

Alas, Babylon

Revelation 18:1 – 19:8

Pictures of Jesus

So, to continue our study of the book of Revelation this morning, we need to take a step or two back. In Looking at this book together, we are looking for exactly what we would expect; the Revelation—the unveiling—of Jesus Christ. We are looking for portraits of Jesus, and Revelation chapter 14 gave us two. In the first, he was standing on Mount Zion, with 144,000 saints, who had His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads. These are the saints. These are the people of God whom we met in chapter 7, where they were described as “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” So, kind of a heavenly “Palm Sunday” liturgy. But just seven chapters later, now that John’s spiritual location has shifted from the throne to the land, he looks up, and sees them “above” him, standing on the heavenly Mount Zion, described this way in Hebrews chapter 12, verses 22 and 23:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect... Hebrews 12:22–23 (ESV)

But still, they were standing with the Lamb, these who

⁴ ... have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits... Revelation 14:4 (ESV)

And they were singing a new song, worshipping before the throne and before the four living creatures who surround that throne, and this is the mission of the church—this is what we were made for—to glorify God and fully to enjoy Him forever. That is the reason why we were created—it is our purpose, now, and in eternity—to worship (which is what it means to “glorify and enjoy”) the Living God.

But as the saints worship, God—heaven—moves. John observes an angel, flying in the midst of heaven, “having an everlasting Gospel to preach to those who dwell on the land, saying,

⁷ “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.” Revelation 14:7 (ESV)

So, this angel (and we might recall that early in the Book, angels were associated with both the ministers and the ministry of the church), is calling the people of the land to repent (“Fear God and give him glory...”), and to join the church—the people of God—in their mission (“worship Him who made heaven and earth”). But in its historical context, this message is being proclaimed as a final call to the people of Old Covenant Israel, because “the hour of His judgment has come.”

Bringing us to the second portrait of Jesus in Revelation chapter 14, verse 14, where Jesus was revealed as “one like a son of man, seated on a cloud”, ready to reap the harvest of the

land, and the results of this harvest were to be thrown into “the great winepress of the wrath of God” and trampled “outside the city” for 1,600 stadia, roughly the length of the land of Israel.

Well, chapter 15 made clear that the wine of God’s wrath—the vintage produced by this harvest—would be served to the inhabitants of the land by seven angels who came out of “the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven”; and these angels would be sent to enact a judgement that was absolutely required by that “testimony”—God’s covenant—kept in the ark of His covenant which was shown in chapter 11 to be within God’s temple in heaven, and this would be accomplished by the pouring out of “seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever.”

Babylon “the Great”?

The next chapter, which we covered in the evening Bible Study a couple of weeks ago, revealed both the targets, and the nature of the judgements poured out by the seven angels, culminating in verses 17 – 21 with “the great city”, identified in chapter 11 as “the great city” where the Lord was crucified—so, Jerusalem—being split into three parts, as God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.”

Chapter 17, as we saw last week, was essentially a clarification of chapter 16, further identifying “Babylon”, as John was taken away into the wilderness—another change in his perspective—to be shown “a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names...” Now, the identification of the “scarlet beast” with the Roman empire is relatively self-evident, but why do we identify “Babylon the great” in Revelation 17 and 18 with Jerusalem? There are a number of reasons, but, to get just a bit ahead of ourselves, look chapter 18, verse 21. There we are told that “Babylon the great was to be, “thrown down with violence,” and “found no more”, because, as it says in verse 24,

²⁴ ...in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth. Revelation 18:24 (ESV)

Compare that with Matthew 23, verses 34 and 35 where Jesus said to Jerusalem,

³⁴ 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, ³⁵ 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 Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Matthew 23:34–35 (ESV)

Add to that the fact that His very next words were, “Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon **this generation**,”ⁱ speaking to a particular generation of people, at very a particular time (just before His crucifixion), and in a very particular place, which He Himself identifies in the very next verse when He says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Other reasons exist, but this should be adequate to make the case. In the context of Revelation chapters 17 and 18, “Babylon the great” has become the spiritual identity of Jerusalem below, as Paul refers to her in Galatians, and not in a good way.

Fallen, Fallen is Babylon

We've seen why in chapter 17, but chapter 18 picks up the theme in the first two verses,

¹ After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. ² And he called out with a mighty voice,

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!"

And this chapter will go on to recapitulate all that has been said before, adopting the poetic form of lament, a kind of "song" often used in the Old Covenant prophets. In this case, the lament is taken up by "another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority," and making the earth "bright with his glory."

