

The revelation of the inevitable failure of Babylon's rebellion against God and of her terrible punishment should keep Christians from being seduced by her blandishments and her temptations and make the followers of Christ wary of becoming enmeshed in Babylon's culture or way of life.

“The Bitter End”

Revelation 18:1-24

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In chapter 17 we were given a brief account of the fall of Babylon, the great City of Man, the anti-Christian world order that is, in fact, the creation of Satan and his agents: the beast and the false prophet. The angel in 17:1 had promised John that he would show him “the punishment of the great prostitute.” In chapter 18 we have what in the OT would be called an “oracle against Babylon.” Indeed, if you compare them you will immediately see that chapter 18 is dependent upon every one of the oracles against Babylon in Isaiah and Jeremiah as well as Ezekiel's oracle against Tyre (26-28). What we have here, in a manner typical of the OT prophets, is a combination of prophecy, lament or dirge, and even, in one verse, thanksgiving. But it is all about the final destruction of Babylon.

I realize that some of you may be struggling with week after week of Revelation. If you want some sympathy, let me tell you that I have never worked harder nor read more in preparation for a series of sermons than I have for these sermons on the Book of Revelation. You find John's vision perhaps opaque and hard to fathom. I have myself in some respects. You already knew, as I have reminded you, that faithful scholars with the best will in the world come away from these chapters – chapter after chapter – with quite different understandings of what John *meant*. No doubt you have wondered whether the explanation of a passage that I have given you is correct. What is more, it can be discouraging to read chapter after chapter describing in the vivid imagery of apocalyptic literature the judgment of the world and the doom that must overtake the unbelieving world. Take courage, brothers and sisters. We are nearing the end of the book and the final four chapters, 19-22, are both the clearest and the happiest of them all.

Text Comment

- v.1 John is suddenly on the earth in his vision. In chapters 15 and 16 he was in heaven and perhaps as well in chapter 17. This angel radiates the glory of God. As one commentator beautifully puts it: “So recently has he come from the Presence that in passing he flings a broad belt of light across the dark earth.” [Swete, 226]

- v.3 The scene of man's proudest achievements is reduced to a dark ruin inhabited by demons and birds of prey. The lament describes Babylon as already fallen even though clearly in the context her final destruction is something that is being predicted and remains in the future as the succeeding verses make clear. The past tense emphasizes the certainty of the prophecy; so certain it can be spoken of as already having happened. The reason for her fall is again, as said several times in chapter 17, her moral and spiritual wantonness.

Babylon gave herself to the beast and his program of rebellion against God and now must pay the price.

- v.5 Another angel, different from the first angel, calls on Christians to flee the city before its destruction. Remember the angels who hurried Lot from Sodom before its destruction. As seems to be the case, we are reading here of the period elsewhere in the Bible described as the Great Tribulation, the final and most intense persecution of Christians in human history. What we learn here by the by is that all Christians will not be destroyed in Babylon's last crusade against the Christian faith.
- v.6 Scholarship now prefers, on the strength of Hebrew usage, to translate "double" in v. 6 with the word "equivalent." The idea is not *twice* the punishment but a *fitting* punishment. As always in the Bible the punishment must fit the crime. Double punishment would, in fact, be a violation of God's justice. [Beale, 901] That Babylon's punishment will fit her crimes is also the point of the next verse.
- v.7 The same angel that warned the Christians to flee Babylon now calls upon the angels of retribution to visit a just punishment upon her. [Ladd, 237]
- v.8 Now in the next section John records the lament over Babylon's fall by the various groups of people who cooperated with her system for the sake of their own profit and who now must suffer loss because of her fall. First we hear from the rulers of the earth, then from the merchants, and finally from the seafarers, who had shared in Babylon's great wealth by carrying goods to her and from her. Rome's great wealth was built on trade and much of that trade crossed the sea in ships. Interestingly, in Ezekiel 27 – another reminder of how thoroughly chapter 18 depends on the oracles of the OT prophets – the same three groups lament Tyre's demise: the rulers, the merchants and the seafarers. These laments do not express righteous sorrow over another's catastrophe. These people weep for their own loss. Their cooperation with Babylon had made them rich and so Babylon's judgment and destruction has become their judgment and their destruction.
- v.13 The list represents the luxury products of the Roman world.
- v.20 Remember that the persecution of Christians was all along Babylon's project, and will be still more at the end. In chapter 17 she was described as drunk with the blood of the saints. Again, her punishment will correspond to her crimes.
- v.21 The casting of the stone into the sea as an image of Babylon's destruction – the great city sinking into the sea never to be seen again – is a symbolic act typical of the biblical prophets. If you remember, Jeremiah wrote a book prophesying the destruction of Babylon – the Babylon that had taken Israel into exile in the early 6th century B.C. – and then instructed his assistant to take the book from Jerusalem to Babylon, read it aloud to the Jewish exiles, then tie a rock to it and throw it into the Euphrates. After he had thrown the book so weighted into the river he was to say, "So will Babylon sink to rise no more."

