

“COME OUT OF HER, MY PEOPLE”

Revelation 17:1-18:24

Key Verse: 18:4

“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...””

Chapters 17-18 are John’s vision of the fall of Babylon. This fall was previously announced by an angel in 14:8 and portrayed as coming from the seventh bowl (16:18-19). Though the word “Babylon” appears just four times in this passage, it is also referred to as “the great city,” “the great prostitute,” “a woman,” “she,” “her,” “I,” “you,” and “your,” so that in all, Babylon is mentioned 80 times. These chapters are all about Babylon: its nature, greatness, wealth, influence, and corruption, and its doom. Outwardly, Babylon is impressive, rich, strong and attractive. But inwardly, it is corrupt, wicked, blasphemous, and abominable. Because her sins have piled up to heaven, God punishes her crimes with a terrible and complete judgment.

In order to understand this passage we need to know what Babylon refers to. “Babylon” first appears in the Bible in Genesis 10:10 as the center of the kingdom of Nimrod. In rabbinic tradition, the Tower of Babel (Gn 11:1–9) was “the house of Nimrod” where idolatry was practiced and divine homage offered to Nimrod. His tower was likely a ziggurat. Later ziggurats were associated with the sign of the zodiac. From the top of these ziggurats pagan priests would chart the stars, hoping to gain spiritual insights and knowledge of the future.¹ From Babylon rebellious sinners wanted to establish a worldwide kingdom opposed to God. This blasphemous pride and idolatry offended God and he scattered them by confusing their language. In 612 B.C. the Babylonian Empire became the superpower of the ancient world. To solidify its rule, King Nebuchadnezzar made a huge statue and forced all people to worship it (Dan 3:1-6). The capital city Babylon became the center of idol worship. It contained over 180 shrines dedicated to Ishtar, the ancient goddess of love and war. She is referred to as “the Queen of Heaven” in the Old Testament (Jer 44:17-19). Her offspring include Greek and Roman goddesses Aphrodite, Venus, Artemis and others.² In fact, “Babylon” means “gate of gods.” It has come to symbolize the center of idol worship.

To John’s first readers, Babylon would have been understood as the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire conquered other nations with military power and then united them together with a religious system. Politics, economics, and even military force are unable to

¹ MacArthur, John, *The New Testament Commentary: Revelation 12-22* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2000), p.158.

² Feinberg, Charles L. “Jeremiah” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), vol. 6, p.643.

unite the world's diverse cultures. Only religion can join them together in a compelling way.³ What is Babylon the Great today? We should not try to locate it on a world map, for it is not yet clearly manifest. But we see the spirit of Babylon in religious efforts to oppose the one true God and persecute God's people. As we study today's passage, let's learn how to recognize Babylon in our time, heed God's warning that she will be totally destroyed, and come out of her if need be. Then we can live with a clear identity as God's holy people.

First, Babylon, the mother of prostitutes (17:1-18). When the seventh bowl was poured into the air, judgment came against Babylon (16:18-20). Chapter 17 elaborates on why God brought this judgment. One of the angels came to John and said, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters" (1). As verse 15 tells us, "many waters" symbolizes peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. She united the world--overcoming geographical, historical and cultural barriers--with religion. She made religion the center of people's lives, providing a system of worshiping thousands of pagan deities, and especially the emperor. She is called a great prostitute. Just as a prostitute lures some men away from their wives for profit, she lures kings of the earth away from the one true God to join her in ruling the world (2a). Her wanton beauty intoxicates the inhabitants of the earth with visions of false peace and prosperity and they commit their hearts, minds and bodies to her (2b). In this way, Babylon is the source of idolatry that leads the whole world to rebel against God. These days "coexist" is a popular bumper sticker. The letters stand for Islam, Paganism (the occult), Hinduism, Judaism, Witchcraft (Satan worship), Yin-Yang (Chinese philosophy), and Christianity. Though it may seem innocent, it suggests that all religions can become one, bringing peace and prosperity on earth. People become deeply passionate about this dream. Yet it is one of the manifestations of Babylon in our time. A "secret power of lawlessness" is at work to unite all people on earth under an idolatrous religious authority, in rebellion against God (2Th 2:7-8).

