

Sermon 13, God Against the City: Babylon III, Revelation 18:1-19:9

“Into every aspect, therefore, of the city’s construction has been built the tendency to exclude God.” — Jacques Ellul, *Meaning of the City*, 53

The apostate church will “give her most hearty support to any movement that comes along, and be busy in the things of this world instead of in the things of the eternal kingdom of Christ.” — Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh*, 586

The wrong relation between church and state, symbolized by the harlot riding the beast, ensues “when, in the first place, the state, the power of the world, presumes to represent the development of the kingdom of Christ, and thus claims to be essentially the eternal kingdom itself. . . and therefore, as soon as the state through its power aims at establishing the eternal kingdom, a kingdom of righteousness and peace and justice, without the spiritual means of the Word and the blood of Christ, it becomes the antichristian kingdom. It becomes the beast.” Ibid, 585

Proposition: God will finally and climactically destroy the ungodly world economic and religious system so that He can unite His people to Himself forever!

- I. God Destroys the World Economic and Religious System, ch. 18
 - A. Its Doom Announced, 18:1-8
 - B. Its Doom Mourned, 18:9-19
 - C. Its Doom Celebrated, 18:20-24
- II. God Consummates His Glorious Salvation, 19:1-9
 - A. Through the Praises of His People, 19:1-6
 - B. Through His Marriage to His People, 19:7-9

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come today to the next-to-last message in our look at the Bible’s Big Picture. We have traced the theme of dwelling in God’s presence from the garden through the exile and then the Incarnation and outpouring of the Spirit. We have seen that at the beginning God scattered people away from Babylon so that they would not succeed in attaining Heaven without His help. Now, at the end, we see that once more and climactically He scatters and destroys Babylon — for the same reason. You see, brothers and sisters, our God is so intent on dwelling with His people forever that He jealously destroys any

possible rival for their affections. The biggest and baddest of those rivals is described in Revelation 17-18. It is described as a woman who is a city, a woman who is a clever parody of the true church but is really a faithless whore. Not only does she represent the power and allure of false religion, however. She also stands for the power and allure of wealth. This woman is involved in all kinds of global trade and economic activity. In short, we see here that the twin allurements of false religion and wealth will both be destroyed by our jealous God so that He can unite us to Himself. The best way to describe this union is by looking to marriage. God wants to take us, the church, as His bride, and to do so He will utterly obliterate all that competes with Him for our affections and all that tries to be for humanity what only He can be.

Back in the beginning, in the primeval period, Babylon offered a way into Heaven without God's help. Even today, the combined religious and economic power of the world, especially when leagued with the political power of the world (as ch. 17 says that it will be) seems to be our best hope for creating Heaven on Earth and perfecting conditions on this planet. It is good and right to strive for justice, peace, and wealth. But the problem arises when those things are pursued under the auspices of a false religion, and when they are sought as ultimate goods in themselves. That's what happens here. Economic prosperity and religious observance of all stripes, whether apostate Christian or explicitly pagan, have all joined hands to do what the original Babel-builders failed to do. Climactically, John tells us, the world economic and religious power will at some point be consolidated, just as it was at the original building of Babel, and will make friends with the world political powers at a time when the great powers of the Earth are all of one mind. Those events are described in chapter 17, and it is at the point in time when that culminating unity is achieved that the events described in this chapter will take place.

We must see the gravity of the events of this chapter. They are truly climactic, and will take place someday in consummate form. But John was not writing for a tiny moment in church history. He was writing to encourage God's people in every age. And thus, we can understand that in lesser form, aspects of the world religious-economic system rise and fall around us every day and every year. Our calling is to watch the Dow and recognize that the economy does not have our ultimate allegiance — to read about the massive growth of Islam and see that false religion may have power, but it does not have ultimate power — to live in the midst of the world political-religious-economic system without giving it our ultimate loyalty or our ultimate hope. Why should we do all this? Because we serve a jealous God, a God who will literally stop at nothing to ensure our full devotion and allegiance to Himself. What I want you to take away from our text this morning is simply this: God will destroy the world economic and religious system so that He can have you, His bride, all to Himself. God will destroy the world religious and economic system, taking it out of the way so that He can consummate His union with His people.

I. God Destroys the World Economic and Religious System, ch. 18

Chapter 18 of Revelation deals throughout with the fall of Babylon. The chapter divides into three parts, and all three highlight the destruction of Babylon. Just as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel all prophesied the destruction of historical Babylon, so John prophesies the destruction of mystical Babylon.

