

Babylon and the city of God

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] By the time we finish, please will you turn to Revelation chapter 17.! By bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And that as we meditate in the law of the Lord, we are like trees planted by streams of water. A leaf doesn't wither, and they bear fruit in due season.

And as we come to this chapter, which I don't think is a particularly easy chapter, that nevertheless you, O God, will show us the truth of all your promises, and make it a good time as we meditate in the law of the Lord.

For Jesus' sake, Amen. Amen. Well, this chapter and the next one, chapter 17 and 18, are about Babylon and her downfall.

And you might say, well, that's completely irrelevant, but I think it is very relevant. Actually, quite raising a lot of quite profound questions about the way we live in this world.

[1 : 31] So here's a question. Which way are we going to vote on the 7th of May? I hope we can find it in our hearts to vote. But what's the best way to vote?

Is it right to vote? I think it's right to vote. Will it change anything? Well, everybody asks that. Of course, if all the people who didn't vote did vote, it would change things dramatically. Perhaps a little bit more of a philosophical question.

How is God involved in government and in authority and the way a country is run and the way the whole world is run? Is it perhaps not at all?

Does he always support governments or does he always judge governments? Well, what should we expect of these powers in this world in which we live?

What should we think of them? How should we think of them? What should we hope for? So they raise quite profound questions. And at different times in history, particularly in European history and certainly I think of English history, considerable battles have been fought in the world of ideas and persuasion, and in fact we have in our history a civil war.

[2 : 56] Touching on this whole question, what should people expect of their government? Christian people in relation to God.

And here's one of the ways the Bible approaches this question, by thinking of two cities, two cities that we should know about. And as I was thinking of this this morning, I didn't write it down on the screen.

We're not the only people to think about that. But the great philosopher and teacher of the church, Augustine, who lived in a place called Hippo in North Africa in sort of 400 AD, he too considered what should we be expecting in the stability of government.

Because during his lifetime, the stable government of the planet, which was the Roman Empire, fell, could you believe it, to barbaric hordes invading.

And the whole world seemed to have come to an end. And he reflected on this long and hard and wrote a book about the two cities, and the book is called The City of God.

[4 : 14] So let's think about Revelation 17 and 18, not in detail this morning, but in perhaps a wider view, a tale of two cities.

And the two cities I'm thinking of are, first of all, the city of Jerusalem. In the Bible, the city of Jerusalem is a significant place.

In the Old Testament, Jerusalem is... Can you see it? Does it work? Yes, I just thought I'd turn and look. You can see why we need a new projector, can't you?

I think this one's probably got dusty as well. But we do need a new projector, and then we'll all be able to see everything really, really clearly. But we can see enough this morning. In the Old Testament, Jerusalem is God's headquarters on earth.

And that's what it is. If you wanted to meet God, you could get your shoes on, or get on your donkey, and trek to Jerusalem. And in the old nation of Israel, the men were encouraged to do that, I think, three times a year.

[5 : 22] You actually had to go there. It was God's headquarters on earth in the Old Testament. If you think of the New Testament, Jesus addresses this question of Jerusalem.

He actually turns up as the king to say, well, what have you been doing with this privilege? How have you been stewarding the things you're supposed to do?

How have you been producing the fruit you're supposed to produce? And if you think about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in that last week of his ministry, and the questions he asked, and the things he checked up on, and the fact at the end, he says, it's like this tree where I'm looking for fruit, and there isn't any.

It's a miserable failure. Do you remember that? And God's headquarters on earth. Jerusalem as God's headquarters on earth was a failure. We have Paul telling us that we belong to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Jerusalem above is our mother, he says in his letter to the Galatians. And so we have the idea of God's headquarters in heaven. And that, for the Christian, is our current headquarters.

[6 : 40] We're not interested in earthly geography. Our spatial alignment, if you like, is we're not facing, you don't, Chris didn't arrange this, so we're facing towards Jerusalem.

Although some people would think that was an important thing to do. We are hopefully facing toward heaven. Towards the heavenly Jerusalem. That's where we belong.

We're citizens of heaven. But one day, in the book of Revelation, the heavenly city takes its place in a new heaven and a new earth.

So there is a change yet to come when the whole of physical creation becomes, as it were, identical with the city. That's the future of the city of God in a new heaven and a new earth.

