

Revelation 18

Getting Started

Songs speak in ways words alone cannot. Rev 18 is a funeral song. And here the funeral is Babylon's. But why sing about Babylon's funeral in AD 95? The problem for John and the churches in AD 95 was not Babylon, it was Rome. Are Rome and Babylon connected?

Consider Nathan's story concerning David's sin with Bathsheba as an example of connection. Nathan told David a story about a wealthy man who arbitrarily takes a poor farmer's little lamb. Although David is moved by it, he doesn't realize the story's true intent. After David offers Nathan his opinion about what should happen to the wealthy man because of his injustice, Nathan turns the tables and says, David, you are the guilty unjust man (2 Sam 12:7). David failed to look beneath the surface of his own behavior. Nathan exposed David's behavior for all to see.

Along with Ch. 17, Ch. 18 takes the churches, like David, are taken below the surface of what is normally seen. How could some of them have been so blind? Like David, these churches probably found reason to defend their compromising behavior. John, like Nathan, comes along and exposes the true nature and the end of what these churches might have found alluring. One must always look deeper than the surface. The funeral song concerning Babylon (Rome) exposes the awful truth of cities like Babylon and Rome, and the end they will face.

The Core:

A word about Babylon.

Babylon first appears in the Bible in Genesis as the city of Babel in the land of Shinar established by Nimrod the son of Cush (Gen.10:6-10). Interestingly, Nimrod is also the one who establishes Nineveh in Assyria. Babel (Babylon) and Nineveh were two cities that caused untold grief for God's people.

Babel is the location of the famous story concerning the building of a tower in an effort to reach into heaven (Gen.11:4). In the same passage the people of Babel also say that they must make a name for themselves lest they be scattered abroad. Nahum Sarna notes that the word "name" probably carries the idea of "monument". The people of Babel want to build a monument to themselves. This is the height of human arrogance.

By the end of the Bible, as Rev. 17 & 18 plainly show us, Babylon comes to represent the utter arrogance of humanity in its relationship with God. The Revelation exposes what has been true about Babylon from the beginning. And Rev. 18 shows us how human arrogance ultimately comes crashing down on itself, mocked by the God Babylon mocked. It faced humiliation when God scattered its languages. Rome in AD 95 has Babylon's spirit. Indeed this can be applied anywhere on the earth where human arrogance sets itself against God.

Listen to the conclusion of the tower of Babel story, Gen. 11:9,

There its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

How would you like your hometown to have name associated with that kind of history?

Looking below the surface

Below the surface of these magnificent cities lurked something less obvious to those struck by their beauty and splendor. They also had a dark pagan underbelly that affected everyone's lives, including those who followed Christ. Christians were committed to the exclusive worship of Jesus as their God and King. This led to conflict. You can't worship Rome's gods and the Christian God equally. And God's people in the OT were not to worship the gods of Babylon.

For Christians faithful to God alone, this meant big trouble that affected their ability to earn a living, function as families, and even exist in Roman dominated culture. In some cases it meant facing physical death. But some Christians found ways around this threat. Seduced by Rome the great prostitute they found ways of worshiping God while at the same time taking advantage of what it offered by allowing pagan religions to infiltrate their churches. Further, they weren't always aware of how deeply they were being affected by their blending of their Christian faith with the pagan religions around them. This is called syncretism.

Laodicea for example

One of the best examples of compromise was Laodicea. John's letter to it (Rev 3) charges that its wealth and materialism blinded it to what's real and valuable. Laodicea thought itself rich, independent, well dressed, and acutely aware of its place. Perhaps, like Rome, a church to look up to because of its great outward stature. John's evaluation is less flattering. Below the surface, from God's point of view, Laodicea was a poor, blind, miserable wretch needing help.

This simply indicates that what we see and what God sees are very different. How could Laodicea have been so wrong, so blind about themselves? Think about David. No doubt when Laodicea received John's letter, their shock at its content would have been considerable. Added to this, all the other churches around Laodicea had opportunity to see what it really was. Talk about awkward. Had Laodicea allowed itself to be mesmerized by Rome? Yes! Laodicea's ministry and witness of Jesus in its community had been compromised and it needed clearheaded thinking to get back on track.