Why do I say that this mystery Babylon is a figure for the world economic and religious system? Plainly this chapter emphasises the economic significance of Babylon. When it falls, all world trade collapses with it. No city, no matter how large, is that important. Global centers of trade are important, but not that important. Furthermore, no single city is capable of killing all the martyrs. Martyrdom has taken place everywhere, and the power responsible is bigger than any one city or state. Rather, the power responsible is the world power of false religion, the power that was already at work when John wrote and continues to be at work today. In short, this chapter is full of encouragement for those who are suffering economic hardship and for those who are the victims of religious persecution. The ungodly world system that does those things will be judged. Its doom is certain — and in response, God’s people rejoice.

A. Its Doom Announced, 18:1-8

We have a glorious angel, probably the Lord Jesus Christ, whose glory lights up the earth. He announces the fall of Babylon, doubling the announcement and putting it in the past tense to indicate the certainty of this event taking place. Using the language of Isaiah, He declares that human beings are gone and that only foul demons and animals live in Babylon’s territory now. Then He gives the preliminary reason: Because this religious-economic system has lured astray kings and merchants from their rightful activities. They have “fornicated with,” or had the wrong kind of relations with, Babylon. What does this mean? Something along the lines of seeking wealth and religious devotion for the wrong reasons — not in submission to God, but in opposition to Him.

Because of this, God’s people are urged to leave this city. I preached on fleeing Babylon back in November, and I urge you to listen to the recording of that sermon if you want to know more. The bottom line is that we leave Babylon not by going out of the world, or by moving to a rural area, but by refusing to adopt its view of things. We live in the midst of the corrupt world economic-religious system, and we need to buy and sell in order to live. But we must not worship in the wrong way, or worship the wrong gods. If you live for prosperity, you are a Babylonian. If you live for luxury, then you are part of Babylon. If you worship any false god, or attempt to worship the true God in a wrong way, then you are part of Babylon. So how do you leave? You leave by refusing to take part in Babylon’s sins. You refuse to make the hopes, dreams, and priorities of the world *your* hopes, dreams, and priorities. You refuse to worship the gods of our culture — the gods of political correctness, ease, wealth, pleasure and convenience. These sins reach to Heaven, and God remembers them.

Thus, the voice here in vv. 6-8 asks that Babylon would receive what she dished out. In effect, the request is for Babylon to be destroyed. This is a prayer that God hears. We as God’s

people are not responsible to repay Babylon; no, God will take care of it. (In that light, understand that “repay just as she rendered to you” in v. 6 is a mistranslation. The Greek merely says, “Repay her as she has rendered;” the “to you” has been supplied by our translators.) Our call is to stand back, separate ourselves from the sin of Babylon, and see what God will do.

He will judge Babylon; it’s so certain that it’s already been announced. Again, as I said, this is climactically applicable at the end of time, when the consummate world religious-economic power makes war against Christ by attacking His people. But it is applicable in miniature throughout history. Whenever an ungodly persecuting economic or religious power falls, it is a prefiguration of the doom which will eventually fall on Babylon.

B. Its Doom Mourned, 18:9-19

The largest section of chapter 18 describes the kings and merchants of the earth mourning over Babylon, and lists 28 items that Babylon had for sale. The number seems to be symbolic for the totality of earth’s merchandise, for it is the number of earth (4) times the number of perfection (7). The items seem to be listed in order of value, from most valuable to least valuable in Babylon’s eyes — a chilling thought when you see that the list begins with gold and silver and ends with slaves and human souls. That’s right — in Babylon, human beings are just a commodity, and a cheap one at that. Yet the political powers and economic giants of the world mourn Babylon’s destruction, because it means their downfall and impoverishment. People with a worldly mindset and lifestyle will be upset when Babylon falls. When the world religious-economic system reaches its climax, whenever that is and however it will look, it will attack Christ and persecute His people — and He will judge and destroy it.