So there, in a very brief compass, is one city. Jerusalem. Now then, if I click enough, it will work.

[7 : 46] Yes. Now the opposing city is the city of Babylon. Babylon. In the Bible, these are the two great cities.

And the story of Babylon, it goes back to Genesis chapter 11. And you might or might not want to flick back to Genesis chapter 11.

It's a long way back. It says, In those days, the whole world had one language and a common speech. And as men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

So Shinar is the old location of Babylon. Babylon. And they said to each other, Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.

They used brick instead of stone. Bitumen for mortar. They said, Let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

[8 : 47] So up they are building this city. It's going higher and higher because that's what they do. And interestingly, the Lord investigates this city and he has to come down to see it because it actually hasn't got anywhere near him.

He's got to come a long way down to find this city that they think is so elevated. And the Lord judges the Tower of Babel.

And scatters people. So their effort was to reach God by human power and technology.

They were trying to build up to heaven. And it's a story of pride. It's a story of human pride. This is what human pride does. It tries to build up something heaven-like, heavenwards.

And in the end, God scattered and confused this city in his judgment. You've got that back in the book of Romans.

[9 : 54] Back in the book of Genesis. Now then, this is all going wrong. Let's see what I'm trying to do. Okay, so this is further on in history.

Jerusalem wasn't a major city originally, but as history went on, David, King David, took Jerusalem for his headquarters.

And so you've got Jerusalem, Zion, the other word for it. And Babylon stands in opposition to it.

So up here, there's Jerusalem on its mountain. Everybody admired it in its height and in its mountain.

And here, far away, is Babylon, with its rivers and canal systems. And these two cities find themselves in opposition because Babylon is the city which famously attacks the city of God.

[11:09] And as you go through the Bible, the whole question of God's city being strong and cannot be defeated, impregnable, that whole question is raised because the very, very shocking thing is that at a certain point, God says, this city of mine, where I live, where my temple is, don't think that you can live anyhow and do anything and I'll just protect you anyway because I won't.

And God gives 400 years, as it were, of warnings. But in the end, the city is defeated. God's city is defeated by the Babylonians and it's set fire to and it's awful.

And the people of God are taken into exile to Babylon and there they are being taken into exile. And they lived their lives for 70 years as strangers in this enemy city.

That's the story of the Bible. So it's the years of exile. And I think we shouldn't minimize how dramatic that story is. I haven't got time to give you chapter and verse on it, but the idea of God living in a city is a fantastic idea.

And then the idea that God should abandon the city is almost unthinkable. And the idea that God's people should in any sense be able to survive living in the city that attacked them.

[13:03] And then, of course, that God should bring them back, which is the thing they've been looking forward to all the way through. Here are some quotes. So here is from Two Kings.

It's very matter-of-fact and it says, actually, I've just abbreviated it for the purposes of the screen. So let me find the full version and read that to you.

At the end of something like 400 years of patience, we get this very matter-of-fact report.

On the seventh day of the fifth month in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, Zardan, commander of the imperial guard and official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army, under the commander of the imperial guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

[14:07] Nebuchadnezzar, the commander of the guard, carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon.

The commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and the fields. The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands, the bronze sea that were at the temple of the Lord and carried away the bronze to Babylon.

They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, dishes and bronze articles used in the temple service. The commander of the imperial guard took away the censers and the sprinkling bowls and all that were made of pure gold and silver and on it goes and all the things that had been so carefully constructed and so valued and so precious in the service of God item by item are burned, vandalized, destroyed, melted down, taken away.

An appalling thing. An appalling thing. And it was the Babylonians that did it. And no wonder the exiles said, this is Psalm 137, verse 1.

You might know it in terms of a song but this is what they said, by the rivers of Babylon. We sat down and wept when we remembered Zion and our captors said to us, sing us some of those songs that you sing.

[15:43] Sing us some of those psalms. Go on. Sing us a psalm. Sing us one of the songs of Zion. And they said, our captors asked us for songs.

Our tormentors demanded songs of joy. There on the poplars we hung our harps. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

The grief, the heartbreak of being taken from Jerusalem to Babylon and then told to be cheerful. No wonder in the prophetic writings, for example, in Isaiah, there is an emphasis on what God will do to put this wrong situation right.

