

## **Fallen, Fallen is Babylon the Great**

**Revelation 18:1-24**

**By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)**

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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."

The fall of Babylon, first announced in 14:8, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great," and then again in 16:19, "God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath," now reaches its climax in chapters 18 and 19. Babylon has so far been represented as a harlot (prostitute) who sits astride a seven-headed, ten-horned beast, and who is drunk with the blood of martyred saints (17:1-6). She is a temptress, alluring and seductive. Her goal is turn folk away from God. Her influence is cosmic, she rules over the kings of the earth (17:18).

But who is she? As we have seen, those who interpret much of the Book of Revelation as having a fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. insist that what is in view is the Roman Empire. Others have interpreted Babylon as the

entire evil economic-religious system that operates in the world throughout the last days. She is the exact opposite of the pure bride that is the church. Whereas the woman in chapter 12, giving birth to a son, is delivered from the dragon, the harlot of Revelation is destroyed. Babylon is the worldly city (17:18) that tempts and seduces and allures.

I still recall, as a young teenager, the allurements of London to a country boy from the heart of Wales: the lights, the people, the attractions, the brazen sin that was "in your face." Jacques Ellul, for example, has depicted graphically how "the city" is a powerful symbol of the Fall. There is something about the fact that Eden was an agrarian society that is instructive of how cities are viewed in the Bible. Babylon is the pleasure mad, arrogant world, with all its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its anti-Christian philosophy and culture, and with its teeming multitudes that have forsaken God and have lived according to the lusts of the flesh and the desires of the mind. One contemporary analysis of this passage depicts Las Vegas as 'typical' of what Babylon may symbolize.

Others have been equally insistent that Babylon represents a worldly element within the church itself, and that therefore Babylon is representative of Jerusalem! There is some justification for this line of reasoning. After all, whenever Babylon is finally destroyed (18:20), the apostles and Prophets whom she has destroyed are called upon to rejoice. The pages of Scripture reveal that it was often the church—the worldly church—that abused the servants of God more than the world in general. And there are clear echoes to Jeremiah 25:10 in verses 22 and 23 of this chapter, a passage in which Jeremiah is clearly talking about Jerusalem.

One thing is certain, ungodliness, wherever it manifests itself, whether it be in the church or in the world, has no ultimate future over the true church of Jesus Christ. Jesus shall reign!

### **'Red in tooth and claw' (18:1-3)**

The chapter opens with yet another vision, "after this I saw..." (18:1). "After" implies a sequence in which John saw these things rather than the chronological order they are to be fulfilled in history. An angel descends from heaven, and as a consequence, "the earth was illuminated by his splendor" (18:1). The word splendor ought perhaps be rendered "glory". It is the usual word used to describe God or Christ in Revelation (4:9, 11; 5:13 etc for God; 1:6; 5:12-13 for "Christ").

In the background lies yet another Old Testament passage. The closing chapters of Ezekiel depict in some detail the new temple. Chapter 43 describes the descent of the Lord to the temple in terms which are strikingly similar to the opening verse of Revelation 18. In particular, the earth is said to shine as a consequence of the "glory" of the Lord as he enters the temple structure.

However alluring Babylon may be, the splendor of this 'angel' (Christ?) belongs to another sphere of reality. The light and the voice are both meant to suggest a sovereignty far greater and far more threatening than Babylon: God is pronouncing a curse on Babylon and her doom is written: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" (18:2; c.f. 14:8; Isa. 21:9). Where once her beauties allured and dazzled, one day her streets will empty and her fine buildings ruined. She will be fit only for the demonic (18:2). "Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives" (Jer. 51:37). There are several allusions in this chapter to Jeremiah 50-51 (prophesying the fall of Babylon) and Ezekiel 27 (prophesying the fall of Tyre).

It is tempting to view verse 3, with its allusion to commerce and trade, to the modern city and its stock markets and economic power. Headlines are made of slides in the various economic indices, ranging from New York, to London, to Hong Kong. The Dow Jones, or the Nasdaq have become household names and given the emergence of e-trading is likely to become an even more powerful force on the lives of many. It may be that John is merely painting pictures, using commerce (familiar then as it is now) as a way of describing the exchanges that take place between Babylon and the world. Babylon represents power and pleasure, the things which the world desires to have. And a day is coming when all of this will be broken.

