

Revelation Ch. 18: The Fall of Babylon

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Here we have the final announcement of the fall of Babylon the Great, the city Jerusalem, and a description of her utter desolation. Her demise is cause for rejoicing by God's people (18:20), because their petitions for vengeance have been answered (cf. 6:9-11).

Verse 1

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory.

Like the mighty angel that declared the completion of the mystery of God (10:1-7), this angel appears as a representative of Christ, having authority to declare that time is up (1:3; 22:10), and Jerusalem must fall.

Verse 2

And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!"

Reiterating the announcement of the fall of Babylon (14:8), this describes the character and actions of the seditious Jews that were trapped within the city walls as the Romans besieged the city (Lk. 19:41-44; Josephus, Wars 5.10.5; 5.13.6; 6.3.3; 6.7.1-3; 6.8.5; cf. Rev. 9:1-10). This is a description of a city in which God no longer dwells (cf. 21:2, 3, 27). Eusebius described Jerusalem "as if holy men had entirely abandoned the royal city itself and the whole land of Judea" (Ecclesiastical History 3.5.3). The caged birds contrast with the description of the church flying away as an eagle (12:14).

Verse 3

For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury."

This wicked city had been an evil influence on the entire world (14:8; Matt. 23:15; cf. Jer. 51:7; Rev. 11:18), an example of those who put tradition, wealth, and power above justice and righteousness (cf. Matt. 15:3; 21:12, 13; 23:23; Mk. 7:13; 10:17-25; Lk. 18:10-13; Jn. 2:13-16).

Jerusalem was a very wealthy city (17:4; Josephus, Wars 6.6.2; 6.4.8; 6.10.1). Josephus records:

And let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the habitable earth, and those that worshiped God, nay, even those of Asia and Europe, sent their contributions to it, and this from very ancient times (Antiquities 14.7.2)

Verse 4

And I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.

This captures what has been depicted earlier, that the people of God would be protected from this judgment (7:1-3, 14; 12:6, 14; cf. Matt. 24:15-21; Mk. 13:14-19; Lk. 21:20-24). This would have spoken directly to the reader during the first century as a warning to flee the city, and is similar to

language used in the Old Testament to flee Babylon (Jer. 51:6, 45). History records that Christians did flee to the mountains (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.5.3). This is also a warning to those who were drifting back toward Judaism (Heb. 6:4-8; 10:19-39).

Verse 5

For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

God does not forget, and will punish those upon whom it is due (6:9-11; 16:5, 6, 19; cf. Jer. 9:9; 51:9; Lk. 18:7, 8; 2 Pet. 3:7-10).

Verse 6

Render to her just as she rendered to you, and repay her double according to her works; in the cup which she has mixed, mix double for her.

Jerusalem had rendered to God the persecuting and killing of His servants; wise men, prophets, apostles, and the Son of God Himself (Matt. 23:34; 27:20-26; Acts 2:36; 7:52-60; 8:1-3; 2 Cor. 11:24). For this, they deserved a great punishment (Heb. 10:29-31). God would repay her double according to her works (cf. Ex. 22:4, 7; Isa. 40:2; Jer. 16:18; 17:18; 50:15; Hos. 8:7), because in her was found the blood of the righteous under both covenants (17:6; 18:24). These people thought their sins were harmless, yet the consequences proved quite the opposite.

In this regard, perhaps this is also a reference to her first destruction in 586 BC (2 Kings 25), or possibly the troubles brought on by both the seditious Jews and the Romans, or even the desolation of both the temple and the city. Either way, this severe punishment was deserved and just (16:5, 6; Josephus, Wars 5.6.1), especially considering that this generation should have learned from their ancestors (Matt. 23:32; Acts 7:51-53).

Verse 7

In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow; for she says in her heart, 'I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow.'

The nation of Israel was spiritually married to God, the King of the Universe (Ps. 47:2; 89:18; Isa. 44:6), yet she did not realize that her harlotry had caused her to be separated from Him (17:4, 5). The mother of harlots had killed her husband (Matt. 27:22-26; Acts 2:36; 5:30), and sat alone as a widow (cf. Lam. 1:1; Hos. 2:1-13; Isa. 47:6-11). The ancient "Judea Capta" (Judea Conquered) coinage that was produced to commemorate these events pictures a woman, alone, mourning under a palm tree.

