

Seven Messages of Judgment

We previously read the following words from Nancy Guthrie, “You and I don’t want to have to live forever in a world tainted by evil, rebellion, idolatry, and immorality. And we won’t have to. God is determined to get all of the ugliness and evil cleaned out before we enter our forever home. Pouring out his wrath is God’s glorious way of cleansing and preparing a home for us.”¹ In these next two chapters, we’re going to see the beginning of this cleansing as Babylon the Great is overthrown. This is also an expansion on Revelation 16:19, where God promises to make Babylon “drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.” In this lesson, we’ll see God’s wrath poured out upon Babylon.

The Allure of Babylon (17:1-6)

One of the angels who had the seven bowls takes John to see another vision, this time the judgment of the great prostitute (v.1), which is later identified as Babylon the great (v.5). Babylon represents the worldly system of mankind, living in rebellion against God. Derek Thomas describes Babylon as “the pleasure-mad, arrogant world with all its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its antichristian philosophy and culture.”² For John’s audience, this certainly could have symbolized Rome, although Vern Poythress writes, “Our modern cities, with their wealth, false religions, and sexual exploitation, are modern forms for Babylon.”³

Augustine, in his book *The City of God*, argues that all of history can be symbolically identified as a battle between two rival nations: Babylon, which represents the nation allied with the god of this world, and Jerusalem, which represents the nation allied with the one true God, the King of kings.⁴ In this passage, we’re going to see this godless nation overthrown, and later we’ll see the godly kingdom victorious.

Babylon here is depicted as a prostitute, and much reference is made to sexual immorality (v.2). However, throughout Scripture sexual immorality is symbolic of idolatry. So, she’s not just luring people into illicit affairs. She’s luring them away from their commitment to God, causing them to love the world more than they love God.

How does Babylon tempt people away from God? She’s very alluring. We see that she’s “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup” (v.4). She makes sin look good and inviting. People want what she has to offer.

It’s only after people get involved with her that they realize the truth. She’s sitting on a beast, showing her Satanic influence. Inside her golden cup is “abominations and the impurities of her

¹Guthrie, Nancy. *Blessed: Experiencing the Promises of the Book of Revelation*, 174.

²Thomas, Derek. *Let’s Study Revelation*, 146.

³Poythress, Vern. *The Returning King*, 161.

⁴Thomas, 136.

sexual immorality” (v.4). She has a name written on her forehead, “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations” (v.5). Earlier, we read in chapter 12 of the woman who gave birth to the church. The woman here in chapter 17, as the mother of prostitutes, gives birth to those who would destroy the church.⁵ The woman’s worst offense, however, is that she is drunk on the blood of the saints, those that she caused to be killed for the name of Christ (v.6).

The Truth Behind the Allure (17:6b-14)

It seems like even John was taken in by the allure of Babylon. We read in verse 6 that he marveled greatly. The angel asks, “Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her” (v.7). The angel is about to open John’s eyes to the true nature of this prostitute.

She is riding upon a beast who “was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction” (v.8). The dwellers on earth will marvel at the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. This language should sound familiar, but it’s not quite right, is it? Remember the description of God as the One who is and who was and who is to come from Revelation 1:8? This description of the beast could be an example of his trying to counterfeit God, but his failure to do so.

In verse nine, we are told that wisdom is required to truly understand this imagery. What’s needed is not just any wisdom, but a knowledge of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament if we are to interpret this passage correctly. We talked in our first lesson about how Revelation contains so many allusions to the Old Testament. We must understand the imagery of books such as Daniel, Exodus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and more if we want to understand the visions of John.

First, the angel says that the seven heads of the beast are seven mountains (v.9), a reference to Rome, which was built on seven hills. Then he says that the heads are “seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come” (v.10), which is an allusion to Daniel 7:4-7. Many attempts have been made to link these kings to specific, earthly rulers, but there are issues with this approach. Instead of kings, some have connected the heads to major empires. The five that have fallen would be Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. The one that is would be Rome, since that was the ruling empire at the time the book was written. Then the seventh head or empire would be symbolic of all empires between Rome and the second of Christ. The beast as the eighth king would represent the totality of power and evil possessed by the seven kings combined. He would be the epitome of all that evil.⁶

The heads could also be symbolic of pagan empires at large without actually referring to specific nations. The fact that the sixth head is the one that is could refer to the end being near, but not

⁵Thomas, 139.

⁶ibid., 140.

quite yet. The beast as the eighth king would then symbolize the manifestation of power equal to that of all seven kings.⁷

In verse 12, the angel describes the ten horns of the beast as “ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour.” This is also an allusion to Daniel 7, but verses 7-8, 20, and 24. Thomas identifies the ten horns as things that the beast uses to further his agenda, things such as art, education, commerce, industry, and government.⁸ Greg Beale sees the kings as human agents, though...not literal kings but “earthly agents through whom the spiritual forces of evil work.”⁹

Either way, these “kings” will only gain power for a short time, apparently only during the reign of the seventh king, or in the very last days when they will gather to make war on the Lamb. This refers back to the sixth bowl, where the kings of the whole world were assembled by the beast at Armageddon for a great battle.

We don't need to worry about the beast or the kings or the battle, though, because we're told in verse 14, “The Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called chosen and faithful.”

