.

people of the earth, getting others to join in her idolatry. And because she killed prophets, Christians, and many others. God is right to judge people for rebellion, idolatry, slavery, and murder.

It's important to see that there will be no joy for those who are judged. There will be no fun in hell, no parties. There will be no music, no light, no bridegroom and bride. But there will be those things in the new creation. God will purge the world of evil in order to bring about a new world, a world not marred by rebellion, idolatry, slavery, murder, and every other form of evil. And in that new world, there will be music, there will be joy, there will be light, and there will be a bridegroom and a bride. We're told that Jesus will be the light of that new world (Rev. 21:23). God's people are a bride (Rev. 21:9). And the groom is Jesus. The new creation will be beautiful, joyful, and filled with every pleasure we can imagine. The pleasures there, unlike the pleasures here, will not be tainted by sin. They will be enjoyed in a pure form.

The question for us today is simply this: are we part of Babylon, or have we come out of her? To help us assess where we are, I want to ask a number of questions posed by Jim Hamilton in his book on Revelation:

Do you feel good about yourself because the world respects you? Or do you feel good about yourself because you trust in Jesus and are united to him by faith, and that makes you righteous and right with God?

Do you feel good about yourself because you think you can make a lot of money and ensure your future? Or do you feel good about yourself because you trust your heavenly Father to meet all your needs because he is good and you can trust him?

Do you feel good about yourself because you know your agenda, know your goals, and are chasing your dreams? Or do you feel good about yourself because you are seeking your joy in the joy of those you love and it feels so good to make sacrifices for them that benefit them?

Do you feel good about yourself because you have a sound mind and a strong body and you have great health insurance? Or do you feel good about yourself because the purpose of your life is to make much of Jesus and death will be gain to you because you will be in his presence and you are confident that he will raise your body to be like his glorious body on the last day?

Do you feel good about yourself because you have a great security system in your home and you pack a weapon that you know how to use? Or do you feel good about yourself because you trust God's providential plan for you and are ready to preach the gospel every chance you get while you live?⁶

⁶ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 333–34.

Christians, if you feel the allure of Babylon, turn back to Jesus. Babylon's wealth cannot save you. It won't help you when you need it. When you suffer, Babylon will be far off. In fact, she may cause you to suffer. She will certainly pull you away from God. Instead of being enamored by Babylon, look to Jesus. Though he truly is glorious and mighty, he humbled himself and became a man, living the only perfect human life but also dying on the cross to pay for your sin.

If you are not a Christian, know that Jesus is the only one who can make you right with God, who can bring you to the greatest party there will ever be. I'll end with the words of Jim Hamilton: "If you are not believing in Jesus right now, the words, 'Come out of her, my people' are a call for you to abandon the sinking ship of the world and step onto the ark of salvation: trust in Christ."⁷

⁷ Hamilton, *Revelation*, 337.