Getting things back into perspective

Part of how John helps them regain clearheaded thinking was by having them hear a funeral song from heaven about the very ones they bowed to. Remember, Rev 17 exposed Rome's true nature as a spiritual prostitute who lured many customers into lethal spiritually compromising situations. Ch 18 is a funeral song about Babylon's death, with application to Rome.

The funeral song for Babylon/Rome

Imagine Laodicea having to face the reality of its sin. Imagine its horror at having to hear a song sung at its mistress's funeral. But here she wasn't even dead yet! In fact, in AD 95 Rome is nowhere near its end. It would probably have said, "We're not Babylon!" But, like Nathan's convicting word to David's heart, John says, "You are Babylon!" Craig Keener observes of John,

"This exiled Jewish Christian prophet had the audacity to write down a funeral dirge over the mightiest empire the world had yet known! Such an act may not seem so reckless from the advantage of hindsight, but in John's day it must have appeared an act of either incredible faith or incredible presumption. After all, the Christians were a persecuted minority sect, their prophet was banished on an island for political prisoners, yet he used against Rome an ironic literary form employed by Old Testament prophets to declare its destruction."

V.1-3 Rome the prison/prostitute

These verses are cutting/raw. Rome is not what it seems. In fact it's the opposite. It is, in God's eyes, a prison, a dwelling place for the demons and everything unclean. The problem is that the political powers, and the economic drivers of the day, in their rush to curry Rome's favor and allegiance do not see this. They're unaware of the putrid hellish nature of Rome's inner being. Building on the theme of prostitution in Ch.17, here in Ch.18 it's exposed once again for all to see. The prostitution in Ch.17 & 18 is not of the physical sort we might think of, although there were temple prostitutes in Rome's day. This prostitution is spiritual. This is a theme God had to deal with regarding Israel playing the harlot with foreign gods (Hosea has much to say about this). V.3 points out the depth of degradation to which the world has sunk in its desire for Rome. Rome is a most effective whore.

V.4-8 Get out while you can

Amid all this a voice rings out for God's people to come out of Rome. Don't get duped by its allure. Don't be like the world's kings and merchants. It's amazing how the prospect of power and wealth can change us and what we'll sometimes do to get them. So John says to the churches, "do not participate in her sins and receive her plagues." Verses 6-8 remind God's people of the power of God's judgement. Rome will get in return for all her harlotry everything she has coming by way of judgement, and more. God says she will receive a manifold judgement for her sinful contribution.

Rome is not eternal.

In fact note Babylon's self-evaluation at the end of V.7,

"I sit as a Queen and I am not a widow and will never see mourning."

Rome is known as "the eternal city", even among ancient Romans themselves. No matter what happened to the world, no matter how many other empires might rise and fall, Rome would go on forever. Tibullus (54-18 B.C.) the Roman elegiac poet, and Ovid (43 BC), one of the great Latin poets, as well as other Roman writers, refer to the city as eternal. This is

expressed in many of the Empire's official documents in later days. In Virgil's Aeneid, Jupiter tells Venus that he will give the Romans "imperium sine fine", "an empire without end." Rome thought itself immortal. Its arrogance knew no bounds. Rome has no idea its mortality.

Think about the clash of these words over against God's evaluation of the 7 churches. Especially those who've, like the kings and merchants, blindly drunk of the wine of Rome's passion and immorality. Some churches have drunk deeply. Solomon was right,

"The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish. There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (Prov 14:11, 12).

For all the 7 churches there is here a serious opportunity to read and heed. For the faithful suffering churches, they need to heed that their cries for justice haven't gone unheard. They'll be vindicated. The great harlot causing them so much pain will get her just desserts.

For the compromised or caved in churches believing their actions justified/wise, hearing a funeral dirge for their lover would have been bitter. But there's a bright spot here. These churches still have time to respond to God and stave off judgement (18:4). Remember what Jesus said to Sardis,

"Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of my God" (Rev 3:2).

V.9-20 hear Rome's lovers cry and wail

Everyone laments the great cities death. Kings (V.1), merchants (V.11), sailors (V.17) all feel unquenchable grief. Ironically many of these same people had previously enjoyed all the harlot offered without discernment. Now the great harlot is standing stripped bare and the sight is not attractive at all. She's fallen from a seductive harlot to a smoldering ruined corpse.