[Jeremiah 51:60-64] We have the same image of final destruction here of Babylon in its final incarnation at the end of history.

- v.23 All the good things, the happy things of Babylon's life – for there are always beautiful and happy things even in the wicked world – will disappear.
- v.24 “Prophets and saints” is a phrase John has used several times, always to indicate the entire population of Christians (11:18; 16:6).

The fact that Babylon's fall is described in this chapter in terms drawn from the biblical descriptions of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre, and Jerusalem indicates once again that all of John's contextual references to the Roman world, its government, and its economic life refer not to one particular empire and its rise and fall, but to the Satanic world system as it has been expressed in political, economic, and religious systems throughout world history. In that sense Sodom and Gomorrah were Babylon, in that sense Rome was Babylon and in that sense there have been Babylons in the world ever since. So there will be Babylon in a concentrated form at the end of the world. The concluding phrase of this chapter – “of all who have been killed on the earth” – further generalizes the description of Babylon's fall. We are not talking about the end of the Roman empire, but the end of the world and about the destruction of that form of Babylon that will *at that time, at the end of history* rule the world at Satan's behest.

Now, it is fair to say that there is little here in chapter 18 that we have not heard time after time in Revelation to this point. Christians, as we read in v. 20, are to take comfort from the fact that their faith in Jesus Christ will be vindicated in due time and that the day is coming when those who have suffered greatly for that faith will be rewarded. The great motive for faithful Christian living in a hostile world, at least in the Revelation of the Apostle John, is that such faithfulness and loyalty to Christ will not go unrewarded! In due time it will be made clear that, no matter the mistreatment the saints may have suffered for their loyalty to Christ, their persecutors will be judged and they themselves will be rewarded. Hang on brothers and sisters! Hold on; hold fast and you will be very, very glad that you did when the day dawns.

It is important for any right understanding of Revelation always to remember that it was written *for Christians*. The entire book, not just the first few chapters, was written to the seven churches of Asia Minor, which is to say it was written to the Christian church, which is to say it was written to us. It is not unnatural for a reader of Revelation to begin to think that the great message of the book must be of chief relevance to *unbelievers*. After all, it is *their* judgment and *their* punishment that is here being prophesied. Surely that is the great thing in chapter 18 and throughout the book. Time after time and in vivid and dramatic ways the judgment of the unbelieving world is described. Surely this is a solemn warning to unbelief: this is what will happen to you if you do not put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and follow him. And no doubt there is that. But, remember, there is much of this same kind of writing in the OT prophets as well, oracles against the pagan nations who were the enemies of the people of God. And those oracles, like John's here in chapter 18, were preached not to those nations themselves but to the people of God. They were *about* Philistia or Assyria or Babylon but they were *for* Israel!

The fact is the book was written to and for Christians and is about *their* life, *their* calling, and *their* future. The judgment of the unbelieving world forms *the backdrop*, but it is not the real *message* of Revelation. This lament over Babylon's fall is, in other words, an admittedly unusual sort of sermon preached to the Christian church, to us, a congregation of Christ's people as surely as were the congregations of Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, and Laodicea mentioned early in the book. The sermon emphasizes the great theme of the book: the eventual vindication of Christian faith and Christian steadfastness. That is the sermon's indicative, the *is* or the *will be* of chapter 18. The ungodly world will eventually be judged and those loyal to Christ through thick and thin will be vindicated and rewarded for their fidelity to him. But in a biblical sermon we expect the indicative to produce an imperative. The things we know to be true about the future are to produce *in the present* a particular kind of behavior in us. Our *faith* is to lead to a different way of *life*.