Brothers and sisters, a new kind of commodification of human life is at our doorsteps. Indeed, it is already well-established in our country. It is called surrogacy, whereby a child is artificially created and a woman is hired to nourish it in her womb. When it is born, she must turn it over to those who paid for its creation and who paid for her pregnancy. Often they want to raise it as their own. But this is no longer adoption; this is creating a parentless child who doesn’t belong to anyone by right of generation, but only because he or she has been bought and paid for. This is something for which the homosexual lobby is fighting tooth and nail, and they have been largely successful. Indeed, recently a surrogate mother was told by her employer to abort one of the triplets she was carrying. She refused, and he sued her for refusing to do what he wanted with his property. Brothers and sisters, this is real. Don’t fall for the surrogacy propaganda; it is simply a symptom of Babylon the great, which traffics (and has always trafficked) in human lives and souls.

C. Its Doom Celebrated, 18:20-24

So rather than mourning, God’s people are called to rejoice in the destruction of this wicked whore-city. Heaven, apostles, and prophets together rejoice that God has sent doom on this system in a single hour. An angel highlights the destruction by sinking a giant rock into the sea, just as Jeremiah commissioned someone to throw his prophecies against Babylon into the Euphrates river tied to a heavy weight. Then the text goes on to highlight the things that will no

longer take place in Babylon because there are no more Babylonians. Throughout, this whole picture emphasizes Babylon's guilt and the certainty and completeness of her punishment.

Babylon was punished for three reasons, says vv. 23-24. The first is that her merchants were the great men of the earth. Why is that a reason to punish Babylon? Because it is an allusion to Isaiah 23, in which Tyre is destroyed because its merchants are the great men of the earth and God has a day against everything exalted. God is going to create the biggest reversal of all time at the last judgment. Those who were exalted will be abased. Those who were first will be put last. Insofar as Babylon is run by great men who make deals in smoke-filled rooms, those men must and will be put in their place by God Almighty. This warns us not to seek pride and status and exaltation — and it also comforts those of us who are weak, despised, and helpless. God is not on the side of the powerful, on the side of the enslavers. He is on the side of the slaves.

The second reason Babylon will be judged is because her sorcery deceived the nations of the earth. This may be economic wizardry; this may be actual dark arts and demonic powers, as in false religion more generally; or, most likely, it is some deadly combination of the two. Brothers and sisters, the corrupt world religious-economic system is liable to lead the nations astray. It's liable to lead you astray. Commentators note that in the previous chapter, John seems to hint that he found certain things about the whore of Babylon attractive. He himself was allured by her surface glamour! And if the apostle John could be tempted, do you think that you and I might be tempted to give undue prominence to the world religious-economic system? I know this system as such is an abstraction to all of us. I know that we need to participate in economic life. But I just want you to think carefully. How do you spend your money? How do you participate in the economic system of the world? Are your hands as clean as possible? Are you careful to avoid participating in the evil of Babylon as much as you can? Remember, we become Babylonian by beginning to worship what the world around us worships. We lose economic righteousness when we acquire and spend money for the ultimate purpose of feeling good, rather than for the sake of glorifying God by responsible use of His gifts. Don't fall prey to Babylon's sorcery. Don't believe in her economic wizardry or be seduced by her promises of prosperity to all those who will simply worship the right gods. It is because of those lies that she is going to receive God's judgment!

Finally, Babylon is judged because she persecutes the righteous. This is perhaps the easiest element to identify. How do you tell whether something is Babylonian? By seeing whether it persecutes God's people. Surely I don't need to warn God's people not to align themselves with the persecutors of God's people! And yet, so often throughout history, those who killed Christians thought they were doing service to God. Maybe people in the Reformation era believed that they were serving Jesus by persecuting believers in Jesus. Many people since have believed themselves to be serving their gods (communism, Allah, etc.) when they attack and harm Christians. For now, realize that if you see religious-economic persecution of Christians, that is the handiwork of Babylon. When one of our Christian brothers in Colorado is

sued for hundreds of thousands of dollars for refusing to glorify a same-sex parody of “marriage,” and the court awards the damages to the plaintiffs, that is the work of Babylon. No blood is involved yet — but the economic crippling of those who want to serve Christ is a classic mark of Babylonian policy. For now, know that Babylon may shut you down. But be comforted, and rejoice: Babylon’s doom is already certain. False religion and corrupt economic systems cannot and will not triumph over the Lamb.

II. God Consummates His Glorious Salvation, 19:1-9

Why did God punish Babylon? We just saw three preliminary reasons. But the ultimate reason the text presents is that God wanted to remove the final barrier to His completion of union with His people. God is so committed to dwelling with His people that He will let nothing, including the combined religious and economic might of the entire world, stand in the way of completing His rescue mission. He will have His bride, and He will destroy the whore that tries to replace her.

