

The End of Evil No.1 - Babylon

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- [0:00] Well, good morning. Let's pray. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, as we look at your word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. And may we hear your word clearly to us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.
- Well, have you ever got a new book and instead of reading it, you naively flick to the last couple of pages to see how it ends?
- Well, I discovered, and especially with books that we were supposed to read at school, that you could fool people into believing you had read the book for a little while.
- But you had to really read the beginning and the middle bit to get the sense of what the book was really talking about.
- Well, Revelation is the last book of the Bible, and it stands as the conclusion of the Bible's story.
- [1:20] The conclusion of God's story of his dealings with his people. The final chapter in God's big design.
- The end of the story of his mission to draw a people to himself. And at the other end of the Bible, the book of Genesis stands as the start of that story.
- And those two books sort of bookend the whole of the Bible. They show how things started and how they will end.
- It began in the garden of God with the tree of life at its center. And in a couple of weeks, we'll see.
- And this is a spoiler alert. Yeah, that it ends in the city of God. With the tree of life. At its center. So I want to look a little bit at the beginning of the book to try and get a sense of what the end of the book is really saying to us today.
- [2:43] So we heard, read a story of the book of, or the story of Babel. But I want to go back a little bit further.
- When Noah came out of the ark, he came with his three sons. And one of those sons was a man named Shem. He's his eldest son.
- Now, Shem is a kind of a funny name to have to give somebody because actually in Hebrew, the word Shem means name.
- So it's almost like on the birth certificate, Noah and his wife, when they're filling it out, when it said, write name here, they wrote name. And now, so that we have the story of these various sons of Noah and all their descendants are listed in.
- But then the story of Shem is interrupted by the story we had read, the story of the Tower of Babel. And so what is going on?
- [3:57] The people in the story, the people of Babel, had built a high tower because they wanted to reach to heaven.
- And so make a name for themselves, a Shem for themselves, if you like. And so God scattered the people to stop this wickedness, this idolatrous foolishness.

Who knows how much they would get up to if he didn't. It's almost an act of mercy. On God's part. But since that time, Babel and after it, Babylon, the city that was built on that same site, became a symbol of those who willfully oppose God and seek instead to make a name for themselves.

You'll remember that it was the Babylonian Empire who, many centuries later, were the ones who invaded the land God had given to his people, destroyed the temple, which was the symbol of God's presence amongst them, and carried God's people off into exile.

They were yet again the opponents of God, seeking to make a name for themselves at the expense of God and God's people. After the story of Babel, the tower, we get a resumption of the story of Shem's family.

[5:44] And it is in the next chapter of Genesis, Genesis chapter 12, that we have the introduction of Abraham, who was a descendant of Shem.

And God makes his famous promises to Abraham. And part of the promise was that God would make Abraham's name, his Shem, great.

Do you see the contrast between the people of Babel and the people of God, represented by Abraham?

Babel stands for human endeavor without God, making a name for themselves. Abraham is described in the Bible as the father of faith, the father of all who have faith.

God's people, who God has promised that he will make their name great. One seeks to forge an identity for themselves that will make them central.

[7:06] The other is given identity from God, and God will be central in their lives. So now to our passage in Revelation.

And we've got two and a half chapters to get through, so I'll be very quick going through it. You may want to follow in the outline.

In Revelation 17, the passage we had read to us, Babylon is depicted as a prostitute who leads many peoples and kings into spiritual adultery, the spiritual adultery of opposing God.

So briefly, I'll just in bullet point form, go through some of the things we can observe about this woman as she appears in chapter 17.

Remember that remembering that she represents this attitude of making a name for herself. We notice where she's sitting.

[8:22] First of all, she's sitting by many waters. And later on in verse 15 of the same chapter, they're identified as peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.

In other words, this woman influences and leads astray a great number and a wide variety of people. She sits on a scarlet beast, which is soon identified as the same beast that we saw back in chapter 13, the beast that opposes God, that is proud and arrogant.

Both Babylon and the beast are agents of Satan, that great dragon as he's depicted. And they work together for God's, for Satan's purposes, even though, as we'll see, they hate each other.

And finally, we're told that she sits on seven hills, which helps us to identify who she is, what she represents. We'll see that in a few minutes.

But she is beautiful and seductive and sophisticated. She's dressed all in very fine, but rather gaudy clothes.