And that behavior is defined in this sermon in the two imperatives or commandments that are addressed specifically to Christians in it. One of them is found in v. 20 where we are commanded to rejoice in the hope of the destruction of Babylon. It isn't the first in the chapter, but I'm taking it first. Both of these imperatives, after all, repeat themes that have appeared many times in the book so far. In any case, we are commanded to rejoice in Babylon's destruction. That seems odd. Christians are supposed to mourn over the unbelief of the world and over its impending judgment, are they not? If we love our neighbor, surely it is sadness to us that they do not believe and therefore are exposed to God's judgment. Our Savior was often sad, as we read in the Gospels, and he grieved in particular that so many who saw and heard him did not believe in him and so remained subject to the judgment. He wept over the city of Jerusalem in his day – another version of this Babylon of Rev. chapter 18 – because it was so hard of heart, so unwelcoming of the Savior God had sent to her, so willfully blind to the truth. Indeed, when he forecast the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, as he did several times during his ministry, the last time as he was carrying his cross to Calvary, the thought of the city's doom was heart-breaking to him. How then can Christians be commanded to rejoice over the spiritual destruction of multitudes of human beings?

Well, the answer is that it is not the death of these people that is the cause of Christians' joy but the vindication of the justice of God and of those who suffered terribly on behalf of their faith in Jesus Christ at the hands of unbelieving Babylon. In the comfort of our 21st century American life we ought not to be too glib about desperately suffering Christians in other parts of the world who are today *longing* for the Lord's justice finally to be revealed. Thousands upon thousands of Christians have lost their lives *in our time* while we have lived comfortably in this world for no other reason but that they were faithful followers of Jesus Christ who refused to compromise their loyalty to him even when Babylon in its particular form in their part of the world threatened them with death. For them and for their loved ones, the in-breaking of God's justice will be a matter of immense relief and great satisfaction as, of course, it will be for us as well.

All Christians will rejoice at the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ – a joy such as none of us I'm sure has ever known in this world – even though that coming must mean the end of the unbelieving world and the judgment and punishment of its people. You cannot have the one without the other. You cannot pray, "Maranatha, O Lord Come," without praying that God's judgment be visited upon the world because that is what will happen when Christ comes again.

And we who have mourned the blasphemy of God's name, the mockery made of his laws and his will for the life of mankind, and who have despaired to see human beings swallow one gigantic lie after another, surely we of all people will rejoice, must rejoice to see these terrible wrongs exposed for what they are and finally to be put right. We may still grieve the loss of so many human beings, but that cannot be helped. They made their bed; they must now sleep in it, and sad as it is to say it will be so. But it will be an altogether good thing that truth will prevail, God's name will be hallowed in the world, his righteous judgment enforced, and his people rewarded for their faithfulness to him. For such reasons every believer knows *that* will be a happy day!

The second imperative or commandment to arise out of the indicative, the other behavior that answers to the prophecy of Babylon's final destruction, we read in v. 4:

“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.”

The revelation of Babylon's sin, of the inevitable failure of her rebellion against God, and of her punishment should keep Christians from being seduced by her blandishments, her temptations, and make them wary of becoming enmeshed in Babylon's culture, careful not to touch her in ways in which her own fingers and hands might be stained. This too is a theme we have already encountered in the book. This is, in fact, the burden of a number of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3: to avoid entanglement with the pagan culture so as not to be seduced and compromised by it.

In one of his prophecies against Babylon Jeremiah says a similar thing (51:45):

“Come out of her, my people! Run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the Lord.”

In neither that case nor this is it meant that the followers of Christ are physically to withdraw themselves from the rest of the world, as, for example, into some monastery or Amish sect. Jews in Babylon in Jeremiah's day couldn't do this in any case. Now slaves in a foreign land, they weren't free to flee Babylon any more than many Christians at the end of the first century were free to flee the Roman world. Many of them were slaves and had to remain where they were put. Rather they were being commanded and we are being commanded to separate ourselves from the world *in the sense of* making no compromise with its unbelieving program, *in the sense of* remaining faithful to Christ and to his kingdom. The purpose of this separation and the nature of it are explained in v. 4: “so that you will not share in her sins...” What you are to separate yourself from is the spiritual life, the spiritual program, the ideology, theology, and ethics of Babylon.

