

Come Out of Her My People Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 25

Texts: Revelation 18:1-17; Isaiah 52:1-12

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The harlot Babylon has seduced the kings of the earth with her wealth, power and beauty. John is now given a glimpse of the future, when Babylon the Great will come to her appointed end. Indeed while heaven celebrates Babylon's fall into ruin, the nations will weep and mourn. For the kings of the earth have committed spiritual adultery with the harlot, and her destruction will bring them to ruin as well. But the declaration that God's judgment is coming upon Babylon is also intended to serve as a warning to all of God's people—flee from the evil city before it is too late.

We now turn our attention to Revelation chapter 18 and the account of the reaction from heaven and the earth to the news of the destruction of Babylon the Great. Recall that in Revelation 17—our text last time—Babylon the Great is depicted as the great prostitute and harlot who seduces the kings of the earth, who commit spiritual adultery with her, which is idolatry. The great city, as John calls the harlot, sits on many waters and rules over the kings of the earth, having seduced them with of the allure of her wealth and beauty. Because of her seductive ways, the nations, kings and people who serve her, also serve her master, the beast. John has depicted the harlot as a woman riding upon the beast, which, in apocalyptic symbolism, indicates that the harlot does the bidding of the beast and that the two of them—the beast and the harlot—have forged an unholy alliance.

As we have seen throughout the past few sermons in our on-going series on the Book of Revelation, the destruction of Babylon the Great occurs as a direct result of the seventh bowl judgment which God pours out upon the earth at the end of the age. The bowl judgments are the third and final cycle of judgment found in the Book of Revelation. They are connected to the time of end and are far more intense than all the other judgments,

extending to all of the earth and to all of its inhabitants. When the bowl judgments have run their course, John says, God's wrath is complete. And yet, God's people are spared from his judgment because they are sealed with the name of Christ. But all those who worship the beast and his image, including those who have taken his mark so as to buy and sell, or to avoid persecution, will bear the full fury of God's wrath.

We have seen how the sixth bowl judgment (the demonic deception and gathering together of the nations at Armageddon to wage war on the church) and the seventh bowl judgment (the destruction of Babylon) both occur at the time of the end, when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. This is, as we have been pointing out, a very powerful argument against all forms of premillennialism. Premillennialism holds that Jesus Christ returns to earth and then establishes his millennial kingdom, before judging the world when the thousand years are over. But throughout this book, John teaches that judgment day occurs when Christ comes back—not a thousand years later.

Emphasizing different theological points, each of the various visions in Revelation is like a different camera angle on the same period of time, that lying between Christ's first coming and his second advent which is the present age. Each of these visions ends with Christ coming in judgment. When we turn to Revelation 20 and the famous millennial text, we will see that the thousand years mentioned there by John is a description of this present evil age and not a future millennium in which lions lie down with lambs and when Jesus rules over the earth from the city of Jerusalem. Simply put, this means that we are in the so-called millennial age right now, and that the millennium is not a time of peace and prosperity on the earth. Instead, the thousand years refers to the reign of the saints in heaven during that time when the Beast and the harlot are persecuting the church upon the earth.

There is also an important pastoral emphasis in the Book of Revelation as well. John is seeking to offer hope and comfort to the persecuted Christians to whom he is writing. This becomes especially clear as we draw closer to the end of the book. Beginning with the bowl judgments of Revelation 16, and then moving on to the account of God's judgment upon the harlot in Revelation 17, then to the reaction of heaven and earth to the destruction of the city in Revelation 18, to the introduction of the bride of Christ and his second coming in Revelation 19, to the thousand years and final judgment of Satan in Revelation 20, to the establishment of the new heavens and earth in Revelation 21-22, John gives us a glimpse of how the great drama of redemptive history is coming to its final and glorious climax.

