

REVELATION

Study 9: The Fall of Babylon

In our previous study, we looked at how John uses the theme of a new exodus to reveal the winner of the cosmic battle between the beast and the Lamb. We also discussed how the pouring out of the seven bowls in Revelation 15-16 once again pulls from the imagery of the plagues in Exodus to portray the final judgement of God and the downfall of the great city that is referred to as Babylon.

As we pointed out in our introduction to this study, the Book of Revelation was not written to help Christians decode the future. The Book of Revelation was written to inspire hope. It was written to first-century Christians who were fearing for their lives, resisting the way of the empire, watching the execution of their friends and family, and wondering if it was all worth it.

At this point in the book, the Book of Revelation has helped John's audience see that enduring their current tribulation is in fact totally worth it. And it's not just worth it because you will go to heaven when you die; it is worth it because this is in fact the subversive way that God's kingdom comes here on earth as it is in heaven. Christians conquer the evil that wages war against them by following the Lamb who was slain. We participate in bringing God's kingdom here on earth when we refuse to compromise and remain loyal to the way of the Lamb no matter what it may cost us.

The Book of Revelation has revealed a perspective that has inspired hope and brought purpose to the persecution and suffering that the first-century Christians are experiencing. And the last several chapters in particular (Revelation 12-16) have made it known to these seven churches that they are in the crossfire of a cosmic battle, and therefore they must make a definitive decision on what side they will choose. Are they giving in and compromising with the beast or will they conquer with the Lamb? Will they inherit the blessings of a new creation or will they suffer the fate of Babylon?

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss what John sees next as he describes the fate of the empire (aka. Babylon). John's visions in Revelation 17-19 are an extended treatment of what is portrayed in the pouring out of the seventh bowl (Revelation 16) where John describes the downfall of the great city called "Babylon". It is a message of hope, but it is also a sobering warning.

The Woman on the Beast

Revelation 17

John now sees a stunningly attractive woman who is riding the beast. She is dressed like royalty and is holding a golden cup in her hand. But John notices that she is intoxicated with the blood of martyrs. The angel refers to her as “the great prostitute,” and she is given the name: “Babylon the great.” Later, she is identified as “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

The language and imagery that John uses to describe this “great prostitute” would have been clear to his original audience. John is using language and imagery from several passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that described the fall of ancient Babylon and the city of Tyre.¹ This is a very intentional move on John’s part. By portraying “the great city” as “the great prostitute” who rides the beast, John is connecting the Roman Empire of his day with other empires that have come and gone throughout history – and most specifically with the ancient empire of Babylon.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, Babylon serves as the archetype of human rebellion and is used to teach a consistent message about the nature of self-exalting empire. Whenever human beings get together to define good and evil for themselves and pursue the building of their own empire, the result is always a Babylon-like empire that exalts its own power and self-sufficiency. John’s vision show us that the Roman Empire of his day is simply the latest version of this system of empire that always rebels against God and exalts itself as something worth our total allegiance.

The great prostitute in John’s vision represents Rome itself, and the beast, as we’ve mentioned before, represents the power systems of empire. The woman rides the beast because it is through the use of military conquest, political tyranny and economic exploitation that the city of Rome gains her power, prosperity and so-called “peace”. The woman uses this attractive power, prosperity and peace to lure other kings and nations into her empire. She offers them the benefits of the empire – such as military security and economic prosperity – if they would pledge their allegiance to her.

This is why Revelation repeatedly describes Rome as “she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.” John declares that the peace and prosperity that the empire has to offer is really a deceitful illusion – a drunken fantasy. The metaphorical “wine” of Rome is a peace and prosperity that is made and maintained by oppression, tyranny and exploitation.

¹ Read Isaiah 23, Jeremiah 51 and Ezekiel 27.

The seven churches in Asia hearing these words from John would have clearly understood that John was calling out the Roman Empire for its exaltation of its own military and economic power. The empire is seducing nations who want to reap the benefits of the Roman economy and slaying those who choose to resist her ideology and influence.

This was the day-to-day reality of John's original audience. But the consistent message of hope that the Book of Revelation keeps repeating is delivered once again: Even though the empire deceives the nations and wages war against God's people, we already know how this story is going to end. The Lamb and his faithful people will conquer the beast. The kingdom of God will ultimately win. All Babylons, including Rome, will eventually fall.

