

Babylon the Prostitute

Revelation 17-18

Turn to Revelation 17:1.

Babylon the prostitute. Pay your money, get your pleasure. That is the business of a prostitute, and that is the business of Babylon. But we will see that the pleasure is wealth and luxury, not sexual pleasure. The pleasure of valuable possessions is the business of this prostitute.

The Bible introduces us to Babylon in Genesis 11, and to Jerusalem in Genesis 14. Before we are 1/3 of the way through Genesis, we've been told about both cities. And the last quarter of Revelation has much to say about both Babylon and Jerusalem. In that sense, the Bible is a tale of two cities.

In Genesis 11 we read about the tower of Babel, people united in a big project to be independent of God. In Hebrew, though, what we call "Babel" is "Babylon," spelled in Hebrew exactly how the city "Babylon" is always spelled. It's the tower of Babylon. Babylon is people united to be independent of God. Do we see this around us? Sure do.

In Genesis 14, Abraham was going home from a battle in which he had rescued his nephew Lot. As Abraham travelled home, Melchizedek king of Salem came out to meet Abraham, and gave him bread and wine, and he blessed Abraham.

Besides being king of Salem, he was also a priest of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth, that's why he could bless Abraham.

King of Salem. Salem is the last part of Jeru-Salem. He was the king of the city that was called Salem at that time and eventually was called "JeruSalem." "Melchizedek" means "king of righteousness." He was a priest of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth, and he was king of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is people united to serve God Most High.

Babylon is people united to be independent of God. These two cities are at the beginning of the Bible, and also at the end, and that is not an accident. They both occur often in the Bible's story. In Revelation, they are both symbolic cities, not geographical cities. That spiritual attitude that we saw in Genesis, people united for and against God, is what Revelation means by those cities.

That's all background. Revelation answers the question, "what's really going on in our world?" That's what John's 7 first century churches needed explained, and the same things are going on in our world. They needed that question answered in the first century, and so do we.

Babylon Introduced – 17:1-6 *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.² With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."*

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.
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. ⁵ The name written on her forehead was a mystery: “Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.” ⁶ I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, God’s people, and the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

How does Babylon fit into what we’ve already seen? It is part of the bowl judgments. One of the bowl judgement angels shows these things to John, and the seventh bowl said the great city would be broken up. Rev 17-19 is an expanded view of the sixth and seventh bowl judgements.

She’s a prostitute. The kings of the earth commit adultery with her, and those who live on earth are intoxicated with the wine of her adultery. Only the kings can actually afford to have sex with this prostitute, but the rest of us can afford get feeling good with her adulterous wine.

How does she look? She looks rich, she looks like a queen. The description does not try to make are sexually attractive. That happens in the Bible, but that’s not what we get here. This woman’s rich. Everything a woman could want to wear to show off her glory and wealth, and look good, this prostitute owns and wears. She’s impressive to see, marvelous.

But the cup she drinks is disgusting. She is drunk with the blood of saints and those who are faithful to Jesus. She is filthy and bloodthirsty. She is a splendid-looking putrid killer. This description intends to show us that wealth and luxury is gross and evil.

To compare with Babylon, how does God’s woman dress, in Revelation 12? God’s woman is also looks like a queen. But she has a crown of 12 stars, and she’s clothed with the sun, and the moon is her footstool. That’s the real woman, God’s woman, clothed with the heavens. But that woman has to flee to the wilderness, which God makes sure she survives.

Beside a woman clothed with the sun and a crown of stars, scarlet and purple and gold and pearls do fall a bit short, don’t they.

The rest of Revelation 17 describes the destruction of the Babylon the prostitute. We will skip that and go to Revelation 18. Revelation 18 is seven funeral speeches, seven voices that speak at the great prostitute’s funeral. Imagine seven people getting up to speak at a funeral.

The first and seventh speakers are both angels who announce what just happened to Babylon. The second voice is the actual voice of God or Christ. Not sure about the sixth – angel?

The third and fourth and fifth speakers are the broken-hearted, those who are sad and discouraged at the death of the great prostitute. From them we find out who she is. Because, when Babylon is destroyed, no human actually dies. Just great sadness and disappointment.

Speech One – Angel Announcement: Babylon has fallen (18:1-3)

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. ² With a mighty voice he shouted: “‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!’ 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. ³ For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.”

All the nations drink her wine, everyone drinks the wine of her fornications, and loses their way. Only the kings can afford to actually get into bed with her. The merchants of earth, the buyers and sellers, all get rich from her excessive luxuries. The nations get drunk from her, the kings get into bed with her, the merchants get rich from her. Who is she?

Speech Two – The Lord calls us, “Come out of her, my people.” (18:4-8)

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; ⁵ for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, ‘I sit enthroned as queen. I am not a widow; I will never mourn.’ ⁸ 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. [So, come out of her, my people.]

The Lord calls us, “Come out of her, my people, so you don’t share in her sins, because I don’t want you to receive any of her plagues. Because her judgement will be severe.” We will come back to this one.

Speech Three – The Kings’ Lament (18:9-10) *“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. ¹⁰ 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!’*

The kings fornicated with her, and they shared her luxury. Two ways of saying the same thing. To be immersed in wealth and luxury, and to commit adultery with her, are two ways of saying the same thing.

