



When our oldest daughter was about three or four, we lived in Pleasanton. It may seem weird but one of the places I remember visiting with her was the city dump. That may sound like a strange place to take a little girl for a father-daughter outing but I had a reason for going. I was trying to save a few dollars. We had just bought our first house and it happened to be only a mile or so from the dump. I figured out that I could save money by canceling my garbage pickup and taking my trash to the dump myself. I'll never forget those visits to the dump! We would back up our long, yellow Pontiac against the mounds of refuse and throw our garbage on the pile. And once in a while we would look at all the stuff heaped up: plastic swimming pools, barbecues, old lawn chairs, televisions, refrigerators and stoves. There was also everything a little girl dreams of: Barbie dolls, bicycles, skateboards, play kitchens, flattened soccer balls.

I'm not sure if my daughter remembers those trips to the dump, but I do. Every trip out there was a powerful reminder that someday everything we own will be junk. In some city dump the things that have captivated our lives will smolder beneath a simmering flame in a stinking mound of rotting garbage. That picture in my mind not only portrays the destiny of all our stuff, but also the ultimate demise of everything that's of this world. The things of this world will not last forever, but they await the awesome and terrible judgment of God. Few chapters in the Bible portray this frightful end more pointedly than Revelation 17 and 18 and few people need to hear its message more than we Americans.

In chapters 15-16 we saw seven bowls of wrath being poured out on the earth. These were the judgments of God. As the seventh bowl was poured out the overthrow of Babylon the Great was announced. All that remains is to tell of the coming of the end and the victory of God and the Lamb over all that opposes them. That's really what the rest of Revelation is about. John first gives the negative side of God's victory in chapters 17-18 where the overthrow of Babylon is described. And then he gives the positive side in chapters 19-22 where the coming of Christ and his victorious reign is established. Chapters 17 and 18 describe the fall of the city of man, which is Babylon. Chapters 19-22 describe the establishment of the city of God, which is the New Jerusalem.

These chapters ask a very pointed question of us: Where do I belong? What city do I belong to? The city of God or the city of man?

The doom of the great harlot and Babylon

In these chapters John sees certain images and he has a conversation with an angel who will see what he sees. Let me give you kind of a guided tour of the main points.

The judgment of the great harlot

In chapter 17 John sees the image of a great harlot. An angel says to John, "*Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot...*" (v.1). John is carried away into a wilderness where he sees her. He says, "*I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns.*" The woman is very beautiful but she's also corrupt. He says, "*The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality*" (verses 3-4). Then he sees a name written on her forehead, which is a mystery. It says, "*Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth*" (v.5). It seems this harlot and Babylon the Great are two images of the same thing.

John is astonished and confused by all this when an angel offers to explain the vision. Starting in v.8 he does that in great detail. In essence what he describes is the overthrow of the beast and all who align with him. We've already seen in earlier chapters that the beast is a symbol for Rome and its emperors who persecuted the church and demanded to be worshiped and drew together kings from throughout the earth. But the beast is more than Rome. At the end of the age, the beast will be a final manifestation of evil in the form of a person, a counterfeit Christ, who draws together Presidents, Prime Ministers and Chancellors. John describes their demise in v.14, "*These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.*" Once again we're reminded that the victory doesn't come through a show of strength but through the One who was slain for us—God's lamb, Jesus.

But somehow in the midst of all this the beast and its followers will turn against the harlot. It's like the forces of evil implode and turn on themselves. Verses 16-18 describe how God orchestrates a civil war and the beast destroys the harlot. Finally, in v.18 he tells us again who this harlot is, "*And the woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth*" (v.18).

The harlot and Babylon are different images for the same thing. Together they represent the city of man which is opposed to the city of God. They represent the seductive power of prideful humanity and godless society. They stand for all that's of the world, *"the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life"* (1Jn. 2:9). Babylon comes from the word *babel*. In the story of the Tower of Babel people gathered together and said, *"Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name."* (Gen. 11:4). In other words, "Let's build a new society without God. We're so great and so clever we can be our own gods." Later there was also a corrupt and affluent nation called Babylon, Israel's enemy. When John wrote Revelation he no doubt believed the city of Rome was Babylon. I say that because in v.9 when John identifies the seven heads of the beast who carries the harlot he says, *"The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits."* Everyone reading that would think of Rome which was built on seven hills. But it's not just Rome. Remember she's called *"the Mother of Harlots,"* i.e., the mother of more Babylons; there were more to come; there **are** more to come. That's why it's possible today to wake up one morning and find yourself in Babylon.

Lament for the city of man

In chapter 18 John sees Babylon's fall. Another angel cries out in v.2 *"Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the Great."* Then he gives the reason for her fall: *"her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities"* (v.5).

Then the rest of the chapter presents three separate funeral songs, all choruses of mourning. This isn't just any old funeral, this is Babylon's funeral. And the songs are laments for the city of man. First, kings and politicians mourn because their power has come to naught: *"And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, 'Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come'"* (verses 9-10).

