

Revelation 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 December 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Revelation chapter 18 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory.

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.

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.

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, for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

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, as she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning.

[1 : 1 0] Since in her heart she says, I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see. 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.

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. 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.

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more. 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, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.

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

Alas, alas, for the great city, that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels and with pearls, for in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.

[2 : 5 3] And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out, as they saw the smoke of her burning. What city was like the great city?

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.

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

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.

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.

[4 : 06] And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth. In Revelation chapter 18, the fall of Babylon the great is declared, and the people of the Lord are called out from her, in words that remind the reader of Jeremiah chapter 51, verses 6 to 8.

The chapter depicts the last of the Lord's death.

Lamentations that different groups take up over the fallen city, and describes the significance of her overthrow. Babylon the great, presented here and in the preceding chapter, is Jerusalem, and the entire world system that surrounds her.

The world of the diaspora that looks to the temple there, for instance. Back in chapter 17, we saw that Revelation speaks of the city of Jerusalem, in ways that may seem startling to us, in the significance that it is prepared to grant it.

The chapter opens with a descending angel or messenger, possessing great authority, who formally declares the fall of the city of Babylon, and the sentence carried out upon her.

[5 : 33] In bringing Babylon down, it has been emptied of its population, to be handed over to a new population of demons, unclean spirits, and unclean birds and beasts. The language here might remind us of passages such as Isaiah 34, verses 8 to 15, the judgment declared in Zephaniah chapter 2, verses 13 to 15, or perhaps, most of all, Isaiah chapter 13, verses 19 to 22.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendour and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations.

No Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there, but wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures. Their ostriches will dwell, and their wild goats will dance.

Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged. The wild animals here are demons and unclean spirits, spirits that defile and render impure.

The whole system of worship and religion, centred upon the temple in Jerusalem, has been rendered desolate and defiled. Christians will need to leave it behind, not merely in the city of Jerusalem itself, but wherever it continues to operate and exert its influence in the world.

[6 : 55] To this point in time, the early church was still largely Jewish, and in many places still retained extensive ties with the wider world of Judaism that had rejected Christ. The fall of Jerusalem and its temple rendered the breach between Christianity and Judaism much more complete.

Once Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed, the period of the overlap between the old covenant and the new had come to an end. What remains is the system of apostate Judaism, condemned and the possession of unclean spirits, rather than as an expression of the Holy Spirit.

As Jerusalem and the vast religious system built around her are judged, the faithful people need to forsake her and escape from her, lest they share in her desolate and defiled state.

Babylon the Great had caused all the nations to drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality. Jerusalem was the mother city, the city to which millions of Jews across the empire looked.

She set the pattern that others followed. She crucified Christ, rejected and persecuted the church, and exported the hostility to the faithful everywhere in the empire.

[8 : 04] The rulers of the land of Israel were complicit in the sins of Jerusalem at their heart, and the merchants of the earth, the missionaries and teachers that went out into the wider world with her influence, all were made rich and powerful through her.

Even after the head of Jerusalem was crushed, the power of the body of the Jewish adversaries of the early Christians throughout the world continued to be immense. The book of Revelation, while presenting its judgments as possessing a final and decisive force, is often presenting judgments that have more of a definitive character, whose full significance will take many centuries fully to work out.

A couple of centuries later, Judaism throughout the empire will continue to be a powerful adversary of the church. The Roman beast will continue to be a persecuting one. However, both suffer a judgment in the book of Revelation, the greater repercussions of which will prove devastating for both.

In the Lord's judgment, Babylon the Great is paid back as she has paid others, double for her deeds. What she has inflicted upon others, she experiences herself, and not only must she restore what she has stolen, as it were, in a single payment, she must make a double payment, as she suffers the same loss that she sought to place upon others.

Babylon the Great is marked by complacency, a decadent self-confidence in which she thinks herself immune to any reckoning, but her judgment comes upon her suddenly and decisively.

[9 : 30] In verses 9 to 20, various groups take up their lamentation for the city. In these verses we see figures representing the wider system of which Jerusalem served as the centre.

The figures in question are the kings of the land, the merchants of the land, and shipmasters, seafarers, and sailors, whose trade is on the sea. To understand these figures, we need to recall that the land generally represents Israel, and the sea represents the nations of the Gentiles.

The kings of the land are powerful figures in the land of Israel most probably, figures both within and outside of Jerusalem itself, figures like the Sanhedrin, Herod, and other leading priests and rulers.

These kings are distinct from the kings that attacked the harlot in chapter 17 verse 16. The merchants are the people who move out from the land with the wares of the land, missionaries and teachers who go out from Jerusalem and Israel onto the waters of the Gentiles.

The seafarers, shipmasters, and sailors are the millions of Jews and Gentile adherents of Judaism who operate upon the Gentile Sea, in the diaspora and in the wider empire.