In these final chapters of Revelation, we are given a glimpse of the back of the book—so to speak—which would not only have brought tremendous comfort to those in John's original audience who were facing both the sword of the beast and the seduction of the harlot on virtually a daily basis, but which also serves to remind us of the central theme of this vision. Jesus Christ wins in the end! Although to unbelievers, it may look like the beast triumphs when he wages war on the saints and kills some of them, to believers, on the other hand, who see these things through the eyes of faith, the martyred saints come

to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. Even when Christians are forced to face the point of the sword, we know that we will inherit the riches and treasures of heaven no matter what the beast may do to us. We also know that the dragon, the beast and all who serve him will get exactly what they deserve. They will be cast into the lake of fire and suffer eternal torment.

Recall too, that we identified the harlot of Revelation 17 as the city of Rome, while the Roman empire itself is the beast. When John finally understood the connection between the beast and the harlot in this vision, he was amazed at how the power of the sword (the beast) and the allure of the harlot, came together to rule the known world. All of Rome's subjects were amazed by her apparent resurrection from the dead. Rome not only dominated the first century world with its military power, but its administrative efficiency, economic prosperity and cultural achievements seduced the kings of the earth, as well as a significant number of Christians. Her wealth and grandeur blinded people to her idolatrous ways.

And so it is in this sense that Rome is the great harlot. For the harlot promises wealth and prosperity to those who ignore their allegiance to Christ, and who will confess "Caesar is Lord" so as to avoid persecution and conduct their business—even if they do it half-heartedly or with their fingers crossed behind their backs! John has already told us that this was going on in certain congregations in his letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3 of this book. Indeed, there were many Christians who were increasingly attracted to the money, power, glamour, and celebrity which the harlot dangled in front of them. And so rather than suffer persecution for refusing to worship the beast and his image, the harlot seduces them by offering what looks like an easier and better way. John's point is to warn the church that Satan will either attack us directly at the point of the sword (the beast), or indirectly, through the wiles of a seductress (the harlot). Therefore, we must always be on our guard.

It is also important to remember that in apocalyptic symbolism, the beast and the harlot, which are the Roman empire of John's day, in turn, become vivid prophetic images of all those governments which will arise throughout the present age and which will also persecute the church with the sword, as well a picture of those nations and empires which seduce Christians into spiritual adultery drawing them away from Christ. By mentioning the seven heads and ten horns, one of whom is yet to come, John is fast-forwarding his reader from ancient Rome to those days immediately before the second advent of Jesus Christ, when the world will again witness the rise of an even greater empire (with the full power of beast and the harlot exercising her full sway) connected to the release of Satan from the abyss.

This world-wide empire in which beast and harlot once again join forces, will not only mimic the power of God, but like Rome, with the evil Nero serving as the type of a final ruler yet to come, once empowered by Satan, this empire will assume to itself divine privileges and prerogatives and demand worship for itself and its leaders. Although world conditions may actually improve when this empire emerges, and economic prosperity may reach great heights, it will be that time in which the people of God face the greatest

persecution. For, according to John, the beast unleashes his final fury on the church immediately before Christ returns to destroy him at Har-Mageddon and to bring about final judgment upon the earth.

And so as we turn to our text in Revelation 18, we will complete the section we began last time, when John announced God's impending judgment upon Babylon the Great.

In Revelation 17:15-18, John has already told us about the fate of the great harlot: "Then the angel said to me, 'The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.'" The irony in all of this is that the very same kings whom the harlot has seduced will suddenly turn upon her and destroy her. When the time of end finally comes, Satan's kingdom will be divided against itself—a division which God puts into their hearts—so that God's words and the promise of impending judgment are fulfilled. When the seventh bowl is poured out, the harlot meets her end at the hands of her erstwhile lovers, who then mourn her loss.

When the news of Babylon's destruction is announced there are two sets of responses. The first response is that from heaven, found in verses 1-3 and 20 of Revelation 18. The second response, in verses 4-19, is the lament of those who profited from the great city and who participated in her idolatry. Starting with the response from heaven, we read in verse 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!" Earlier in Revelation 14:8, an angel has already announced Babylon's impending doom. We read "a second angel followed and said, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries."