[9:53] She's glamorous. She's very sophisticated with her golden wine cup. But we see that it's actually full of filth.

The filth of her waywardness, her spiritual degradation and rebellion against God. And she makes the inhabitants of the earth, which we saw is a code word for all those who are not believers.

She makes the inhabitants of the earth drunk on this foul brew that she carries in her cup. Although she looks great on the outside, she looks like the aspiration of sophistication.

The content of her cup is disgusting. And her identity is revealed in verse five. She is Babylon.

The mother of all prostitutes and abominations, probably in the sense of being the worst, the most notorious of all prostitutes, the most abominable of all.

[11:14] And of course, by the time John was writing this, the actual city of Babylon was long gone. But Babylon, as we saw, represents all those who oppose God, who try to make their own name great without reference to him.

They are, in effect, setting themselves up as a replacement for God. And for John, as he was writing, Babylon represented Rome in the first instance.

Rome was known as a city built on seven hills. And which we saw that that was where the woman sat. And that identity of the Babylon as Rome is confirmed in verse 18, where it says that she is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.

But since there's a wider symbolism of Babylon, that means that she's still around today. Human beings still, in pride, and with that great arrogance, seek to set themselves up as the center of the universe.

We still do it, don't we? Humans are still drinking the filth of arrogance, self-autonomy without God.

[12:52] Still trying to build their own towers to heaven rather than following the one who created the heavens and the earth. We're still all trying to make names for ourselves apart from God.

Another thing about this woman is that she that she is opposed to God. Verse 6 says that she is drunk on the blood of God's people, delighting in their suffering.

You see, at the heart of evil in the world is opposition to the Lamb and to His people. And in fact, verses 12 to 14 talk about the horns of the beast along with the woman waging war against the Lamb.

But it's a no contest, actually. Verse 14 says that the Lamb will naturally triumph because He is the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings.

He's supreme. And of course He wins together with His called, faithful, and chosen people. And in the vision, John is told of the final fate of this woman.

[14:23] The beast who hates her will turn on her. He will ruin her. He will strip her naked. He will eat her. He will burn her. God uses evil's destructive nature to destroy itself and so fulfill His judgments.

But you see, humans are not actually God. And all attempts to make us so are deemed to failure, doomed to failure.

They will be judged by God. No matter how seductive, no matter how right, such attempts to make humans the center look like.

Even mighty Rome was doomed to failure and to judgment because she put herself in place of God.

God. And so we move into chapter 18 and the first few verses, the first three verses of chapter 18, the end of Babylon the great is declared.

[15:39] It's proclaimed by an angel from God. But of course, it hasn't quite happened yet.

And so in 18, verse 4, we have a call that is a warning to God's people. 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.

this is the warning is the same one the prophet Jeremiah made many years before, before the at the time of the real non-metaphorical Babylon.

Flee from Babylon. Sorry, I've gone too far. Flee from Babylon. Run for your lives.

Do not be destroyed because of her sins. It's time for the Lord's vengeance. He will repay her what she deserves. And he goes on, Babylon was a gold cup in the Lord's hand.

[16 : 49] She made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine. Therefore, they have now gone mad. Babylon will suddenly fall and be broken, wail over her.

You see, we are to be a holy people in the midst of a sinful and seductive world. We are reminded this several places in the New Testament, including the whole letter of 1 Peter is all about that because as sophisticated and all pervasive as the message of Babel is, that is, rebellion against God, it's going to be judged.

and we read that in verse 8. I've got ahead of myself.

anyhow, you can see it in verse 8. Her plagues will overtake her.

She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord who judges her. love and what follows in verses 9 to 20 of chapter 18 is a threefold lament over the fall of Babylon.

[18 : 20] I won't go through it in detail, but it comes from those people who were personally invested in the success of the great prostitute.

Their woes are entirely self-interested. The kings with their power and privilege that rides on the back of human-centered power-grabbing. The merchants and the traders who make their wealth out of exploitation, even to the point of trading slaves, based on the premise that human pleasure is the greatest good.

And they suddenly realize that it all comes to naught when that idolatry is judged. And then we get verse 20, which you have in front of you.

While those who ride on the coattails of evil systems, buying into that evil themselves, lament, the people of God rejoice. we shouldn't be ashamed of rejoicing at the end of evil.