In a wonderfully practical passage in 1 Cor. 6 the Apostle Paul explains that Christians can't help associating with the people of this world. If, he goes on to say, the sort of separation the Bible requires of us meant physically separating ourselves from unbelievers we would have to leave the world not just Babylon. Besides, Paul spent his life among non-Christians, seeking to win them to Christ and to salvation. He read Babylon's books, toured her cities, made use of her laws, even appealed to her government for help in more than one instance. What Paul meant when he told us to separate from the world is that Christians must take care not to make the sort

of spiritual alliances with the world that will undermine their loyalty to Christ or destroy their witness to the truth. *Paul was not worried about Christians getting into the world; he was worried about the world getting into Christians!*

As Paul put it in 2 Cor. 6:14: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers,” or, as someone else translated the same phrase, “Don’t get into a double harness with unbelievers.” “*In* the world surely but not *of* the world.” That is how Paul describes the situation we should be aiming for and that is the sense of the command here in v. 4. As one commentator explains v. 4: We are to withdraw spiritually from Vanity Fair. [Kiddle, 364]

A few years ago there was an article in *Atlantic* magazine by Prof. Bernard Lewis of Princeton, the dean of American orientalist, the scholars of the Near East, and, at that time, before his retirement and disappearance from public life, he was our most respected scholar of and commentator upon all things having to do with Islam. In the article he notes that the two “expansive and civilization-defining” religions in the world are Christianity and Islam. Both of them, he says, have a problem with tolerance. And that is inevitable. For they both believe that they have the final truth from God and that everyone must believe that truth and accept it and live by it or else. Prof. Lewis, like so many others who think the same way, failed to recognize that everyone is intolerant in this way; the difference is simply what they happen to be intolerant about! Nevertheless in the article Bernard Lewis expressed the hope that more and more Christians would become Christians of the modern, relativistic type who believe that all religions lead to God, that there are many ways to conceive of religious truth, that there is nothing really important at stake in the choice of one religion or another. If so religion would increasingly become no big deal, certainly nothing to fight and die for as did the terrorists of 9/11. In that way we would all get along. [Cited in *First Things* 134 (June/July 2003) 60] But to say that – and of course there are many others besides Bernard Lewis saying just that to the Christian church today – to wish that is precisely the same thing as saying that Christians should *not* come out of Babylon. It is to wish for the reverse of what John commands Christians to do. It is to wish that Christians would make their peace with Babylon, which, of course, is precisely what Babylon wants them to do! Then they will have forsaken Christ and gone over to the Devil, left the City of God to become a citizen of the City of Man.

If you ask why churches go bad, why they lose their way, why Christian churches in great number, especially in Europe, in the United States, and in Canada that once stood for the gospel of Christ, now spout smooth, vapid and toothless slogans to largely empty sanctuaries; why such churches no longer interest their own children; why they never witness the revolutionary impact of the gospel of Christ on human life; the answer is this: in every case they refused to come out of the world, they got into a double harness with unbelief, they weakened, blurred, smudged and then finally obliterated the bright line that distinguishes faith and unbelief, wickedness from righteousness, darkness from light, God from idols. They did precisely what Bernard Lewis hoped we Christians would do! By refusing to keep the antithesis between Babylon and the New Jerusalem clear, by refusing to keep the distinction between the two kingdoms front and center, and then by refusing to live out that distinction, they lost the distinction altogether and became part of Babylon and didn’t even realize it in most cases. Many of Babylons most beautiful churches were once Christian churches! When Christians merge with Babylon, Babylon does not become Christian; Christians become Babylon!

There are legions of such churches in our land and in our world and a large number of Presbyterian churches among them. It would be the most ridiculous conclusion for any of us to draw that *this* church might not do *exactly* the same thing in *exactly* the same way, given enough time, if *we* do not come out of Babylon ourselves. And such churches are useless. They have become the enemies rather than the advocates of salvation. And at one time it was the furthest thing from their mind that they would ever betray the gospel of Jesus Christ or fail to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world and the King of Kings. But at the last, when push came to shove, they liked living in Babylon and refused to leave.