The earlier announcement of judgment upon Babylon is now reiterated in connection with the seventh bowl judgment. There are a number of echoes in these words from the Old Testament, especially from Jeremiah 50-51 (from which we took our Old Testament lesson last week), which depict the fall the city of Babylon, as well as Ezekiel 27, which predicts the fall of the city of Tyre. Israel's prophets foretold that these two Gentile cities which seduced and oppressed Israel would be destroyed by the hand of God. Their destruction centuries earlier, in turn, becomes a picture of what will happen to Babylon the Great at the time of the end. The angel who reveals this speaks with the authority of God (the mighty voice), and having been in God's presence, radiates the divine glory, thereby illumining the earth.¹

Babylon's end is fitting. According to the angel, "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

¹ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 168.

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.” The glittering city of man, will suddenly become a desolate wasteland, inhabited only by demons and vultures. Her fleeting glory (lasting but “one hour,” as John puts it in Revelation 17:12) is now gone. Without her jewelry and her make up, her beauty is no more. Her true ugliness is exposed, and her lovers desert her. She is left destitute, a hollow shell of her former self. But all those entangled with her idolatry will suffer her fate.

But even as heaven resounds with the announcement of Babylon’s destruction, a solemn warning is proclaimed to all those who dwell upon the earth. According to John’s testimony in verses 4-5, “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.’” This time another angel sounds a warning to God’s people, commanding them to flee from the city before God’s wrath rains down upon her. This too, is a loud echo from the Old Testament. Three times in Jeremiah 51, God calls out to his people, commanding them to flee from Babylon before it is too late. In Isaiah 52:11 (our Old Testament lesson), the prophet is speaking of a future exile for Israel, warning God’s people that a time will come when they must, “Depart, depart, go out from there!” They are to “touch no unclean thing!” Indeed, God commands: “Come out from [the city] and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the LORD.” A similar warning is now reported by John.

Since this message is proclaimed by John to those living throughout this present evil age, we must be reminded that we are God’s people, living in exile here in the city of man. We wander through the wilderness of this evil age as pilgrims, functioning as salt and light, while making our way to the heavenly city. And while we must take the cultural mandate with great seriousness—as we seek to build a godly culture and rule and subdue the earth in the name of Christ—let us not forget that our true citizenship is in heaven, where Christ is seated above. And indeed, we are warned by John in no uncertain terms, that the great harlot will tirelessly seek to entice us away from Christ, through the allure of the city of man, its wealth, its power and its glamour. As the prophets warned Israel during her time of exile, and as John warns us here in Revelation 18, the city of man—Babylon the Great—will fall under the direct judgment of God. And if we become involved in her sins (her idolatry), we, too, risk coming under God’s judgment, for God will not be mocked.² Therefore, we must heed the angel’s warning, and we must come out from the great city while there is still time.

In Revelation 16, the angels and saints proclaim the fact that God’s judgments are just and true. The punishment God brings upon the harlot, likewise matches the nature of her crimes. She has seduced the nations of the earth while persecuting the church of Jesus Christ. This is why the angel exclaims in verses 6-8, “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

² Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 255.

her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.” Because of her smug self-confidence and her arrogant pride, in just one day God will give to her exactly that punishment which her sins require.³ She will be consumed by those very things from which she thought herself immune: famine, death and mourning. Glory and luxury will give way to grief and torture. It is a frightening picture of what awaits for those who have turned their backs upon Christ because of the allure of the harlot.

The consequences of her fall rock the entire earth. In verse 9 and following, we read that “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 kings of the earth worshiped the harlot because of her wealth and power. And now, it is all gone. The kings weep and mourn because in one hour, Babylon the Great goes up in smoke, consumed by the judgement of God.

But the kings of the earth are not alone in their grief. We read in verses 11 and following, “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!’”

