

The Book of Revelation

Session 10 - The Mystery of Babylon (Chapters 17-18)

Book Overview

Chapters 17-18 continue the second retelling of the action, emphasising the role that sinful humanity has played in this drama and introducing us to the system that's been in the background pulling the strings.

Chapter Overview

These two chapters can be divided into four sections:

1. Babylon: The City That Leads the World Astray (Revelation 17)
2. The Punishment of Babylon (Revelation 18:1-8)
3. Despair for the Wicked (Revelation 18:9-20)
4. Babylon's Final Destruction (Revelation 18:21-24)

These chapters continue another long vision (ch. 15-19) that helps us understand the sinfulness of the world and the severity of God's wrath. In this section, John sees the Harlot Babylon, an ancient demonic system that leads the world in wickedness and immorality. This system will be fully manifest on the earth in the days preceding Jesus' return, until its final and total destruction.

Babylon: The City That Leads the World Astray (Revelation 17)

Verse 1-2:

"One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me: 'Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries'" - The angel who poured out his bowl upon Babylon now explains to John who and what Babylon is. She sits on many waters, meaning she has a global influence (Revelation 17:15). She is the one who leads the nations astray. Her ways are intoxicating - they cause everyone who drinks her wine to lose all sense of reason and truth.

Verse 3:

"Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns" - Contrast to the woman (Israel) in Revelation 12. Her purpose and calling is to bring forth salvation and truth into the world (Revelation 12:5). Babylon's purpose is to bring death into the world. Just as Satan, the antichrist and the false prophet form a twisted, 'unholy' trinity, this woman is in many ways a perverted imitation of Israel, raised up by Satan to serve his wicked purposes alongside the beast (Revelation 13:1-10, Genesis 11:1-9, 12:1-9).

Verse 4:

"The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries" - This woman is all about lavishness and riches. She appears beautiful and attractive, but the wealth she offers comes from sin and depravity.

Verse 5:

"The name written on her forehead was a mystery: 'BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH'" - This is a title never used of the literal city of Babylon. She is more than just a city or a kingdom - she is a spiritual power, a demonic system, that has infected the whole human race.

Verse 6:

"I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished." - This woman is responsible for all the shedding of the blood of God's people (Revelation 16:5).

Verse 7:

"Then the angel said to me: 'Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides" - Where there is symbolic language within visions, God always explains it (Ezekiel 37:1-14, Daniel 8:1-27).

Verse 8:

"The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction" - In this context, the beast speaks of an earthly kingdom that this woman uses, or 'rides', for her own purposes. Babylon was a literal example of this earthly kingdom. In future days a kingdom like this, but of never-before-seen wickedness, will rise up on the earth, led by the antichrist.

"The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come" - Just as in Revelation 13:3, many will be in awe of the beast. But the end is written and was from the very beginning - God will be victorious.

Verse 9-11:

"This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for only a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction" - The seven heads are described as hills (symbolising kingdoms) and as kings - so it is more likely the angel is speaking of kingdoms rather than individuals. A common view is to see the first five as the major kingdoms throughout the bible that opposed Israel (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece) and the 6th kingdom as Rome who were in power at the time. The angel is saying that one more major kingdom will arise for a short time before the kingdom of the antichrist. These

kingdoms have all been influenced by the woman, and this final kingdom, an amalgamation of all of them, will take the world to even greater depths of sin.

Verse 12-14:

“The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast” - The ten horns speak of ten kings, or nations, who will align themselves with the beast and give him their power (Daniel 7:24).

“They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. And with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers” - Their purpose will be to oppose Jesus’ return to the earth. But victory for the Lamb is not even in question. Jesus will return with all those who were killed by the beast and the woman. They will have the final victory.

Verse 15:

“Then the angel said to me: ‘The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages’” - This woman has a global influence. Her teachings and wicked ways have permeated the whole earth.

Verse 16-17:

“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 hand over to the beast their royal authority, until God’s words are fulfilled” - God will use the antichrist to bring judgement upon the woman and her religious system. The antichrist will ascend to power using her influence, and then turn on her when he has assumed control. But he will simply take the power and control she exerted over the nations and use it for his own purposes and his own glory.

Verse 18:

“The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” - In Revelation 16:19, Babylon is referenced as a literal city. This passage (and the following chapter) seem to suggest that in future days an actual city will be raised up that will be the centre of this wicked system.

The Punishment of Babylon (Revelation 18:1-8)

Verse 1-2:

“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendour. With a mighty voice he shouted: ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great!’” - An angel announces Babylon’s final and complete destruction. He references Isaiah 21:9, a prophecy about ancient Babylon. Though that kingdom was destroyed, the spirit of Babylon still remains in the world today. The angel is speaking of a future time where every trace, both physical and spiritual, of this demonic system will be uprooted from the earth.