That is why in the midst of this warning of Babylon's impending fall we should find suddenly this commandment to come out of her, "My people," the Lord says, "you must come out." Babylon's temptations are subtle and powerful. There will always be bright and influential people urging compromise. There will always be reasons not leave, not to leave just yet, not to leave in *that* way. The Devil is the master compromiser. Babylon will not compromise, but she will embrace and reward everyone who compromises with her and cooperates with her. Or, at least she will until the day of divine judgment breaks upon her and her punishments overwhelm her.

However impolitic to say it nowadays, however distasteful to the modern mind the notion that there is an unbridgeable chasm separating the kingdom of God from the kingdom of this world and that Christians must view Babylon as the enemy and so with great wariness walk within her lest she share in her sins; however hard it is for unbelievers to grasp the truth of this, for *us* to deny this for the sake of a seemingly wider and more charitable Christianity is to betray the Lord with a kiss. You will from time to time wish to hold fast to Jesus Christ as the only name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved *and* stay and prosper in Babylon. But neither Christ nor the Devil will let you do that. If you are a faithful Christian you must make your choice for Christ and that means coming out of Babylon. If you are a faithful Christian parent, you must teach your children what Babylon is, where she is going, what will be her end and why she does not speak for you or think as you must think or live as you must live. Many people will think you intolerably dogmatic, extreme, and arrogant for separating yourself from her, but your eternal life and that of your children depend upon your doing so.

You may remember the names of Martin and Gracia Burnham, the Christian missionaries kidnapped by a Muslim terrorist group in the Philippines a few years ago. In the Philippines now as in other parts of the world one incarnation of Babylon, one political and religious expression of the kingdom of the Evil One is a violent and resurgent Muslim fundamentalism. As in first century Rome's grip, Babylon's grip upon the world is often religious in nature. Christians have been through the ages and are today as often persecuted and killed for a religious as for a secular principle. In any case, the Burnhams and others were held for more than a year in hopes of ransom before an attack on the group's camp by the Philippine military. The terrorists shot the hostages as the attack began and then most of them eluded capture. Gracia Burnham was the sole survivor among the hostages. During their months with their captors the Burnhams, as you would expect, continued to be Christian missionaries, talking with the rebels about Jesus Christ and the gospel as they could.

“Marching the Burnhams past predominantly Muslim villages in the southern Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf [the terrorist group] came across a Christian chapel. ‘There used to be a cross there, but we destroyed it,’ one of the rebels proudly told the missionaries. ‘We hate the cross. Any time we see a cross we destroy it if we can.’ [Gracia] Burnham says she was never ‘a real cross fan’ before her abduction. ‘I was raised a Baptist, and [making to much of a cross] always seemed to be Catholic to me. But I love the cross since my captivity, and I have it everywhere,’ she says. ‘My mind has changed because the Muslims hate it so much, [and] what it stands for.’ The Burnhams tried to explain it to their captors, but to no avail. ‘I don’t want anybody paying for my sin,’ said one. ‘I’ll do my own paying.’” [*Christianity Today* (June 2003) 35]

Well, in Babylon one can hate the cross and tear it down or one can simply dismiss it as nothing more than one of many religious myths that ought easily to be put side by side with the others. But if Jesus is the Son of God, as he is; if he made the world and gave life to every human being, as he has; and if he suffered and died on that cross for the salvation of the world as he did; then we cannot, and we must not, and we will not make peace with any view that denies or diminishes in any way the gospel, the good news of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Babylon proudly boasts that she will do her own paying. She will indeed; she simply has no idea of how great a price she will have to pay.

We will never make war on those who do not believe – the world has nothing to fear from us – but we will by love and good deeds, and by words fitly spoken, do our very best to help the people of Babylon come to know what we have come to know. And we will not compromise with the world, either in its overt opposition to Jesus Christ or in its indifference to him. We will be his people, he calls us here, “*My people, come out of her; My people...*” We will be *his* people come wind, come weather, no matter in how many ways that must mean we must come out of Babylon so that we will not share in her sins or receive her plagues.

As so often, Augustine has the last word. What does it mean that we must “come out of her?” “We must renounce our rights as citizens of this world, and flee to God on the wings of faith.” [*City of God* xviii. 18]