In verses 3-6, the angel carries John away in the Spirit into a wilderness so that he may see Babylon's true colors. Babylon is personified by a woman. What kind of woman was she? First of all, she was sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns (3). This beast, portrayed in chapter 13, was empowered by a red dragon, Satan. This beast symbolizes a powerful empire that will blaspheme and oppose God and persecute his people. The woman is riding the beast and seems to be in control. But later we will see that the beast destroys her. Secondly, she was dressed in purple and scarlet and was glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls (4a). She surpasses Hollywood movie stars in glamour and wealth. Where did she get it? In Roman times, merchants had to belong to trade guilds in order to prosper. These guilds promoted idolatry and sexual immorality, through which wealth was steered toward the religious system. In brief, this woman represents a prosperous business network which makes corrupt religious leaders very wealthy and enables them to live in luxury.

³ MacArthur, John, *Ibid.*, p.157.

Thirdly, she had a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things (4b). The glittering cup was gorgeous on the outside. But it contained a most vile and poisonous brew, the filth of her adulteries. Likewise, Rome looked very impressive on the outside. However, it was a hotbed of sexual licentiousness, human trafficking, and every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity (Ro 1:24-32). Fourthly, the name written on her forehead was a mystery (5a). Here, “mystery” means secret reality to be revealed in the end times. We cannot understand this mystery now. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the woman are clearly revealed by her name: “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes, and of the Abominations of the Earth” (5b). In Revelation, a name on the forehead describes the individual’s character and relationship either to God or to Satan (7:3; 14:1; 13:16; 14:9). In spite of her glamorous appearance, this woman’s true nature is blasphemous and abominable. The phrase “Babylon the Great” was used by Nebuchadnezzar to express godless pride which led to his downfall (Dan 4:30). “Mother of Prostitutes, and of the Abominations of the earth” indicate her central role in directing the idolatry of false religions. Fifthly, she was drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, who bore testimony to Jesus (6a). She was the direct cause of the martyrdom of God’s people, like Antipas in Pergamum (2:13). This made her drunk with the illusion that she could defy Almighty God. This drunken deception made her boldly rebellious and a toxic influence. Will God really do nothing about his people’s martyrdom? Let us see.

When John saw the woman, he was greatly astonished (6b). He was surprised at the power and wealth of the woman and the beast. The angel kind of rebuked him: “Why are you astonished?” Then the angel explained the mystery. The beast is repeatedly described as the one who: “once was, now is not, and yet will come” (8a,b,11). Though it counterfeits the one true God who is, who was, and who is to come (1:4,8; 4:8), it absolutely falls short. Once this beast was powerful; now it is not, but it will be, yet again in the future. This beast comes up out of the Abyss. Empowered by Satan, it will counterfeit Christ’s resurrection. Though it is immensely powerful, it will remain only a short time before going to destruction. When inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life, see the beast they will be astonished and follow the beast (8b).

The beast is overly complex and deceptive. It is easy for anyone to be deceived by the beast. So this calls for a mind with wisdom (9a). This wisdom enables us to understand the vision: the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits (9). They are also seven kings. At that time, five of them had fallen, one was, and the other had not yet come; but when he did come, he would remain for only a little while (10). The five kings have ruled the great empires which had been strongholds of world religions and opposed to God’s people. Historically, they were Babylonia, Egypt, Assyria, Persia, and Greece. These five kings had fallen. The king who “is” reigned during John’s time and refers to the Emperor of Rome. The one who “has not yet come” refers to the antichrist who will rise in the future. He will also be called an eighth king after counterfeiting Christ’s resurrection. But in nature he belongs to the Satanic seven and is going to his destruction (11).

The beast's ten horns symbolize ten kings not yet in power but destined to reign for a short time under the beast's control (12). These ten kings probably represent all the kings on earth. Deceived by the dragon and the beast, they gather for a futile insurrection (13). They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them at his coming, because he is the Lord of lords and the King of kings (14a). No one can defeat the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. We believers are identified as his called, chosen and faithful followers. We have been called according to his purpose and chosen by his grace. We are faithful to him as we trust in Jesus Christ daily. We may have suffered for a while. But as we have shared in his sufferings, we will also share in his eternal glory and victory (14b).

Verses 16-18 tell us how Babylon's fall came about. Surprisingly, Babylon will be destroyed by the beast and ten horns. They had coexisted for mutual benefit for a while. But the time comes when the beast and the ten kings hate the prostitute, Babylon. They bring her to ruin and leave her naked, taking away all of her wealth, clothing, and jewels. They even eat her flesh and burn her with fire bringing about her complete destruction. In truth, this happens according to God's plan. In this way God's words of judgment are fulfilled.

Second, woe to you, Babylon the Great (18:1-24). Chapter 18 announces Babylon's fall (1-3), warns God's people (4-8), shows threefold responses to Babylon's fall (9-20), and enacts her irrevocable destruction (21-24).