² 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."

So, at this point in the vision, Babylon **is** fallen. At this point in the vision, the final outpouring of God's wrath has been completed. The false bride, having given herself to other lovers, has now been forsaken. She has become "a dwelling place for demons", and "a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast..." But at the time the vision was given, Babylon was about to fall, and this is precisely why a voice speaks from heaven in the very next verse, saying,

Come out from among them...

⁴ ... "Come out of her, my people, **lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues...**"

And we will go into much greater detail on the rest of this chapter at the Bible study this evening, but for now, there **is** a historical context to this that we need to see. The first century Christians were called by Jesus to "Come out of her..." both here, and in the Olivet discourse, where He said in Luke 21, verses 20 – 22:

²⁰ "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²² for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Luke 21:20–22 (ESV)

So, receiving this travel itinerary from the Lord Himself, and understanding that it applied directly to them, the Christians in Jerusalem were obedient. Eusebius, a historian of the ancient church wrote,

The people of the Church in Jerusalem were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city who were worthy of it, to depart and dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they called Pella. To it those who believed on Christ traveled from Jerusalem..." — Eusebius, Church History 3, 5, 3

This probably doesn't seem huge, but one of the strategies used by some unbelievers to attack the Bible is to point to the fact that Jesus Himself, and the apostles spoke with certainty about the nearness of the events they predicted, and because many evangelicals today refuse to

believe that these things were truly fulfilled in that first century context, those who attack the Scriptures say, “See? Jesus was wrong when he said, ‘Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon **this generation.**’” But he wasn’t, and it’s important, because,

⁴ ...Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: “That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged.” *Romans 3:4 (NKJV)*

And this Book—the Revelation of Jesus Christ—is for us, in the same way that Old Testament prophecy is for us. Not because it hasn’t happened yet and it gives us something interesting to talk about at Bible studies, but rather, because it has been fulfilled—God always keeps His promises—and we find strength and hope in the truth that our God reigns. See, skipping down to verse 21, we read,

The Last Nail

²¹ 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...**” *Revelation 18:21 (ESV)*

And this echo of the prophet Jeremiah’s words about the destruction of “old” Babylon as a force to be reckoned with speaks to the finality of the Old Covenant system as decreed by God. “New” Babylon will be thrown down to “sink and rise no more”, just as “old” Babylon was.

So, this is the last nail in the coffin. This is the final fulfillment of all that God promised to a faithless and disobedient people under the Old Covenant. In truth, it is a fulfillment of the last phrase of the Old Covenant as we have it in our Bibles.

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

But it is not the last word. It is not God’s last word. In verse 20, the voice which spoke in verse 4 had said,

²⁰ “Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged her with the judgment she imposed on you.” *Revelation 18:20 (NIV)*

And this is counterintuitive to us. We’re not used to being told to “rejoice” over God’s judgement of the wicked. We are not accustomed to thinking this way, having misunderstood what it means to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. The thing is, loving and praying for our enemies is ultimately focused on seeing them converted to Christ so that we will no longer be enemies. Where that may not happen, we are taught very specifically in Romans 12, verse 19, not to seek vengeance for ourselves, but rather, we are to “**leave it to the wrath of God**”, for it is written “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

So, the idea is not that there should never be justice or even vengeance against the wickedness of those who hate God. The idea is that such vengeance should be left where it rightly belongs—in the hand and actions of God Himself. And that’s why we can rejoice, because God’s holiness, justice, and righteousness will out. God will be vindicated, and He will do so by pouring out His vengeance. But for those who repent, and turn to Him by grace, through faith in Christ, that vengeance has been poured out on Jesus, the mediator of a new and better covenant, enacted on better promises. And this is why we rejoice. Because,

In all my distress and persecution, I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All His enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and the glory of heaven.

Even so, the voice from heaven in Revelation 18 said,

²⁰ Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!”

So, bringing us back from the wilderness, and into the throne room of God, the saints and angels and elders in Revelation chapter 19 do just that; and so should we. We’ll look at this in more depth next Lord’s Day, but let me close by reading Revelation 19, verses 1 – 7:

¹ After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,

² for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

³ Once more they cried out, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.”

⁴ And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!”

⁵ And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.”

⁶ Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “**Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.**”

You may have heard that somewhere before. And because it is true, and because the Church is the true bride of Jesus Christ:

⁷ Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready... Revelation 19:1–8 (ESV)

ⁱ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 23:36.