Those who were made rich by the harlot and who also participated in her idolatry are now terrified by her fate. As with Ezekiel’s description of the destruction of the city of Tyre in Ezekiel 27, John also lists a catalogue of the great wealth which is lost when the great city is consumed by the flames. The merchants lament her destruction because it is too late for them to save any of their own wealth within her confines. But they not only lament the loss of their wealth, John says, they are terrified by the sight of her burning. For as the harlot has been consumed, so will they. Babylon’s wealth not only included gold and silver and other fine merchandise, the great prostitute also traded in the souls and bodies of men, which is a description of slavery, perhaps, but more likely of the “culmination of a decadent culture’s ruthless pursuit of pleasure, whatever the cost to others.”⁴ And since God’s judgment is just, all those who participated in such despicable behavior must now watch all that they have worked to attain go up in the flames, flames which also foreshadow the judgment that awaits all those whose hands are covered in blood of men and who have exploited God’s people in order to increase ill-gotten gains.

³ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 255-256.

⁴ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 257; cf. Poythress, *The Returning King*, 169.

The world-wide extent of the losses become apparent in the latter part of verse 17. "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!' Like the merchants who weep, so too will the sailors and tradesmen who hauled her cargos. They too watch as their livelihoods go up in the smoke of the great city. They join the kings and merchants in a heart broken lament for the city. Woe! Woe, O Great City! For in one hour she has been destroyed, and her destruction foreshadows their own.

But even while the earth's inhabitants mourn, heaven celebrates Babylon's destruction. As we read in verse 20: "Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you." Babylon the Great is responsible for martyr's blood. She has seduced kings, nations and peoples, enticing them into idolatry and the persecution of the saints. She has done the bidding of the beast, riding upon his back. But one day, God will vindicate his saints who have suffered at her hands, and the great harlot will be destroyed. All those whom the woman has put to death and persecuted, will rejoice at the just judgments of God. Think of what the knowledge of this must mean to a persecuted church. The harlot has seduced many, involving them in his idolatries. The congregations who heard the seven letters read aloud knew the names of some of them. But now the saints learn that the harlot, like the beast she rides, will come under the judgment of God. God will repay her the exact measure for her crimes. And heaven rejoices at the news!

And so with the knowledge that heaven rejoices while the earth mourns, John now describes the tragic, but inevitable end of the great city. According to verse 21 and following, "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.'

Crushed by a great boulder (millstone), never to be seen again, Babylon the Great will be utterly and totally destroyed. Since she led the nations astray by her magic spell, since her streets ran with the blood of the prophets and the saints there will be no more sounds of music, joy and laughter within her walls. There will be no sounds of craftsmen plying their trades (which is perhaps a divine retribution for the fact that the harlot was using trade guilds to draw Christians in Thyatira, for example, away from Christ).⁵ There will be no

⁵ See Beale, *Revelation*, 919-920.

signs of life in her homes, and the day to day affairs of life will suddenly cease. Her end is certain, the judgment upon her will be complete. Nothing will remain of her.

The implications of John's vision of the destruction of Babylon the Great should be now be clear. Despite the allure of the harlot, her beauty is false and her wealth will be consumed by the fires of judgment. All those who have become entangled in her idolatry will weep and mourn as they witness her final destruction. For the fate of the harlot soon will become their own and so the kings and merchants are terrified by the awesome sight of the great city disappearing before their very eyes. Therefore, Christians should not only take heart by the fact that the harlot will indeed get what is coming to her in the end, but any who have been seduced by her deceptive ways are given one final warning, one last chance: "come out of her, my people!" Not only is there still time to escape from her arms, but her illusory beauty and wealth are now exposed for what they are, Satanic deceptions which will be stripped away. As John will make plain in the next chapter, true riches and true beauty can only be found in Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ has died for his bride, purifying her from every stain, spot and blemish of sin, and Jesus Christ was raised for her justification so as to provide her with a perfect righteousness.

While the bride of the beast (the harlot) faces certain destruction, the bride of Christ is being prepared for a glorious feast, the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb.

And I must ask you, what will it be? The seductive allure of the harlot, or the true beauty and riches of Jesus Christ . . . Now is the time to decide. Before it is too late.

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