So I've turned up there, Isaiah 14, verse 22, where he says, and this is not untypical, he says, I will rise up against them, declares the Lord Almighty.

[17:13] I will cut off from Babylon her name and survivors, her offspring and descendants, declares the Lord. I will turn her into a place for owls and swampland.

I will sweep her with the broom of destruction, says the Lord Almighty. So, you see how this fits together. Here is Babylon that has done these terrible things, this city with its pride and its

aggression and God says, I will punish this city.

And in Isaiah 21, sort of looking forward, sort of in a wishful thinking way, but looking forward, Isaiah sees, he says this, day after day, my Lord, I stand on the watchtower, every night I stay at my post. Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses and he gives back the answer. Babylon has fallen. Fallen. All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground.

That's the day they're looking forward to. The day they're looking forward to when the text comes in, when the email comes in, when it goes out on Twitter or as in fact in this case the man on horseback rides by and say, Babylon has fallen.

[18:33] And everybody goes, hooray. It's what they deserve. But, before it falls, what happens to the exiles who live in Babylon?

And that is a very interesting question. It's a very interesting question indeed. Think of Daniel. Do you know Daniel, who was one of the high achievers in Israel?

He would have been on University Challenge I expect for the home side. And he gets taken to Babylon. He and his mates. And what, how will they live there?

I suppose they could be like the Tamil Tigers and while they're there they could be secretly plotting how to explode Babylon, how to poison the water supply, how to continue the battle against Babylon.

they could be doing that. Interestingly, Daniel becomes the right hand man of the big top king, doesn't he? He becomes advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar and at one point he's asked for his advice and he says to the king, O king, live forever.

[19:55] It is interesting, isn't it? Because you might think he should be saying, O king, the sooner you drop dead, the better. Now I realise it would be undiplomatic to say that but I don't think he's saying one thing and meaning another.

Here he is in Babylon and the famous verse that encapsulates this or the famous verse that says this is Jeremiah 29 verse 7 where a letter is sent to the exiles and it's I'll read it a little bit more than I've quoted.

This is what the Lord Almighty says to those I have carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Now notice you wait for him to say explode all the houses, knock down, assassinate all the politicians, just make yourself a complete pain to them.

This is what he says. Build houses, settle down, plant gardens, eat what they produce, marry and have sons of daughters, find wives for your sons, give your daughters in marriage that they too may have sons and daughters, increase in number, do not decrease, also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile, pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Isn't that interesting? There they are in this enemy city, God's taken them there and he says, I want you now to do your best for this city.

[21:31] You don't belong to it, you're there temporarily, but do your best for this city, be a blessing to it, pray for it.

I find that very surprising. And the prophets look forward to the day where that temporary stay in Babylon will be finished.

And there are large amounts of prophetic writing which say one day, one day, one day you'll come home. One day you'll come home.

One day the issue of your sin will be dealt with because they were sent into exile for their sin. We're to understand that. The issue of your sin will be dealt with and you come back home and things will be so different then.

When sin is removed from the land, it'll be like Eden. It'll be like the Garden of Eden again. And the prophets look forward to this.

[22:40] So I've got Isaiah 52. And he's talking about taking back from Babylon the temple furniture that was taken there.

and you'll be able to take it back again and use it for what it was meant to be used for. What a good thing this will be.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, your God reigns.

Listen, your watchmen lift up their voices, together they shout for joy when the Lord returns to Zion, depart, depart, go out from there, go out from Babylon, touch no unclean thing, come out from it

and be pure.

You who carry the vessels of the Lord, but you will not leave in haste or go in flight, for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. Now looking forward to a new, sort of like a new exodus really, leaving Babylon, going home.

[23 : 46] And of course in the time of Jesus, that was the great debate, has this been fulfilled? Are we really home? It doesn't seem to be like Eden, we've got Roman soldiers pushing us into order.

Has the problem of sin really been dealt with? And I would say that it is the key point of the New Testament to say actually you don't go home without Jesus paying the price of sin.

He's the one who brings us home. And home isn't actually geographical. Home is not that we all go back to Jerusalem over there in the Middle East, but we go to the New Jerusalem.

And I think the coming of Jesus sort of expands that vision into its fullness, into what is really the fulfillment of it in the new heaven and the new earth.