A. Through the Praises of His People, 19:1-6

The first thing we see about God’s salvation here is the praises it evokes from His people! The redeemed multitude of the saints, everyone throughout time who has believed in Jesus, praises God and ascribes to Him salvation, glory, honor, and power. God is one who saves from sin. God is the one whose being is radiant with the sum total of His attributes. God is the one whom all people everywhere bow before and praise. God is powerful to avenge His people. He has not allowed the city-whore, the economic-religious world system, to stand against Him or compete with Him for His people’s affections. He is a God who judges righteous judgment, and that judgment includes eternal hellfire. Indeed, God’s judgment on the wicked will form matter of praise for His people throughout eternity.

If you find v. 3 offensive, it is because you do not comprehend either the majesty and grandeur of Almighty God or see the danger that Babylon posed to His people. God is the best, most beautiful, most valuable being in existence — and anything that rebels against and defies Him is guilty of trying to destroy what is infinitely valuable.

Revelation shows us history in apocalyptic colors. We see beneath the surface of world events to their true significance. And the true significance of the ungodly religious-economic system of the world is that it’s a bloody whore that will be judged.

When you’ve been saved by God, your eyes are opened to that reality, and you praise God for having delivered you from your fate. You praise Him for the judgments He dispenses on the wicked. You can and must praise God for His determination to destroy Babylon.

Notice the common theme here. We saw God destroy the Tower of Babel because it competed with His way of salvation. We saw God visit destruction on His idolatrous people through Babylon because they refused to take His proffered way of salvation -- yet even in the midst of that He extended an offer to His people to return to His presence! And now we see God destroying the destroyers of His people. The application the text gives is clear: Praise God! Tell Him just how wonderful He is, through direct speech and through song.

B. Through His Marriage to His People, 19:7-9

Notice how the text climaxes: with Babylon out of the way, God's people praise Him. Then God responds by hosting the marriage supper of the Lamb. That's right: consummate union with His people is how God responds to Babylon's destruction. God took Babylon, the false bride, out of the way so that His Son could wed the true bride. There is destruction for Babylon, because God cannot and will not ultimately tolerate anything that hinders His union with His people. He can't tolerate sin; He took it out of the way at the cross. He can't tolerate sinners; He will take them out of the way at the Final Judgment. But all of it is for the sake of bringing His people to dwell with Him.

God's people are clothed in righteous deeds that they have done. If you are not making a habit of obeying God, you will not be at the marriage supper of the Lamb. If you realize that and say, "I don't even try to obey God," then repent! God is the God of salvation, and He forgives sins. But those whose sins have been forgiven must and will respond by obedience. It's God who invites you and sets a place for you and clothes you in the righteousness of His Son. He's the one who grants you the power to obey and to do good deeds! It is only through God's gift that we can do anything right. But clearly, our text says that everyone at the marriage supper of the Lamb will be wearing their own good deeds. It doesn't say that God saved them because of their good deeds. It doesn't say that He was impressed by their garments. No; it says that He granted them the power to do those good deeds and make those garments. But they don't get in based on the quality of their garments, but rather, based on the strength of the invitation they carry. The angel doesn't bless those who have bright garments, but those who have an invitation to the marriage supper. You see, God invites. God grants the ability to do good deeds and the right to be clothed in them. We, in turn, respond to His invitation and do those good deeds. We want to have something to present to Christ, who loves to gather the fruits of His Spirit.

If you're hearing this sermon, you're being invited. Come to the Lamb's wedding feast! Leave Babylon and its practices. Don't worship false gods or seek prosperity as your highest good. Instead, worship Christ. Trust Him for salvation. Love Him as your suitor who wants to be your husband. And recognize that He will dwell with His people, completely and consummately, as a groom with His bride. So love Christ. Look to Christ. Think of Him as your bridegroom, and get to work on that wedding gown of good deeds that God has granted you to wear. Remember that that dress is just a dress. It's not the reason your groom loves you. It's not the thing that made you worth saving in His eyes. But He loves to see you in it nonetheless — so wear it for Him. Make yourself ready for Him. Don't adopt the habits and thoughts and practices of the whore. Rather, look to the blessing that comes to everyone invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. Amen.