### **"Come out of her" is the call for separation and holiness (18:4-8)**

The trouble arises, to cite A. W. Tozer, not when the ship is in the sea, but when the sea is in the ship. Thus the true church of Christ is exhorted to separate from the alluring tentacles of Babylon. "Come out of her, My people..." pleads another voice (18:4; c.f. similar exhortations in Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6 and especially Jer. 51:45). The reason for this separation is solemn enough: lest the church be caught in the impending judgment (18:5).

The Church is in the world, but the world must *never* be in the church. Short of asceticism, some form of involvement in the world is a responsibility and duty. The church is to be salt and light in the world. Equally, however, the church has no business being of the world. She is to be different. Holiness demands separation from the idolatry that characterizes Babylon.

It is interesting that Augustine of Hippo, after spending his youth very much in the city of this world, enjoying its pleasures and yielding to its allurements, could write, following his conversion to Jesus Christ, of the contrast between the city of the world and the city of God. In a massive 22-volumed treatise called, *The City of God* (413-26 a.d.), Augustine outlined his philosophy of life, the Christian life. In it he called upon Christians to "flee out of the city of this world."

Babylon is to receive in judgment twice what she herself inflicted. At least, that appears to be the cry in verse 6. The word translated "double" can also mean "duplicate" and this would fit with what follows in verse 7, stating as it does the principle that the punishment should meet the crime: There is an equity to the justice meted out by God. The judgment of God will always be fair and right. It will never be possible to impugn the righteousness of the Almighty God in his execution of his judgments.

Such judgment will bring to those who remain under Babylon's alluring spell a cry of despair. The lovers weep whenever their lover is destroyed. Those who have engaged in adultery with Babylon now find themselves bereft of the harlot. Hence the cry:

"Woe! Woe, O great city,  
O Babylon, city of power!  
In one hour your doom has come!" (18:10).

And again:

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. (18:16-17).

### **Lamentations and Woes**

The sight of the city on fire (18:9) is terrifying to her supporters (18:10). Despair arises due either to the suddenness of the demise, "In one hour..." (18:10, 17, 19), or because of the effect of it upon themselves: "no one buys their cargoes any more" (18:11). The point is that the demise can come swiftly and decisively. And the mourners here catch a glimpse of the reality that faces all worshippers of the beast, and participants in the economic schemes of Babylon: they, too, will be judged. If God is to cause Babylon to burn, Babylon's traders will not be far behind in His purposes.

The suddenness of Babylon's demise is a solemn lesson that things can change swiftly and God may call to account at His bar of justice in a moment. In language of graphic simplicity, John pictures the traders who have profited from Babylon no longer having a place to do their trading. No one buys their goods any more: gold, silver precious stones, pearls etc (18:11-13). The picture extends out into the sea, to ship captains beholding the pall of smoke hanging over the city, and they, too, lament singing a similar cry to earlier ones in this chapter (18:19, c.f. 10, 16-17).

## Certain and Irrevocable Destruction (18:21-24)

In a graphic description which repeats much of the imagery of earlier verses, the final section of the chapter (18:21-24) depicts an angel throwing a huge boulder into the sea. It is meant to depict the "violence" with which Babylon will be overthrown. Despite all her great claims, she will be brought to utter desolation. The sound of music, and trade and the allurements of bright lights will be gone. Like the eerie spectacle of the Titanic on the ocean floor as a camera slowly passes over her crumpled remains, so the glory of Babylon will be gone. "Will never... will never... will never... be heard in you again" tolls like some faint echo of distant bell signaling her eternal doom.

Prostitution is tawdry. We recoil at it because it cheapens and commercializes something sacred. The exchange of money adds insult and offence to something beautiful and covenantal. It brings something heavenly to the level of the gutter. But now, in this chapter, the whore has been destroyed and her lovers are upset. From the traffic of her bed they had made a rich life for themselves. The merchants had cashed in on a ready market. But the promise of everlasting gain is shattered. Salvation by checkbook has been shattered. "Money can't buy me love," sang the Beatles in the sixties, and they were right. There is no ultimate meaning to be gained from commerce in this world. It is interesting that *The Harrad Experiment*, a novel published in 1966 by Robert Rimmer in which sex was portrayed as an amoral activity, sold over three million copies. Many have linked this book with the emergence of coed dormitories on college campuses. For Rimmer, sex is "a religious act of worship." The powerful imagery of this chapter has something to say to this generation.

The lessons are not all negative, however. Behind the destruction of this archetypal city of wickedness, lies the truth that God is all-powerful and sovereign. Nothing can thwart his determination to build his church. The gates of Hades will not prevail; nor will the gates of Babylon.

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