These wicked men thought that God was still on their side, and did not realize that Jerusalem's place as God's chosen city was no more (cf. 3:17; Mic. 3:11-12; Josephus, Wars 5.11.2). Their law was dead, their temple was gone, and their city soon lay desolate (11:7; 11:13; 17:16, 17; Matt. 23:37; Rom. 7:4; cf. Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14). Josephus records of one of the leaders of the seditious factions:

But the tyrant himself cast many reproaches upon Josephus, with imprecations besides; and at last added this withal, that he did never fear the taking of the city, because it was God's own city. (Wars 6.2.1)

The New Jerusalem is now the bride of Christ (19:9; 21:9; cf. Eph. 5:25; Rev. 14:4), the mother of the righteous that sits as queen (Gal. 4:26; 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 12:1, 2; 17:14; 19:16). It is as members of this city in which we are united with Christ, spiritually married to Him through His new covenant and

new law (Rom. 7:4; cf. Gal. 6:2; Heb. 8:13; Jas. 1:25; Rev. 11:7).

Verse 8

Therefore her plagues will come in one day – death and mourning and famine. And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her.

Once her time was up, the Lord would bring swift destruction on Jerusalem (cf. 9:15; Matt. 24:22), characterized by death and mourning and famine (6:5-8; Josephus, Wars 6.3.3-5). The city and the temple would be burned with fire (cf. 17:16, 17). Josephus himself even recognized that this was God's judgment upon a wicked generation:

It is God, therefore, it is God himself who is bringing on this fire, to purge that city and temple by means of the Romans, and is going to pluck up this city, which is full of your pollutions. (Wars 6.2.1)

Though the wicked may seem strong, let us keep in mind that the Lord God is stronger (Joel 2:11; cf. Rom. 8:31; 13:1; Rev. 17:14). He will repay wickedness, and avenge His people (Heb. 10:30).

Verses 9-10

The kings of the earth who committed fornication and lived luxuriously with her will weep and lament for her, when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance for fear of her torment, saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.'

Those who influenced the Jews, and those influenced by them would mourn the loss of such a great city. This symbolizes the awe of the whole world as they see the great Jerusalem, the chosen city of the God of Israel, burning and laid waste. They are standing at a distance for fear of suffering the same. This language is reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:28).

Verses 11-14

And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore: merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of ivory, every kind of object of most precious wood, bronze, iron, and marble; and cinnamon and incense, fragrant oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men. The fruit that your soul longed for has gone from you, and all the things which are rich and splendid have gone from you, and you shall find them no more at all.

Such a wealthy city was obviously a great source of trade for merchants. Ogden points out that many of the items listed were those used in the temple service (cf. Ex. 30; 1 Chr. 9:27-29). The wealth and vast riches of the temple have already been noted (cf. 1 Kings 10; 1 Chr. 29:1-5; 2 Chr. 2, 3; Matt. 24:1; Josephus, Wars 5.4.1-4; 5.5.1-8; 6.4.8). Ezekiel similarly describes the mourning for Tyre (Ezek. 27).

Notice what Josephus says of the burning of the temple:

Now although any one would justly lament the destruction of such a work as this was, since it was the most admirable of all the works that we have seen or heard of, both for its curious structure and its magnitude, and also for the vast wealth bestowed upon it, as well as for the glorious reputation it had for its holiness; yet might such a one comfort himself with this thought, that it was fate that decreed it so to be, which is inevitable,

both as to living creatures, and as to works and places also. However, one cannot but wonder at the accuracy of this period thereto relating; for the same month and day were now observed, as I said before, wherein the holy house was burnt formerly by the Babylonians. (Wars 6.4.8)

Notice the last “items” in the list mentioned are “bodies and souls of men.” This is meant to convey the idea of slave trading (cf. Ezek. 27:13). Spiritually speaking, the men of Jerusalem sold themselves under the bondage of sin (Rom. 6:16; Gal. 4:1-31; Heb. 2:15; cf. Mk. 8:36). Because she rejected Christ, the fruit that her soul longed for, the kingdom of God and blessings of the Messiah, has gone from her (cf. Matt. 21:42-46).

