

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

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CHAPTER 18: BABYLON'S FALL

Verses 1-3

Chapter 17 closed with the promise that God would destroy the new Babylon. Revelation 18 opened as this promise was fulfilled. In verse 1, John saw an angel descending from heaven. This angel was a symbol for Christ. The Lord was seen returning because the time for God's judgment had come. This judgment culminated with Christ's return. The angel had great authority because Christ would have great authority when He returned. Christ would come to reign over the whole earth. The earth was illuminated by Christ's glory. This glory can be compared to Ezekiel 43:2 and Revelation 21:13. When Ezekiel saw Christ on His throne, the earth was also illuminated by His glory. This glory would finally illumine the New Jerusalem when Christ returned to reign.

Christ cried out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison for every unclean and hateful bird. For all the nations drank from the wine of the passion of her immorality. The kings of the earth had committed acts of immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth had become rich by the wealth of her sensuality." These verses were an introduction to chapter 18. Revelation 18:3 said that Babylon would be destroyed because the earth's kings and merchants had sinned with her. Much of Revelation 18 described Babylon's fall from the stand point of the earth's kings, merchants, and seamen. Revelation 18:2 grew from at least three places in Scripture. First, Christ's declaration repeated Revelation 14:8. There, John saw an angel who declared, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great who had made all the nations drink the wine of the passion of her immorality." Second, both Revelation 14:8 and 18:2 were probably related to Isaiah 21:9. Isaiah wrote, "One answered and said, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon. All the images of her gods are shattered on the ground.'" Finally, the most important source for Christ's words may be Jeremiah 50:1-3 where God commanded, "Declare among the nations ... Babylon has been captured. Bel has been put to shame. Marduk has been shattered. Her images have been put to shame. Her idols have been shattered. For a nation has come up against her out of the north. It will make her land an object of horror, and there will be no inhabitant on it. Both man and beast have wandered off. They have gone away." These verses were important because Revelation 18 was drawn out parallel to Jeremiah 50 and 51. Both sections of Scripture described Babylon's fall. Jeremiah was describing God's judgment on the empires of Mesopotamia, but his comments also pointed forward to the new Babylon. Both sections began in the same way. In Revelation 18:1-3 and in Jeremiah 50:1-3, Christ introduced the section by declaring that Babylon had fallen and that her land had been made desolate.

Christ repeated the theme of Babylon's desolation at least twice in Jeremiah 50-51. In Jeremiah 50:39, he promised, "Therefore the desert creatures will live there along with the jackals. The ostriches also will live in it, and it will never again be inhabited or dwelt in from generation to generation." This verse was similar to John's prophecy that Babylon would become a prison for every unclean and hateful bird. Jeremiah 51:37-38 and Isaiah 13:21-22 made similar prophecies. John said that God would judge the new Babylon because the nations had drunk the wine of her immorality. Jeremiah 51:7 made a similar point as did Habakkuk 2:15-16.

Verses 4-8

After Christ's declaration in Revelation 18:1-3, John heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, My people, that you may not participate in her sins and that you may not receive of her plagues." This command paralleled two verses of Jeremiah 50. Immediately after God declared that Babylon would be destroyed, He said, "In those days and at that time, declares the Lord, the sons of Israel will come, both they and the sons of Judah as well. They will go along weeping as they go, and it will be

the Lord their God that they will seek. They will ask for the way to Zion. They will turn their faces in its direction. They will come to join themselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten" (Jeremiah 50:4-5). God's judgment on Babylon would mark the end of Israel's exile. Then Israel would return to Palestine and to belief. Jeremiah 50:18-20 repeated the same promise. Israel's exodus from Babylon would begin before God's judgment came. Jeremiah 51:6 and 51:45-50 commanded God's people to flee from Babylon. They must no longer share in Babylon's sins, but they must remember the Lord from afar. God's people must free for their lives because God's judgment was coming. Those who refused to return from exile would be destroyed in God's judgment. The same command can be found in Isaiah 48:20 and Zechariah 2:7.

Babylon would be judged because her sins had piled up as high as heaven. Revelation 18:5 can be compared to Jeremiah 51:9. Part of this verse read, "her judgment has reached to heaven and towers up to the very sky." Revelation 18:6 read, "Pay her back even as she has paid, and give her back double according to her deeds. In the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her." This verse can also be compared to Jeremiah. The prophet proclaimed, "As she has done to others, so do to her" (Jeremiah

50:15), and "Repay her according to her works, according to all that she has done, so do to her. For she has become arrogant against the Lord, against the Holy One of Israel" (Jeremiah 50:29).