Anyway, here's a summary. Babylon was the enemy of God and his people, so I've used the word iconic, meaning if you want to symbolize this in one thing that just says it all, then it would be Babylon.

[25 : 09] Babylon was a city with human culture and technology and power and it took God's people prisoner. Babylon was the place they had to live and to survive, like Daniel did, like Esther did, and all the exiles.

But Babylon was not their home, Jerusalem was their home. And thinking of it geographically, Babylon was in sort of what I think we would now call Iraq.

It is a ruined city, but the spirit of Babylon lives on, which brings us eventually into Revelation 17, because in the book of Revelation he says you need to know about Babylon as I write to you in New Testament times.

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came to me and said, come I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters.

With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries. Babylon and so we've gone on in history now.

[26 : 35] In the time of the Roman empire, God shows John the truth about Babylon. You see in verse 5, this title was written on her forehead, Mystery, Babylon the Great.

I have to be careful, I don't get ahead of myself. She's symbolized as a beautiful woman. In verse 3, the angel carried me away in the spirit into a desert.

There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and seven horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls.

I think she's made up. Do you know what I mean? She looks like she's from the page of a glossy magazine. She has a golden cup in her hand.

She looks so fantastic. You look inside the cup and it's filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The title is written on her forehead, mystery.

[27 : 42] Actually, the word is astonishment. There's lots of astonishment going on. Wonder, amazement, Babylon the Great. She is symbolized as a beautiful woman.

It's a mystery, a secret needing revelation, a wonderful thing. Babylon the Great, mother of all prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth, which is not a complimentary title, is it?

He says, this is the truth about this city. And he goes on to say in 18, verse 2, this angel says what the messenger said in Isaiah.

Do you remember? Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great. And in Isaiah she became a home for various things. And the angel says she's become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.

So the city has become a sort of perverse parody of its former self. She's fallen and in 18.4 another voice from heaven says, come out of her my people.

[29 : 00] Like the prophet said, depart. Come out of her my people so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues for her sins are piled up to heaven.

And in chapter 19 there is a great scene of rejoicing because of the fall of Babylon. Hallelujah they say three or four times.

So that's a sort of summary. So what's it all about? Well mercifully it says John says I'm having a bit of a problem with this, can you explain it to me?

So in verse 6 he says when I saw her I was greatly astonished. The angel said to me why are you astonished? I will explain to you this vision. I'll explain to you the mystery of the woman. So that's great isn't it? So we can look at the explanation. Babylon is seen by John. So he explains it in sections. I'll explain to you verse 7 the mystery of the woman and the beast she rides which has seven heads and ten horns.

[30 : 11] the beast which you saw once was now is not will come out of the abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast because he once was now is not and yet will come.

That's the explanation. Sorry I've got ahead of myself on here. This is out of order. I'm not saying it in the order I've written it.

Here's the picture again then. Here's the beautiful woman. Here's the many waters. There's the beast that seemed to be killed but came alive again. Here are the kings of the earth and they commit adultery with her and this is the text.

Babylon is seen by John. She sits on many waters. She commits prostitution with the global kings and the people. She sits on the scarlet beast. Her identity is revealed but that's more than 20 miles an hour.

She's drunk on the blood of the saints in verse 6. So there you are. There's the saints and the blood goes into the cup. Now then here's the explanation.

[31 : 38] So explanation. The beast she rides. That's the bit I just read. The beast she rides. Well, God is the one who was and is and is to come and the beast is described as the one that once was, now is not, and will come out of the abyss and go to his destruction.

And in verse 8, he once was, now is not, and yet will come. So it's a very sort of a play on the idea of what God is like and the beast is rather like that but isn't.

And this beast is worshipped, is it not? The inhabitants of the earth wonder at the beast. So I'm going to suggest that that wonderment is a sort of respect.

So there's the beast. Christ. And verse 9, it says, this calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits, and there are also seven kings.

Anybody tell us the city which was built on seven hills? Rome, yes, Rome. And there's a succession of kings which gets very, very confusing.

[32 : 55] Five have come, one is, one has not yet come, and so on. And then in verse 12, there's ten horns and he explains it.