Then all the business people mourn over her—merchants, salesmen, brokers. Verse 11 says, *"And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes any more"* (verses 11-12). There is a long list of all the products: everything from gold, silver and precious stones to cargoes of horses, chariots and slaves. The business owners sing, *"Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls; for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste!"* (verses 16-17).

Finally, the third funeral song comes from all who make their living from the sea. Verse 19 says, *"They threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, 'Woe, woe,*

the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!'" (verses 17-19).

Then John sees a mighty angel take a stone, a very large millstone, and hurl it into the sea. He says in essence, "Such is the fate of the city of man. She won't be found any longer. No more music heard from her bars. No more craftsmen working at the mills. No more wedding dances." The late Lord Louis Mountbatten captured Babylon's demise when he wrote, "And when it's all over what will the world be like? Our fine, great buildings, our homes will exist no more. The thousands of years it took to develop our civilization will have been in vain. Our works of art will be lost. Radio, television, newspapers will disappear. There will be no means of transport. There will be no hospitals... There will be no neighboring towns left, no neighbors, there will be no help, there will be no hope."

The question is, where do we encounter Babylon today? The nation of Babylon isn't the problem. Rome isn't the problem. America isn't the problem. The European Union isn't the problem. The problem is something we might call Babylon-ness. It's the spirit of the age which leaves God out of the equation. It's when this independent, prideful, I-can-do-it-my-way kind of spirit becomes institutionalized in families and businesses and cities and nations. How do we know if we're infected with a spirit of Babylon-ness? Where do you and I encounter this spirit in our own lives and families and cities? Right here in these chapters we see several ways the spirit of Babylon infects us.

Babylon encounters us in a variety of ways

Pride

First of all, Babylon encounters us in our pride. In 18:7 it says, *"she glorified herself."* She wants all the attention; all the glory; all the credit. She wants everyone to notice her. And then she says in her heart, *"I sit as a queen and I am not a widow, and will never see mourning."* There is a kind of proud defiance in those words: "No can bring me down. No one can touch me." Pascal once wrote, "Vanity is so anchored in the heart of man that those who write against it want to have the glory of written well and those who read it desire the glory of having read it." Another old saint said, "Pride will only disappear from the human heart 15 minutes after we died." Babylon encounters me in my ego. I see her in my jealousy over a colleague's success. I see her in the subtle ways I drop information into a conversation that make me look better. I see it when I rely on my own strength and my own wisdom to solve a problem only God can solve.

Immorality

Second, Babylon encounters us in our immorality and lust. The word "immorality" is used seven times in these two chapters. We live in a nation where a new porn movie is made every 39 minutes. But it's not just porn. How about adultery? We have web

sites designed to facilitate extramarital affairs. Log on and you have access to thousands of people willing to drop their vows for a no-strings-attached fling. One site reported that in just one month 679,000 men and women logged on to have an affair. After one year, site membership doubled to 4 million people. What are we looking for in all of this? It's not really about sex; it's about a deep-seated longing in all of us; a craving for connection and fulfillment and even worship. That's what we think we're getting, but it leaves us empty. Only God can give that fulfillment. Only he can satisfy that deep sense of longing for connection with another person. That's what we call worship. When we worship, we're longing to be possessed of God, and to possess him fully; we connect with him in a satisfying way. But when God isn't the center of our lives, we look for other ways to fill that void. That's where lust comes in. Babylon feeds on that.

Wealth

Third, Babylon encounters us in our wealth. The great harlot is *"clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls" (v.4)*. In chapter 18 the angel says *"the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality" (v.3)*.

If there is one thing we're known for it's our wealth. America controls nearly 20% of the world's wealth, but has less than 5% of the world's population. One billion people in the world don't have access to clean water; most of us use 400-600 liters of water a day. Every seven seconds in the world a child under five dies of hunger; we throw away 14% of the food we buy. More than half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day; American teenagers spend nearly \$150 a week. Most of the people in the world don't own a car; one third of American families own three cars. One out of every 10 households rents a storage unit. Why? So we can store all the stuff we think we need but don't use.

It's easy to bash America when the problem is really in my own heart. I see this in my own love of things. I did finally buy a car. I found an eight-year-old Mercedes Benz. I couldn't resist because I got it for about half of what I was going to pay for a much lesser car. I love this car! I love how it looks, feels, and I just love the idea that I can cruise around in a Mercedes. But there are two things I've noticed about me and this car. First, I don't want anyone else to drive it. Don't try to borrow my car because I'll make some kind of lame excuse for not letting you drive it! What if you messed it up? Not only that, somehow I feel more important in this car than in the heap I used to drive. I drive with a new swagger. I look down on Honda's and Ford's, as well as those who drive them! That's Babylon! Babylon encounters me in my love of things.