Revelation 18:7-8 may have come from the prophet Isaiah. Verse 7 commanded that Babylon be given torment and mourning to the degree that she glorified herself. For she said in her heart, "I sit as a queen, and I am not a widow. I will never see mourning." This idea was carried over from Isaiah 47:5-8.

Isaiah promised that Babylon would no longer be queen of the nations because she did not deal kindly with Israel. Babylon said that she would be queen forever and would never sit as a widow. Isaiah said that loss of children and widowhood would come on her suddenly and in one day. Scriptures consistently promised that Babylon would become a widow in one day. This was fulfilled when Persia conquered Babylon without a struggle. It will also be fulfilled when the second Babylon was destroyed by fire in a day. Revelation 18:8 promised, "For this reason, in one day, her plagues will come, pestilence, mourning and famine. She will be burned with fire for the Lord God who judges her is strong."

Verses 9-20

Jeremiah 51:8 commanded, "Suddenly, Babylon has fallen and has been broken. Wail over her! Bring balm for her pain. Perhaps she can be healed." This command was fulfilled in Revelation 18:9-20. These verses described the reactions of four groups to Babylon's fall. Verses 9 and 10 described the kings of the earth lamenting Babylon. Verses 11-16 discussed the merchants of the earth weeping for their loss. Verses 17-19 spoke about the sailors who mourned as they watched Babylon burn. Then verse 20 described saints rejoicing over God's judgment. All three lamentations were nearly identical. All said, "Woe, woe the great city." Then all mentioned their own loss through Babylon's fall.

The kings of the earth said, "Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour, your judgment has come." Kings emphasized strength because they received protection and support as allies of Babylon. Merchants said, "Woe, woe, the great city. She who was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet. She who was adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. For in one hour, such great wealth was laid waste." Merchants stressed a long list of things that the new Babylon had received in trade. Now businessmen could no longer become rich through trade with her. The goods listed in Revelation 18:11-13 are also mentioned in Ezekiel 27 in reference to another trading city. Like Babylon, the "land of merchants," Tyre was a world trading center that handled all of the goods found in Babylon. So the lament for Tyre in Ezekiel 27 may be related somehow to the lament for Babylon in Revelation 18. The list of goods in verses 12 and 16 also identified Babylon with the woman in Revelation 17:4 who wore these things.

When sailors saw Babylon burn, they threw dust on their heads in mourning, and they wept. They cried, "Woe, woe, the great city. All who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth. In one hour, she

was laid waste." Sailors mourned because they had become rich by carrying Babylon's goods. So when the world saw Babylon's destruction, they were really only concerned about their own losses. Each lament also emphasized that Babylon fell in a day. Babylon's destruction would come suddenly without warning. There was another thread running through the laments. In verses 10, 15, and 17, the world stood at a distance from Babylon for fear of sharing her torment. If Babylon was destroyed through a nuclear attack, men would fear to approach for fear of radiation.

Jeremiah 51:8 commanded the world to mourn for Babylon. In Revelation 18:9-19, the world did mourn. Then in Jeremiah 51:9, the world abandoned Babylon because she could not be healed, and everyone went home to his own nation. Jeremiah 51:10 described the reaction of God's people as they returned home. Jeremiah wrote, "the Lord has brought vindication. Come, let us recount in Zion the work of the Lord our God." In Revelation 18:20, John again paralleled Jeremiah. When the world had stopped mourning for Babylon, God commanded His people, "Rejoice over her, O heavens, and you saints, apostles, and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her." The world mourned for their loss, but God's people rejoiced because God had vindicated them through judgment. Not only God's people, but all heaven and earth rejoiced over God's judgment. Jeremiah wrote, "Then heaven, earth, and all in them shouted for joy over Babylon because the destroyers will come to her from the north" (Jeremiah 51:48).

Verses 21-24

Revelation 18 had been a rough parallel to Jeremiah 50-51. Both had begun in the same way. Both had similar content, and both would end with a similar symbol. John saw a great angel throw a stone into the sea. John wrote, "Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence. It will not be found any longer." The sound of musicians, industry, business, and society would not be heard in her any more. She would be destroyed because of the blood of prophets, of saints, and of all who have been slain on the earth. A similar symbol was found at the end of Jeremiah 51. Jeremiah wrote on a single scroll all the calamity which would come upon Babylon. This scroll was given to Seraiah who was going to Babylon. Jeremiah told him to read the scroll aloud when he got there. Jeremiah wrote, "You, Oh Lord, promised concerning this place to cut it off so that there would be nothing dwelling there whether it was a man or a beast. It will be a perpetual desolation." As soon as Seraiah finished reading the scroll, he was to tie a stone to it and throw it into the middle of the Euphrates. He was told to say, "Just so will Babylon sink down and not rise again because of the calamity that I am going to bring upon her." Babylon would sink instantly into the water and never be found again. The water symbolized the sea of the gentiles who would overflow her.