"She has become a dwelling for demons and a haunt for every impure spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal" - The angel now references Isaiah 34:11-15, a prophecy about God's day of judgement upon the whole world. The message is clear - the spirit of Babylon lives on today but will meet her destruction in the end. The theme of Babylon being a perverted imitation of Israel is again continued. Just as God ordained Israel to be His dwelling place, Satan and his demons dwell within Babylon.

Verse 3:

"For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries" - References Jeremiah 51:7, another end-time prophecy about Israel's deliverance and Babylon's guilt for the shedding of the blood of God's people and their certain destruction.

"The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries" - This woman uses religious systems, financial systems and all sorts of tools to exploit the people of the earth and to promote everything that is unholy. It justifies the killing of Jews and Christians, slavery, immorality etc and entices people into these things for the promise of riches and power.

Verse 4-8:

"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'" - Jeremiah 51:45. A heartfelt plea from God to Israel and to us to give ourselves to Him in holiness. If we do not remove ourselves from the ways of this woman, we too could find ourselves ensnared by her sins.

"Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Pour her a double portion from her own cup" - God's judgement upon the woman is to give her exactly as she has given others. He is just and true.

"Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself" - She will lose absolutely everything.

"In her heart she boasts, 'I sit enthroned as queen. I am not a widow; I will never mourn'" - Isaiah 47:8-10. She compares herself to God himself.

"Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her" - Her punishment will be quick, sudden and severe. She will be utterly consumed so there will be no trace of her left.

Despair for the Wicked (Revelation 18:9-20)

Verse 9-10:

"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 to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon! In one hour your doom has come!'" - John identified three groups of people who benefited from this Harlot Babylon system. The kings and leaders of the earth, the merchants and businessmen, and those who served under them. Governing bodies, rulers and influential leaders will join Babylon in her immorality in return for riches and power, but they will be left terrified and powerless by her destruction.

Verse 11-13:

“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore - cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls... and human beings sold as slaves” - Now it is the turn of the merchants of the earth to weep. These are the businessmen, the traders, the dealers and the wholesalers. They will mourn because their trade is completely cut off and now their livelihoods have gone.

Verse 14-17:

“They will say. ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendour have vanished, never to be recovered.’ The merchant 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 to you great city... In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’ - In this time of judgement everything these merchants worked for will be taken away. The pursuit of wealth will be proved to be utterly meaningless (Proverbs 23:5).

Verse 17-18:

“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?’ - Now the sea captains - those who served this system and used it for their own gain - will weep at Babylon’s destruction (Ezekiel 27:13,33,36). Consider also Isaiah 62:1-7. God has ordained that one day Jerusalem will be the most glorious city in the whole world. This will be fulfilled when Jesus comes to rule and reign and fill the earth with His presence. Here the nations look to Babylon as the greatest city the world has ever known.

Verse 19:

“They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: ‘Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!’” - They will mourn over this city that brought wealth to so many.

Verse 20:

“Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged her with the judgement she imposed on you” - Though Babylon’s destruction has brought woe and misery to those who committed adultery with her, it has brought joy to heaven and all God’s people. Never again will God’s people be oppressed or persecuted.

Babylon’s Final Destruction (Revelation 18:21-24)

Verse 21-23:

“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’ - See Matthew 18:6. God holds a unique anger against those that lead His children astray.

“The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again” - There will be no more music, revelry, parties or depravity within this city ever again.

“No worker of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again!” - The trade of this city will cease forever.

“The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again” - Even something as beautiful as marriage will never occur again within this city.

“Your merchants were the world’s important people. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray” - This city, through influential men and women, will lead the whole world astray, as if bewitched.

Verse 24:

“In her was found the blood of prophets and of God’s holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth” - Here we see clearly that at heart, this woman is against everything God stands for. Her goal has been to wipe out God’s people and bring destruction to God’s kingdom.

Summary

These chapters highlight four ways this ancient Babylonian ‘system’ operates:

- As a religious system that leads the world into worshipping demons and killing God’s people (Revelation 17:18)
- As an economic system that rules the world and brings wealth to the wicked (18:9-13)
- As a spirit of immorality that leads the world into sin and perversion (Revelation 17:2)
- Through literal cities and kingdoms (Revelation 17:9-10, 18:10)

These chapters highlights four specific sins that Babylon the Great is guilty of:

- Leading the nations into adultery against God (Revelation 17:2)
- Blasphemy against God (Revelation 17:3, 18:7))
- Every single act of martyrdom and the murder of God’s people throughout history (Revelation 17:6, 18:24)
- Becoming a dwelling place for all that is unclean and unholy (Revelation 18:2)

These chapters highlight two ways God will deal with Babylon:

- He will bring her to complete and utter destruction through the antichrist and his kingdom (Revelation 18:16-17)
- God Himself will judge her with plague and fire, never to rise again (Revelation 18:8)