[10 : 39] Each of these groups, in their own way, depends upon Jerusalem and profits from and extends her sins. Peter Lighthouse observes a triple cycle of judgment involving each of the three groups.

It begins with the group in question, describes the group's relationship with the harlot, speaks of them standing at a distance, relates their statement, alas, alas, followed by their description of the former glories of the city in a lamentation, wondering at the fact that, in a single hour, all of its glories were laid waste.

Babylon the Great, as depicted in Revelation, is a mighty trading city, a seafaring city that sustains a vast empire of merchants and traders. Of course, Jerusalem is an inland city, and speaking literally, it is not a powerful trading port at all.

However, represented symbolically, this is exactly what Jerusalem is. It is the centre of an immense religious economy. It is like the mecca of its world, to which and from which everything flows.

Its fall impacts everywhere else. The description of the trade of the city is reminiscent of Ezekiel chapter 27, verses 12 to 25, and the judgment upon Tyre.

[11 : 53] Revelation works with the background of Ezekiel extensively in these concluding chapters, so it wouldn't be at all surprising to see allusions here. One of the things that the list of goods traded from Babylon the Great does is to present the city as lying at the heart of and sustaining an immense world, with all of its riches and treasures.

It is a whole world system. In the Gospels and the Book of Acts, one of the things that is brought into focus is the economic power and impulses of the religion centred upon the temple.

Jerusalem and its temple were big business, drawing in immense wealth and making many people incredibly rich. Jesus condemns the temple as a robber's den and a place of economic exploitation, the devouring of widow's houses and the perversion of true faith for material gain.

Near the heart of Jesus' condemnation of the temple was the claim that it had been perverted into a system of merchandise and exploitation, rather than functioning as the house of prayer for the nations that it was supposed to be.

The priests had become an immense, financially corrupt operation, a system of violence, extortion and exploitation. The list of items of trade ends with and emphasises the trade of slaves, which is immediately described as a trade in human lives.

[13 : 12] The system of the Judaism ordered around the temple is not merely an economically exploitative system, it's a system of slavery and cruel spiritual bondage. The apostle Paul describes what he calls the present Jerusalem as being in slavery with her children, and as bearing children for slavery.

Jesus condemns the scribes and the Pharisees as bringing people into captivity in Matthew chapter 23 verse 15. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

Behind this scene is also the mourning described in Revelation chapter 1 verse 7. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

Even so, amen. This mourning takes up Zechariah chapter 12 verses 10 to 14 with its description of various groups of mourners. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself, the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves, and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves.

[15 : 02] The mourning in Revelation seems to have more of a negative flavour to it. It is the mourning of loss from the tribes of the earth, and desolation, not necessarily the mourning of repentance.

However, the verse that immediately follows this passage from Zechariah, in chapter 13 verse 1, raises the possibility that repentance might also be in view. On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

The righteous are called out of Babylon the Great, but there is also an opening for repentance here. Seeing the downfall of the city of Jerusalem, people connected with the vast religious system stretching out from her are offered the possibility of repentance.

The judgment upon the city is a cause for rejoicing for the righteous. Back in chapter 6 verse 10, the martyrs cried out from beneath the altar, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

Now, in the fall of Babylon the Great, this prayer has finally been answered. The chapter ends with a mighty angel casting a stone like a great millstone and throwing it into the sea.

[16 : 14] This recalls the words of our Lord in Matthew chapter 21 verse 21, likely concerning Jerusalem. And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.

Jesus also warns those who abuse weak, vulnerable and dependent persons and lead them into sin of their fate using imagery similar to this in Luke chapter 17 verse 2.

It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Babylon the Great, with its exploitative trade in human lives, is just such a city.

The downfall of the city is largely described in terms of silencing, of voices and sounds being removed, the hustle and bustle, the rich and evocative soundscape of a great city of trade, industry, learning, music and worship, is struck silent.

Perhaps we are intended to think of the city as like a great millstone, rumbling as it processes the people within it, grinding them down into flour for baking. Then, in a great act of judgment, the upper millstone, typically seen as the female stone, grinding upon a male stationary stone at its base, is taken up and thrown into the sea of the Gentiles.

[17 : 39] What is disclosed beneath the stone, as it were, is the blood upon which the city was built. Here, once again, we must remember Jesus' condemnation of Jerusalem in Matthew chapter 23, verses 29 to 38.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.

Thus you witness against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues, and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel, to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barakai, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.

[19 : 03] See, your house is left to you desolate. The description of Babylon the Great at the end of this chapter fulfills Jesus' condemnation of Jerusalem in Matthew, and in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.

A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament do we see Jerusalem, the temple, its hierarchy, and the system to which they all belong, condemned on account of their economic exploitation?