The Fall of Babylon

Revelation 18

John now sees an angel who comes from the presence of God and who announces the downfall of the empire saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" John will go on to intentionally highlight the economic nature of this downfall, but first he describes hearing another voice from heaven warning all of God's people to make an urgent decision,

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."

Much like the exhortations that were given to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, this voice from heaven calls Christians to make an urgent decision – to repent and to get out of bed with the system of empire or else they will have to share the responsibility for all the injustices and iniquities committed by that system.

This immediate warning for God's people calibrates the hearts and minds of John's audience to better hear the declarations of judgement that follow. These visions of what is going to happen to the empire are intended to bring a message of hope to those who are suffering for their loyalty to Jesus, but they should not be listened to with pride simply focusing on the fact that the bad guys are going to pay. They are also meant to warn those in the church who are compromising with the system of empire (and therefore committing spiritual adultery) that unless they repent (Come out of the seductive prostitute!) they will suffer the same fate as the empire itself.

After this warning for God's people, John goes on to do something that is hard to appreciate now, but something that would have blown your mind if you were a first-century Christian living in the Roman Empire. John goes on to write a funeral dirge for the Roman Empire. John writes a funeral dirge for an empire that was at the height of its power and that seemed to be utterly unstoppable!

At the time that John wrote the Book of Revelation, the Roman Empire was at the height of its power. It was at the height of its conquered territory and had just experienced eighty-four years of uninterrupted economic prosperity. Think about that. That's like having eighty-four straight years of the stock market only going up! Nobody would have been expecting the Roman Empire to fall. But John pulls passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that described the fall of ancient Babylon and the city of Tyre, and he uses them to proclaim the coming downfall of the greatest empire on earth.²

John declares that the rulers of other nations who had benefited from getting into bed with Rome will weep at her destruction because it will mark the end of the life of luxury that the empire had provided for them. He declares that business owners will weep and mourn at the destruction of the empire because they will no longer be able to cash in on the wealth that the Roman economy had made possible. And then he declares that all of God's people will rejoice over the downfall of the empire because it had persecuted God's people and corrupted the earth with its immorality.

John then sees an angel throwing a boulder into the sea symbolizing the fate of the empire. The empire has been judged not only for its evil against God's people (prophets and saints), but also for the way it has enriched itself by deceiving nations and shedding blood all over the earth. God will not allow the violence, injustice and exploitation of empire to go on forever. God is the Creator and King of the Universe who cares for his world. He is concerned about the mistreatment of all human beings and desires for his will to be done all over the earth as it is in heaven.

² Read Isaiah 47, Jeremiah 50 and Ezekiel 26-28.

The Wedding Feast of the Lamb

Revelation 19:1-10

The funeral dirge for the empire now gives way to a song of celebration for all of God's people. The great multitude of God's people are heard praising God for his salvation and justice. We are told that God has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants. This is the climatic answer to the martyrs' prayer for vindication that John described earlier in Revelation 6.

John then hears this great multitude of God's people celebrating the arrival of God's kingdom here on earth. The world is being made right. Everything that God's people throughout history have had to endure is finding its culmination in this moment. A moment that is symbolically portrayed as the great wedding feast of the Lamb.

In stark contrast to the great prostitute, God's faithful people are portrayed as a virgin bride who has made herself ready for marriage to the Lamb.³ This echoes Jesus' words to the churches when he promised that those who do not soil their garments will walk with him in white (Revelation 3:4).

As we've seen again in these three chapters (17-19), the Book of Revelation continues to call all Christians to avoid all forms of idolatry and unholy allegiances. We are called to come out of the prostitute and to make ourselves ready for our marriage to the Lamb.

The overarching exhortation has remained consistent throughout the entire book: Christians must not compromise with the oppressive, exploitive and idolatrous system of economic power that is operating behind their own society and culture. Instead, we must conquer that system by being God's faithful witnesses who speak courageously against all forms of idolatry, resist the way of the empire and who live in uncompromising obedience to God no matter the cost.

³ Read Hosea 2:19-20 and Isaiah 61:10 to see this symbolism of a marriage between God and his people in the Hebrew prophets.