Verses 15-19

The merchants of these things, who became rich by her, will stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, and saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.'

The merchants, much like the kings already mentioned, would be in awe (18:9, 10). Let us keep in mind that those who lay up treasures in the wrong place will see them come to nothing (17:4, 5; Matt. 6:20, 21).

Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, 'What is like this great city?' They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.'

There has never been a city quite like Jerusalem, which was a center for trade by land and by sea. The region of Judea had port cities that had major trade routes to Jerusalem (cf. Josephus, Wars 3.3.5). Throwing dust on one's head was a sign of mourning and sorrow (cf. Job 2:12; Lam. 2:10).

She was a magnificent city laid waste (17:16; Matt. 23:37-39; Lk. 19:41-46). Though the demise of the nation was a cause for joy for much of the world (11:10), the fall of the city itself, and what it represented from an economical vantage point, was probably considered a great loss.

Verse 20

Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!”

Though some would be sorrowful that such a city was gone, the people of God could rejoice. This key verse depicts God's fulfilled promise of vengeance delivered (6:9-11; cf. Lk. 21:22; Heb. 10:30). Apostles and prophets had suffered and been killed at the hands of this nation, and could rejoice for their deliverance (Matt. 23:34; Lk. 11:49; Heb. 11:32-40). When justice is served, we can likewise rejoice today.

Verse 21

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “Thus with violence the great city Babylon shall be thrown down, and shall not be found anymore.

Jerusalem would fall, never to rise again (cf. Jer. 51:63, 64). Though the city itself has been rebuilt, it

does not nearly compare to its former glory. It is not the city of God, the temple will never be rebuilt, and the official genealogical records are gone forever (Josephus, Wars 6.6.3).

Verses 22-23

The sound of harpists, musicians, flutists, and trumpeters shall not be heard in you anymore. No craftsmen of any craft shall be found in you anymore, and the sound of a millstone shall not be heard in you anymore. The light of a lamp shall not shine in you anymore, and the voice of bridegroom and bride shall not be heard in you anymore. For your merchants were the great men of the earth, for by your sorcery all the nations were deceived.

This uses familiar language to symbolize the desolation of the city (17:16; cf. Matt. 23:37-39; 24:2; Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10). She deceived all the nations through her evil influence (18:3), being blinded by her own desires, and using her position as the chosen city of God to gain wealth (Jn. 2:13-16), rather than prepare the world for His kingdom (Matt. 15:14; 23:15ff.; 1 Thes. 2:14-16). As a result, there would be no celebrating, productivity, hope, or joy in the city. Contrast the light in the city of God with the darkness in this city (21:23-25; 22:5).

Verse 24

And in her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who were slain on the earth.”

Because of her history, and the fact that this generation of Jews behaved as did their ancestors, except worse, the blood of all the righteous would be avenged on this city (Matt. 23:29-39; Lk. 11:47-51; Acts 7:52-60; Heb. 10:29-31; cf. Jer. 51:49). According to the words of Jesus, this description only fits Jerusalem.

The temple was burned in early August (10th of Av; Wars 6.4.5), and the city was taken in late August or early September (8th of Elul; Wars 6.10.1). Josephus records that the number of people that died during the siege was 1,100,000 (Wars 6.9.3). He summarizes the destruction of the city as follows:

Now as soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury, (for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other work to be done,) Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple, but should leave as many of the towers standing as were of the greatest eminency; that is, Phasaelus, and Hippicus, and Mariamne; and so much of the wall as enclosed the city on the west side. This wall was spared, in order to afford a camp for such as were to lie in garrison, as were the towers also spared, in order to demonstrate to posterity what kind of city it was, and how well fortified, which the Roman valor had subdued; but for all the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited. This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for innovations; a city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all mankind (Josephus, Wars 7.1.1)

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