After this John saw another angel coming down from heaven with great authority. His appearance was so bright that the earth was illuminated by his splendor (1). He proclaimed an authoritative message straight from God. With a mighty voice he shouted: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" Everyone heard his proclamation. It was shocking. No one imagined that Babylon the Great would be destroyed. But Almighty God destroys her in an instant. She was abandoned and became like a haunted house, full of demons, impure spirits and unclean birds and animals: howling hyenas, jackals, owls, bats, snakes, and wolves (2). The reason for her destruction is given in verse 3. She was the source of idolatry to all nations. Like a drug dealer, she drove people to madness to earn a profit. Instead of serving the true and living God, the kings of the earth worshiped her and made her rich. She indulged in excessive luxury and as a result, merchants of the earth also grew rich (3). But their wealth would soon disappear.

Then John 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..." (4). Surprisingly, there are still God's people in Babylon. Before bringing his judgment, God calls, "Come out of her, my people." This is an imperative. It means to totally dissociate from her. We should "social distance" from Babylon so as not to be infected by her. Though we Christians are in the world, we do not belong to the world (Jn 15:19). Jesus chose us out of the world and purchased us with his blood. Now we are God's people. As his people we have a different mindset, value system and lifestyle than the world's. We should not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Ro 12:2). 2 Corinthians 6:16-17a say, "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?"

For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.' Therefore, 'Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.'"

Why should we come out of Babylon? So that we will not share in her sins and receive any of her plagues. The word "not share" means not to be in partnership with or connected to her sins. Ephesians 5:11 says, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (NKJV). This is not only a personal matter, but for the church. If we share in Babylon's sins, we will share in her plagues. This is why those caught in pornography need to come out of it; those addicted to drugs need to come out of it; those trapped in dishonest schemes must come out of them. As we come out of Babylon, we come into deeper fellowship with Jesus Christ and his people. This is why we establish godly families and commit to our Christian fellowship. In our church, there are so many who keep a clear Christian identity while working and studying in a hostile world. At times we are isolated, even persecuted. However, when we live as God's people, Christ commends, blesses, and rewards us with everlasting glory.

Verse 5 explains why Babylon was punished: "...for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes." People commit sin randomly and then forget about it. But God does not forget. Sins pile up one by one until they demand justice. God is so compassionate that he patiently waits for people to repent. However, when sin reaches its full measure, God punishes sinners based on their crimes. In verses 6-7a, the voice from heaven shifts from addressing God's people to instructing the agents who execute judgment. The voice commands that Babylon be punished to the full measure in proportion to the sins she had committed. The source of her sin was pride; it led to her sudden and complete downfall (7b-8).

In verses 9-20 there are two threefold responses to Babylon's fall. The first responses are laments from kings, merchants and mariners (those who work at sea) who profited from Babylon's power and prosperity. They call to mind in our times antichristian government leaders, corporate bosses and those who have established vast international trade networks. These lovers of Babylon stand far off, in fear and horror, shocked at the suddenness with which the great city had been destroyed. The kings of the earth weep and mourn, not because people suffer, but because they lost their power. The merchants were so evil that they trafficked in human beings for profit (13). They should feel sorry for their sins. But they weep and mourn over lost wealth and luxury. The mariners did the same. Here we can see that even when sinners know that destruction will follow, they still cannot bear to give up their sins, and the accompanying pleasures and wealth. Verse 20 transitions from earthly lament to heavenly celebration. All in heaven who had suffered to be faithful to Jesus--God's people, apostles and prophets--are invited to rejoice in God's judgment of Babylon. Recall Habakkuk, who agonized when he found God used wicked Babylon to discipline Israel. He cried out to God. God heard the prayers of his people and vindicated them. Surely persecuted believers in China and North Korea will rejoice with them.

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea. He demonstrated the violence of Babylon's fall. She would be completely destroyed, never to be found again (21). The pleasant sights and sounds of everyday life--music, craftsmen at work, food preparation, lamplight, marital love--will be seen and heard no more in Babylon (22-23). She had taken these daily pleasures from Christians (2:9-10; 6:10; 13:16-17; 16:16; 17:6), and now they are taken from her. This is the vindication of prophets and God's holy people whose blood had been shed by Babylon (24).

The world we live in seems attractive and prosperous at times. But at the core it is corrupt and wicked. Satan is working invisibly to turn the whole world against God in rebellion. However, God is living, almighty, and righteous. He will judge Babylon and vindicate his people in his time. We Christians should not participate in the sins of Babylon but trust God the righteous Judge. We should be faithful to Jesus until he comes again in eternal glory and victory.