There are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom and they fight against the lamb, verse 14. And they fight against, they make war against the lamb, but the lamb will overcome them because he is lord of lords and king of kings and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.

So that's the explanation of that bit. And then the waters, verse 15, the angel said to me, the waters, I'll explain that, the waters where the prostitute sits are the peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.

There's another bit in the book of Revelation where you have all peoples and nations and tongues and languages worshipping the lamb, isn't it, in heaven. So we've got this same group now where this woman operates.

The many waters are these peoples, like the scope of the gospel. And then he also says, and I think this is rather a puzzling bit, that there is an internal division, a fragility about the relationship between the prostitute and the beast.

[34 : 21] It says, they will bring her to ruin and leave her naked. This is verse 16, they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule until God's words are fulfilled.

The woman is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. So that's great, that's an explanation. I can see how revealed you all look, because it seems to me that's an explanation, what sort of explanation is that?

I was expecting something that explained everything and all it's done is just sort of spelt it out in more perplexing detail. So rather than get caught up in too much detail, let's see what we can draw out of it so far.

The woman is a prostitute and she's a city. There's another woman in the book of Revelation who is the bride who is also a city. Jerusalem versus Babylon.

So let me ask you, which city do you belong to? It's a very fundamental question. Which of these two cities is your home?

[35 : 44] So if you were asked to leave Babylon and come out and go home, would you say, yeah, that's what I've been looking forward to doing, or would you say, no, I prefer to stay here.

Which city is your home? Where do you truly belong? Do you belong where the mindset is pride and trying to take the place of God by human technology, by human ingenuity?

Is that the thing that you think? That's the great thing that is. It's very beguiling, very, very enticing. Or would you say, for all of that, in my heart of hearts, I don't belong there.

I belong to the city of God, where God himself rules, where Jesus is the king, where it's done his way, and his purposes, that's where I belong.

Which of those two cities do you belong to? Babylon was still going then, in the time when John was writing, and I'd say it's still going now. And you think, well, no it isn't, because Babylon is a ruin, you just said that.

[37 : 09] But the idea of Babylon, the spiritual dynamic of Babylon, is still going on. And he said to them, you need to think about this.

This calls for a mind with wisdom, and I think it still does. I think it still does, because Babylon calls us, Babylon entices us, but in its deepest, ultimate identity, that city is lethally opposed to God and his people.

If you take it to its logical conclusion, what it's really saying, it's saying, we do this without God, and we don't want God. That's what you're buying into.

And I think this raises huge questions about how we live in Babylon. It's the same questions that Daniel faced. It's the same questions that Esther faced.

How do we live for God in a world which is really committed against God? How do we earn a living?

[38 : 23] How do we address the king? Do we say, O king, may you drop dead? So when we have our hustings tomorrow and all these prospective MPs, if I'm chairing it, should I say, I hope you're going to drop dead as soon as possible, each one of you?

Would that be the Christian thing to do? Or should I be like Daniel and wish them the best? But I have quite a clear idea what the best really is.

The people of God pray for Babylon and serve its best interests. Now the best interests are not what Babylon necessarily thinks are its best interests.

Babylon probably thinks the best interests are to make as much money as possible at any cost, even if it involves steamrolling people's lives and cheating and everything else.

That's not, that might be the agenda that is set, but we're to serve the best interests and for the good. In the city of Babylon, politics is tied with power and false gods, and yet we're shown it's an unstable thing.

[39 : 41] The city has fallen, is what it says there. Do you remember a time ago, a time of Lehman Brothers and so on, that the index in the city of London, the financial index, suddenly plummeted?

and that was the headline, the city has fallen in an hour. It just pew! And that's what chapter 17 says, everybody looks and is amazed at the fragility of this system, which seems so stable.

Although we live within this city, we are not to belong to it, we are temporary residents only. the mystery of Babylon.

Where is your home? Where do you and I truly belong and find our full rest and security? Whoops. Peter says, dear friends, I urge you, this is what he writes in New Testament times, I urge you as foreigners and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. live such lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

[40 : 59] So, in answer to my starting question, I think we're to vote in the best interests of the world in which we find ourselves, but not to set our hearts on the world in which we find ourselves.

that's what I have to offer this morning and we'll look into it some more this evening and we're going to sing a song. of some more some more some more some more some more some more some more some more some more some more