Violence and injustice

Fourth, Babylon encounters us in our violence and injustice. The harlot is described as *"drunk with the blood of the saints, and*

with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus." (17:6). But it's not just believers who are victims of her violence. It says in the last verse of chapter 18, *"And in her was found the blood of ...all who have been slain on the earth."*

Kay Warren writes, "The first time I visited Rwanda, I went looking for monsters... I had heard about the 1994 genocide that had left one million people dead—tortured, raped, viciously murdered—and somehow I thought it would be easy to spot the perpetrators. I naively assumed I would be able to look men and women in the eyes and tell if they had been involved. I was full of self-righteous judgment. What I found left me puzzled, confused, and ultimately frightened. Instead of finding leering, menacing creatures, I met men and women who looked and behaved a lot like me. They took care of their families, went to work, chatted with their neighbors, laughed, cried, prayed, and worshiped. Where were the monsters? Where were the evildoers capable of heinous acts? Slowly, with a deepening sense of dread, I understood the truth: There were no monsters in Rwanda, just people like you and me."

There is violence in all of us and violence goes hand in hand with injustice. Revelation 18:13 puts *"slaves and human lives"* at the end of a long list of goods. In Babylon human lives are viewed as a product right alongside oil, cattle and gold. How many Babylon's have been built on the backs of slaves? Babylon shows up in our businesses when the product and the bottom line is put above people and their welfare. Babylon shows up when fat cat executives run off with billion dollar bonuses and the guy who worked his tail off for 35 years in the stock room is laid off without a penny for retirement.

Deception and counterfeit

Finally, Babylon encounters us through deception and counterfeit: *"The beast that you saw was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss" (17:8)*. That's an imitation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. People will be taken in by this. Later in chapter 18 it says *"all the nations were deceived by your sorcery" (18:23)*. We live a culture increasingly open to spirituality without any commitment at all to what is true and right. You can describe yourself as a "very spiritual person" but still deny the existence of absolute truth or morality. Deepak Chopra wrote this about the Dalai Lama: "The most inspiring thing he ever told me was to ignore all organized faiths and keep to the road of higher consciousness. Without relying on religion, we look to common sense, common experience and the findings of science for understanding." The Dalai Lama sounds wise. His words fit the mood of our culture. But what he says means you ignore Christianity and the church because it's an organized religious faith; you also reject the gospel because it flies in the face of all common sense, human experience, and science.

We must come out of Babylon

What this passage undeniably reveals to us is that Babylon is going down. *“Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the Great!”* The question is, what do we do about it? We have a choice: we can either go down with her or we can come out of her. You can't have it both ways. You can't be a citizen of both the city of man and the city of God. You can't be a part of Babylon and the New Jerusalem. You can't be in love with both the great harlot and Jesus Christ.

That's why in 18:4 John heard another voice. This voice said, *“Come out of her, my people, that you may not participate in her sins and that you may not receive of her plagues.”* Come out of her, God says, or you will go down with her. Reject her or you'll be rejected with her. But this isn't easy. God says, “Come out!” but where do I go? Babylon is everywhere? This is a call to each of us to be **in** the world but not **of** the world. In one of his letters, John put it this way, *“Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn 2:15-17).*

If I'm going to come out of Babylon I'll have to identify where I'm encountering her; where those places are in my heart where I love her; where I'm seduced by her. You see, most of us Americans have never encountered the beast. We've not yet experienced the iron fist of persecution like believers in other countries have. Instead, what we deal with every day is a seductive mistress. We know the allure of her perfume. We know the warm embrace of her soft flesh. We've not been persecuted; we've been seduced. We've not been brutalized; we've been deceived.

Come out of her. How do we do that? We have to saturate ourselves with a biblical mindset. We have to be in the Scriptures every day so we can see through the lies this harlot seeks to deceive us with.

We also have to surround ourselves intentionally with Christian community. We can't do this alone. We need brothers and sisters to pray for us and encourage us and call us on the carpet when need be by reflecting back to us the ways we're compromising.

Then we have to find ways to dethrone her from our life. Maybe you're a workaholic. Dethrone work. Commit yourself to take at least one day in seven where you turn your computer off and do no work at all. Or maybe you're in an unhealthy relationship with an unbeliever. You know it's causing you to compromise the values of your faith. Get out of it today. Dethrone it.

Maybe you struggle with materialism. You want things you really don't need. You have too many things already. So what do you do? Dethrone them. Make a shopping fast. Give something valuable away. You say, “I can't afford to do that.” But maybe you can't afford **not** to do it. In a Romanian jail cell Richard Wurmbbrand didn't have much to give away either, but he still wanted to make sure material possessions didn't control his existence. To break its power, he tithed, not cash but food. Every tenth day he gave his bread rations away to prisoners more needy than him. Why did he do that? I suspect even in prison he saw the need to come out of Babylon and to dethrone her from his life.

Conclusion

If you doubt the truth of these words, I invite you to take a little drive. Drive out to your city dump. Back your Nissan Sentra or Honda Accord or Mercedes Benz up against the mounds of rotting garbage. See what others have thrown out. Watch it smolder. How many of those things are you working hard to acquire? Are these not the signs of Babylon's collapse? Come out of her! She'll self-destruct. Only the city of God will endure.

“Do not love the world or the things of the world... For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.”