The Alluring Babylon Falls (17:15-18:3)

The angel has been describing the beast, but now he shifts focus back to the woman in verse 15. She is seated upon waters, which are identified as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” This represents the people that have fallen under her spell. It also alludes to Jeremiah 51:13, which connects waters to riches and prosperity. The Euphrates rivers and surrounding canals helped the city flourish due to trade. They provided protection from attack and security.¹⁰

So, this woman Babylon probably thinks that she has it made. She is wealthy, powerful, seductive. She has the beast on her side and the nations under her feet. That is all about to come crashing down, however. The kings and the beast turn against her and destroy her (v.16). This shows the self-destructive nature of sin and idolatry. Vern Poythress describes it this way:

The prostitute rides a hideous beast that eventually destroys her. Idolatrous states end up destroying the very powers, riches, privileges, and people that they start out supporting. False worship is self-destructive.¹¹

However, we also see God's hand at work, because, according to verse 17, He “put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the

⁷Poythress, 166.

⁸Thomas, 140.

⁹Beale, Greg. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 372.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 375.

¹¹Poythress, 163-4.

beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.” So, God uses one evil power (the beast) to destroy another evil power (the prostitute).

As we move into chapter 18, we will see the complete and total destruction of Babylon. She’s no longer fit for habitation. The only things that can reside in her are demons and all manner of unclean things (18:2). Her true nature is exposed. Everything good and pleasing thing has been stripped away, leaving only her demonic roots.

We see the charges brought against her in 18:3, which again mentions sexual immorality and materialism. She brought pleasure and prosperity to those who entered in a liaison with her, but as we’ll see, it came at a high price.

Avoid Falling with Babylon (18:4-8)

Next, there’s a warning for God’s people to come out of her, lest they take part in her sins and share in her judgment (v.4). As we’ve said, Babylon represents the materialistic, pleasure-seeking societies of our world that oppose the things of God. We’re surrounded by this, aren’t we? But we must maintain a distance, if we’re to remain pure.

The story of the Bible can be likened to a love story. God is preparing a bride for His Son. That bride is the church. After Christ’s second coming, there will a great marriage feast, where the bride will be joined to the bridegroom for all eternity. Our job is to remain pure until that time comes.

However, it’s easy to be soiled by the world. We’re tempted to cheat on our fiancé by dating the world, and experiencing what the world has to offer. But Nancy Guthrie says we have to break up with the world and remain faithful to our groom.

How do we break up with Babylon and remain faithful to Christ?

Nancy offers some good advice:

It will require a radical change of heart, a change in our affections and interests and desires. It means we have to figure out how to live in Babylon as citizens of the new Jerusalem, as aliens and strangers. We’re going to have to figure out what it will mean for us to refuse to make ourselves at home here. What we’re being called to here is not separatism but distinctiveness.¹²

What do you think she means when she says it’s not separatism but distinctiveness?

We’re called to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16). We can’t do that if we completely isolate from the world, but we have to protect ourselves from the influence of the world. We have to be careful to not conform to the image of the world, but rather to reflect the image of

¹²Guthrie, 193.

Christ. We must look and talk and act differently than the world. If we refuse to come out of Babylon, we will be destroyed with her.

Great is the Fall of Babylon (18:5-24)

We definitely don't want to be caught up in Babylon's destruction because it will be catastrophic, although it will be well-deserved. We see in verses 5 and 6 that her sins are heaped as high as heaven, and that God will repay her justly for her deeds. Her punishment will fit her crimes. John writes, "Pay her back as she herself has paid back others." What she has done to others will be done to her.

She will be stripped of everything in this great reversal. Whereas, she had been living off of others in luxury, now she will be living in torment. In her pride, she boasted of her high status, as a queen above everyone else. She thinks that she's invincible, and that her reign will never end (v.7). However, we see the swift nature of God's judgment against her. Plagues will come against her in a single day bringing death, famine and mourning. She will be burned with fire, "for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her" (v.8).

What about her lovers, those that we involved with her? What happens to them? They will weep and wail in despair over her destruction. They stand in fear of her torment (v.10, 15), not wanting to take part in the judgment.

They mourn the loss to themselves, as no one buys the merchants' cargo anymore (v.11-13). Those who gained wealth from Babylon mourn the loss of that wealth (v.15, 17, 19). We read, "The fruit for which you soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again!" (v.14). Their fear and mourning are not over the sin that led to this destruction. It is fear for their lives and their livelihoods.

Although they don't repent, they do realize the source of their woe. In verse 20, they say, "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" To me this comes across as slightly sarcastic, as if they're saying, "I guess you're happy now that she got what she deserved."

The truth is, though, we should rejoice to see evil overthrown. This should be a source of joy as the bridegroom puts an end to Babylon's cruelty toward His bride.¹³ He's cleaning up in preparation for our wedding, removing all evil and wickedness.

Finally, we see in 18:21-24 the complete nature of this judgment and the permanence of it, as Babylon is thrown like a millstone into the sea, to be found no more. A millstone is a huge slab of rock. If it's thrown into the water, it will sink straight down. There's no undoing that. Never again will people work or play or marry or enjoy the pleasures of Babylon.

¹³Guthrie, 197.

Although this may seem like a very negative passage, full of destruction and woe, there is a bright side, as we see in this quote from Derek Thomas:

Behind the destruction of this archetypal city of wickedness, lies the truth that God is all-powerful and sovereign. Nothing can thwart his determination to build his church. The gates of Hades will not prevail; nor will the gates of Babylon. Only God's kingdom endures forever. All temporal things, despite sometimes great and substantial appearances are, at best temporal.¹⁴

So, we see the temporary nature of this world versus the eternal nature of God's kingdom. We see the limited power of Babylon compared to the unlimited power of God. We see God's judgment on evil being executed with complete justice. We see the old sinful world system destroyed to make room for the new heaven and the new earth. Unlike the people who dwell in the earth, we don't have to stand in fear of Babylon's torment. Rather, we can rejoice for God had given judgment against her!

¹⁴Thomas, 149.