As well, while wailing and crying go on everywhere, V.20 catches our attention. Amid all the grief someone is told to rejoice at the harlot's death. God's people are not to mourn, but to rejoice. The reason is clear, God has pronounced judgement **for you** against her. **Cheering at funerals is not a good idea. But why cheer here?** Because those who slew the saints and persecuted Jesus' followers (6:9 ff; 8:1-5) have had their vengeance exacted upon them by God. We have said previously, Paul reminded the Roman believers not to take justice into their own hands but to leave room for God's vengeance (Rom 12:14-21). Here justice comes down vigorously, thoroughly, and completely.

V.21-24 know that Babylon/Rome will not rise again. The saints will be vindicated.

Six times in these verses the phrase is repeated, "She will not rise again". Babylon never did recover from her destruction by Cyrus and neither will Rome. Whatever splendor and influence these great cities once knew is now relegated to history. And the two reasons for the thoroughness of the destruction are given, 19:23, 24. First, because of deception by

sorcery, and second because of the blood of the prophets and saints found in her. Neither city, following downfall ever regained their storied splendor. Ironically Hitler tried to revive the Roman spirit in the construction Berlin. He wanted it to reflect Roman glory when Germany won the war, but all that remains of his vision are the miniature table models the Allies discovered after Hitler's death in 1945.

Making it real:

In the world but not of it. When you think about this word from Jesus (Jn 17:16) what comes to your mind? Or, Paul to the Romans, do not be conformed, but transformed (Rom 12:2)?

The call for God's people to "come out of her (Rome)" is clear and sharp. God's goal for his people is to stop participating in the sins of Rome.

The word "participating" (v.4) is interesting because John uses a similar word in 1:9 to describe the churches as "fellow-partakers". Since they are fellow-partakers with Christ they have no business dividing their loyalties. The lure of wealth, advantage, and power are always strong and we ought always to be very aware of what is going on around us.

Discernment is paramount. Paul makes a similar plea,

"Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness". 2 Cor. 6:14

Scott Hafemann provides an understanding of what "yoking together" has in mind,

"it's a metaphor referring to any kind of joint participation, formal or informal, that significantly forms one's own identity, To be 'yoked together' is to take on the identity of those who are joined together for a common goal or task. It is to be someone's 'ally'. For example, those involved in politics are 'yoked together' when they gain their identity as members of the same party; athletes are 'yoked together' on a team bearing the same name. . ."

This is why, for example, John is very clear about the churches call to life and ministry in ch 1, and why he recalls the vision of the Ancient of Days in 1:12-16. He is reinforcing the team identity they have with Christ and John (1:9).

We obviously live in this world, but we are called to carefully discern the allegiances we form that contribute to our identity as believers. We need money to live, work to do, and relationships to encourage us but we must also think carefully about how these things form our identity. Laodicea needed to hear this clearly and so do we.

Leaving room for God when injustice strikes

Finally, all believers can rest assured that the powers we face in this world that oppose God will be exposed and judged to the full measure. In this sense we ought never to worry that someone will get away with something here on earth and never have to face justice because of it. This kind of worry can distract us from fulfilling our call to make Christ known. If we insist on righting the wrongs here on earth we may miss the opportunity to witness of Christ

and his love for us. Our job here on earth is not to right all the wrongs we face but to make God's plan for creation known. Jesus faced all kinds of wrongs in his three years of ministry, but nowhere did his primary ministry derail because of what he faced. Knowing what the churches now know about Rome, they are not to be afraid of it or its power. They may lose their physical life in the process of ministry but even this is under the control of the one who was dead, but now alive forevermore, and who holds the keys of Hades and death (1:19).

React to Dr. Ed Neufeld thought about justice and our feelings,

“God’s people have been treated unfairly, treated as evil and a problem when they weren’t, and they were right to want vindication. God’s people are not free (however) to take revenge, or store up anger; but feeling anger and wanting wrong made right are normal experiences of the godly, including when these sensations are very strong. If we won’t let ourselves be angry, we’ll never understand forgiving, or loving our enemies. Feeling and sounding angry aren’t wrong. Inflicting pain by any means as an expression of anger is wrong. The feeling of anger is entirely normal and neutral, like feeling hungry. Evaluation and management are very important.”