There is joy because God's justice prevails. chapter 18 finishes with verses 21 to 24 pronouncing the finality of Babylon's defeat.

[19 : 49] There is a final judgment symbolized by throwing a huge boulder into the sea. It's all gone. Babylon. And all the good things that Babylon held out as a promise are all finished.

Music and joy and trade and work and profit and celebration and all the good times. They all vanish if they're based on the promise of Babylon.

Babylon. wherever there's worship of human achievement, wealth and power, there is Babylon and it will be judged and punished.

Now as I said, in the first instance for John, this was represented by the city of Rome and it's hard for us to imagine quite how radical this message would have been to the how far fetched it must have seemed for John's readers.

Christianity was a small and relatively insignificant part of public life. And the Roman Empire was large and mighty and magnificent and majestic.

[21 : 12] It was all powerful. It was the superpower. Could the God of the Christians, the God, the Lamb who was slain, weak as they are, really triumph over the all-powerful superpower that was Rome, the Babylon of her day?

How could it possibly be true? And yet it did come true, didn't it? it? And it will come true wherever Babylon is found.

She will be judged until that final day when she is judged with finality. chapter 18 ends on a pretty grim note.

It's a grim note of judgment and it's a hard message for those who persist in worshipping human achievement, power and wealth.

But that's not where the passage today ends because we move in to chapter 19. And chapter 19 starts and our reading ends with a threefold hallelujah to balance the threefold woes of chapter 18.

[22 : 39] The woes over the demise of the beast and the woman and of Babylon. But this hallelujah also introduces another woman.

The bride of the lamb who stands in stark contrast to the great prostitute. In verses 1 and 2 God's praised because he's answered the prayers of the martyrs who pleaded with God to avenge their blood.

Do you remember way back in chapter 6 the voices of the martyrs cried from beneath the altar for God to avenge their blood.

Here it is. Hallelujah because God keeps his promises. His judgment is sure.

God is praised again in verse 3 to 4 because his justice has prevailed and evil has been defeated.

[23 : 58] And again our minds are called back to chapters 4 and 5 where the throne room of God is in focus and the elders and the winged creatures join in the worship.

And then a third round of praise starts. And it's an exhortation first of all to praise God coming from the throne of God himself for all God's people to praise him which they proceed to do.

And there's a great voice. And the reason for the praise is because of this other woman. Whereas the prostitute represented the city of Babylon the city of rebellion this woman represents the new Jerusalem the place of God.

So the prostitute with all her gaudiness is dressed in fine linen and purple and scarlet and glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls.

She's all done up. We see back in chapter 18. And she's identified as the abominable Babylon.

[25 : 28] woman. But this woman, this other woman, is pure. She's dressed simply and elegantly, also in fine linen.

she's bride of the land. God's people who will be, as I say, identified as the new Jerusalem, the very dwelling place of God.

See, the contrast is so striking between these two women. And note, this woman is given her fine linen.

She doesn't take it and put it on, grab it for herself. No, she's given it. And John makes the point of making it very clear that this represents the righteous acts of God's people.

God's church adorns herself in righteous acts, but they don't come from God's people's own efforts or for her own merit. It's not there to make a name for themselves.

[26 : 47] it's given to them by God. It's all to God's glory. What a contrast. But also, what a thought.

The righteous acts of God's people. We today, this week, what we do can be part of dressing the bride's lamb in beauty by the things we do and the things we say.

the attitudes we have. That's mind-blowing. But it's also a challenge, isn't it? And John was overcome and he dropped to the ground in worship to the angel who had shown him all these things.

The angel rejects that worship and instead urges him worship God for it's the spirit of prophecy that bears testimony to Jesus.

The complete opposite to make a name for myself attitude, isn't it? Worship God. God. This trinitarian statement is almost a summary of the whole message of the book of Revelation in a sentence.

[28:15] We've come a long way from the self-aggrandizing, self-worshipping, look at me, make a name for myself, attitude of Babel and Babylon to the humble worship of God alone before the throne of God.

God, we as Christian people are to resist the seduction of human centered worship and turn to God alone in adoration and praise.

Let's pray. Lord God, our heavenly father, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you that we can, we are, have the privilege of being able to live you centered lives rather than us centered lives.

And we thank you that that's what we were designed for, that's what we were built for, and we pray that we would be people who are faithful in that. To the glory of Jesus' name, Amen.