The angel of Revelation also made a list of things which would not be heard in Babylon any longer. Daniel 3:5 showed that the instruments listed in verse 22 were used in Babylon during Israel's captivity. Part of this list was found in Jeremiah 25:10-11 where God promised to punish Judah. Jeremiah wrote, "Moreover, I will take from them the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstone and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall be a desolation and a horror. These nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years." Perhaps John was saying that Babylon had persecuted the nations and would not be judged herself in the same way. Just as Babylon took the voice of gladness from other nations, she would now lose that voice herself (cf. Revelation 18:6).

The last verse in Revelation 18 noted that Babylon would be judged for the blood of prophets, saints, and all who had been slain on the earth. This theme was also carried over from Jeremiah 51. In Jeremiah 51:34-35, the inhabitants of Zion said, "Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured me and crushed me. ... May the violence done to my flesh be upon Babylon." The inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "May my blood be upon the inhabitants of Chaldea." Jeremiah 51:49 also added, "Indeed, Babylon is to fall for the slain of Israel just as the slain of all the earth have fallen for Babylon."

The question remains, can Babylon be identified? These prophecies have not yet been fulfilled? Babylon the Harlot has been identified in many ways. It has been seen as an institution like the false prophet's church, and any number of other prophets have been proposed. The destruction of Babylon was describe in Revelation 18 in terms that sounded much like a nation instead of an institution. If Babylon was a nation which has not yet appeared on the scene of history, it may be impossible to identify the city, and the destruction of the city could result from weapons that have not yet been invented. However, this may not be the case. Luke 21:24 claimed that Israel would be desolate until the end of the age of the gentiles. Romans 11:25 made a similar point. Paul noted that "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the gentiles had come in." Paul prophesied that Israel would reject Christ until the end of the gentile age. Today, the gentile church is in trouble while increasing numbers of Jews are being converted. If Israel has returned to Palestine and is slowly returning to belief, then the end of the gentile age is near.

If the first Woe will happen in the near future, then Babylon would be a city or nation that exists today. Babylon would have to be a leading economic and military power with a port. This description could fit many cities and nations. Babylon could not be the European Union because it was destroyed forever. Europe would be the center of the Antichrist's empire, the new Rome. So it would have to survive the destruction of Babylon. The same might be true for Russia or China. Prophecy seems to say that those three will gather at Armageddon, so they could not be destroyed before that time.

One possible candidate for the Great Harlot Babylon could be North America. The Christian church in Europe remains as an institution, but its influence on the culture is not what it once was. Christians in Africa and other parts of the world are either threatened or actually dying for their faith. If the North American continent was removed from the world's scene, much of the world would come under the influence of Europe and China. It is not hard to imagine ways that North America could be removed from significance in a single day. Models that could produce such an affect range from the eruption of a mega-volcano like Yellowstone Park, to terrorist nuclear attacks, to direct military aggression from a number of nations, or even to a meteorite strike. In this model, the United States might be a good candidate, and surprising numbers of people are suggesting today an identification of the USA with Babylon. The USA certainly has the wealth and military power required of Babylon. Nations are certainly angry with the USA for its interference in their internal affairs, its military adventurism, and its support for Israel. Yet kings of the earth rely on America for military support. Merchants and seamen become rich by trading with her. The USA pays its farmers not to grow food while parts of the world starve. It is also significant that Babylon is called a harlot. In the Bible, the image of a harlot is often used for a nation that had been characterized by faith but that turned away from God. That pattern is rapidly developing in the USA. Morality standards in the country have collapsed since the start of the Viet Nam war. Sins that were thought reprehensible a generation ago are now being taught as normal. Christianity is openly coming under attack both in the media and the schools. 70% of the young people in most congregations leave the faith when they graduate from high school. If this process continues, the time for God's judgment may be at hand. The United States has a reputation in the world as the Christian nation. When the country turns strongly away from God, the honor of the Lord's name is threatened. He may well judge this country in order to preserve the honor of His name. While all of this is true, it is also true that the church remains stronger in the United States than would be expected for Babylon the Harlot. Whether this identification of Babylon has any merit may depend on what happens to the church in the future. If the nation continues its slide away from God, the time may come when God allows the nation to be destroyed in order to initiate the events at the end of history. If God brings revival to this land, then the identity of Babylon should be sought somewhere else.