They weep, and mourn, and are terrified. Why? “Babylon, you were so great, you were so mighty, and in one hour you are gone.” If we have money and power, we feel secure. We’ll be okay even if God ignores us, because we have money and power. We can be independent of God. That is a big evil lie. It was all gone in one hour.

Speech Four – The Merchant’s Lament (18:11-17)

“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their stuff anymore—¹² cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; ¹³ cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves. ¹⁴ “They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ ¹⁵ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn ¹⁶ and cry out: “‘Woe! Woe to you, great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! ¹⁷ In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’

This is the longest speech at the funeral, and it is at the center of the seven; it is important. Why do the merchants weep and mourn? Because no one buys their stuff anymore. It is that simple. They filled their stores with all these wonderful expensive things, and no one buys it anymore.

What do you notice about this long list of cargoes that the merchants bring into their stores? It is all luxury stuff. Simple plain clothes and food and furniture are not on this list. People don’t need these things. These are not the basics of life, ordinary food and clothing and shelter.

1 Tim 6: If we have food and clothing and shelter, with this we will be content. Godliness with contentment is a great gain, it is a great profit. Godliness plus contentment equals great profit.

Babylon the prostitute is an economic system based on luxury, things that are beautiful and expensive and that we like to have. Babylon the prostitute is an economy based on what people want, not what they need. The real buying and selling is luxuries not essentials.

When we buy something new, we experience pleasure. It feels good to buy something nice, and to own it, for a while it feels good. We just drank some of the wine of her fornication and got a little drunk. Felt good, didn’t it? We all know far too much about this. And I’m no different.

The kings are immensely wealthy, they can buy whatever they want, that’s called getting into bed with the prostitute, they can fornicate with her. That is real expensive. The rest of us are not that rich, but we still run behind her with tongues hanging out. We drink the maddening wine of her adultery.

People, this is our economic system, here and now, in full force. Babylon the prostitute has never been closer and bigger than now in North America. We all live in her back yard. All our advertising is built around creating a *desire* where there is no *need*. Pleasure for money.

If everyone in North America suddenly stopped buying what we *want*, and only bought what we *need*, our economy would be trashed in two weeks. There would be nothing else in the news.

Jesus saw money and possessions as his strong competition for our minds and souls. He said more about wealth and possessions than he did about love. Did you know that? Jesus thought wealth and prosperity were dangerous. It is very hard for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of heaven, he said, nearly impossible. We don't think it is dangerous.

This was the Laodicean church. Jesus: *I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.* They were intoxicated with the prostitute's wine. They thought they had it all, and had nothing. That is why he wanted to spit them out.

The last words of the merchants: gone in one hour. All that wealth and security, gone in one hour. Wealthy people feel secure, they are not secure.

Speech 5 – the Sailors' Lament (18:17-19) Ancient sailors were transporters, like our truckers.

Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. [Every trucking company owner, and every trucker, and all who earn their living from transportation, will stand far off.] ¹⁸ *When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?'* 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 [and trucks on the highways] became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!'*

All the people who make their living transporting things we don't need but we sure want, they all became rich because the prostitute was wealthy. Sailors were not evil people, and most actual sailors were not wealthy. The owners were. But when the economy collapsed, all lost it all. Sailors' last words? Ruined in one hour. Money security is a myth. God is our only security.

Speech 6 – God tells his people to celebrate (18:20)

"Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged for you against her." What should God's people do when they see the smoke of her burning? Rejoice, celebrate, praise and thank God. He has answered the prayers of his people for justice on earth. For God's people, the prostitute's destruction is a day of delight.

Speech 7 – Babylon will Never be Rebuilt (18:21-24)

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." ²² *The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard in you*

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.²³ The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's important people. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.²⁴ In her was found the blood of prophets and saints, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth."

Let's pull this together. A prostitute sells pleasure. That's her business. This great wealthy prostitute sells the pleasure of buying and owning nice things. It feels good to buy nice things, and own nice things. If we are as rich as kings, we can afford whatever our heart desires, then we can actually wallow in our wealth. That's fornicating with this prostitute.

Most of us are not that wealthy, but we still run after her with our tongues hanging out. We can afford the intoxicating wine of her immorality, and we have all tasted that wine and liked it.

The prostitute is an economic system based the pleasure of having what we want, things we like to have rather than basic food and clothing and shelter. Watch advertising through the eyes of Revelation 17-18. It is pretty obvious. What we do not see is how deeply evil this system is, how offensive to God, how dangerous to God's people. This we do not see. Rev wants to help that.

God blessed Israel with prosperity at different times. In the OT, material blessing was so that people could have enough food and clothing, they could live in peace, not worrying about enemies and starvation. The *purpose* of God's blessing was not so that people would accumulate more and more clothes and houses and carriages and expensive things.

The *purpose* of God's material blessing was so that people could enjoy God and life and each other without worrying about having enough. No to get more things, but to enjoy God and life.

On the whole, we already know quite a bit of this. We understand that Christ calls us to live simply, and generously, and to be content. You knew that before today, we do seek to live this out. But let's hear the Lord's call again. Because we live in the prostitute's back yard.

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.

1 Tim 6:17 - Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.¹⁹ In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. Amen.

Prayer: Oh God, lead us out of Babylon, so we do not share in her sins, so that we do not receive any of her plagues. Give us eyes to see. Equip us with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. We ask for this in the name of Jesus our Lord.