

The Tale of Two Cities: The City of Blood

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Almighty God and loving Father, we thank you so much for your word to us. We thank you for your word concerning your son.

We thank you for this great news announced in our passages that we're looking at tonight. And Father, we pray that we might live in the light of it. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, tonight, friends, I want to introduce you to someone. To meet him, you'll need to travel in your imagination. Let's imagine we can time travel for a moment.

We travel back in time. Way, way back, back to the time of Noah. You know, Noah, he was born into a time when God saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become.

He had seen that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was evil all the time. It was a time when God regretted that he had even made humans. And when his heart was deeply grieved.

[1 : 00] And when he determined that he'd wipe out all humans from the face of the earth. But you remember that in that time he found one man. Noah. Who found favor in his eyes.

And through whom God preserved the world. He, his children, their wives survived. They fulfill the creation mandate and they bear fruit and increase after the flood.

From there come 70 nations or people groups. And they are listed in Genesis. And it's at this time that we find the man to whom I want to introduce you.

His name is Shem. Now, although some translations create ambiguity. It appears as though Shem was the first born son of Noah.

Now, let me tell you something about Shem's name. Shem's name means name. It's an odd thing to call a son, isn't it? Name. But that's where we are.

[2 : 01] That's what Noah and his wife do. They call their son Name. Shem. I wonder if it might actually be because he carries the name. Of that family. Anyway, before we explore the descendants of Shem.

We should just stop for a moment and remember an incident that happens around about this time. That is around about the time of Shem. Or just after him. Have a look.

Open your Bibles at Genesis chapter 11. It's a spectacular story. It's one you'll all know when we get to it. But look at it. Genesis 11 verses 1 to 10. It is a story about humans banding together under one language.

They find the plain of Shinar and they settle there. And together they make a city. And I want you to notice those special things about the city.

It is a very human endeavor building this city, isn't it? It is humans banding together. It is designed to stretch to the heavens. That is, I think it is a story about humans who have pretensions at being God.

[3 : 08] Look at verse 4. They want to make a name for themselves. That is, they want to make a Shem for themselves. But God sees their pretensions and he confuses their language.

They stop building the physical city, but it gets a name. Its name is Babel. It's what happens when you get such a large group of people together.

Later, we will know it to be Babylon. And it will become associated throughout scripture with human pretension. With humans stretching up to forge their own destiny under the overarching reign of God.

But they won't want to be under the overarching reign of God. They want to be independent from it. It is humans making a name for themselves. That is what Babylon means. To be independent from God.

But the story doesn't end there. You see, we interrupted the story of Shem for their story. But now in verse 10, we take up the story of Shem again.

[4 : 16] And as we read on, we are told where the line of Shem ends up. Can you see it there? Just scan through the rest of chapter 10, chapter 11. Look ahead. It gets to Terah in chapter 11, verse 26.

And then it gets to Abram. And it looks like it might be a dead end for the line of Shem at that point. After all, the wife of Abram, Sarai, is barren.

Now look at chapter 12. The Lord intervenes. And he promises Abram a land. He calls Abram. He promises him a land. And he promises him many children. In fact, he promises that he will make him a great nation.

And blessing will flow. But look at the second half of verse 2. It's yet more of a play on words. He promises him that he will make his Shem great.

Do you see that? He'll make his Shem great. From the line of Shem will come a great Shem.

Friends, do you hear what the writer is telling us?

[5 : 23] Wanting us to hear? He wants to tell us that human sinful disposition will find its focus in humans wanting to make their name great. But God will counter that.

He will counter by making a name great from Shem's line. Now friends, you all know where this ends up, don't you? It ends up with David, the descendant of Abram.

It ends up with God's presence being situated in the city of David. In Jerusalem, in Zion. And it finally ends up with Jesus who is Emmanuel God with us.

Friends, in order to understand what is going to happen in the next chapter of Revelation, you need, in my view, to know this little bit of information, this story, this story from Shem's line, this story about the builders on the plain.

For if you don't understand that, you will not understand the rest. You will not understand the chapters that we are getting to. You see, from Babel flows a city, Babylon.

[6 : 28] It is a city against the heavens, set against God. And from Shem there also flows a city. It is Jerusalem, the place where the temple is.

That is the place where God dwells. And this is fulfilled in and through the person of Jesus. He is the temple of God. And so also is the church of God.

For as we have seen, Jesus dwells in the midst of his church. He walks around amongst it. And now in your Bibles you need to turn to Revelation 17. So flip through from the beginning of the Bible to the end.

Revelation 17. But before we pick up our story, I'd just like to give you my little revised structure there of the book, having slightly changed where I see the break occurring. I think the next section runs from verse 1 of chapter 17 to verse 10 of chapter 19.

But I also want you to notice that I think that the seven bowls have parallels with the seven trumpets. Can you see that there? Seven bowls parallel to seven trumpets.

[7 : 34] Whoops. I've just lost my glasses, which won't do. I'm sorry. Did I say that? Seven seals. Yep. No, that's right. Seven bowls are parallel with seven trumpets.

But I also want you to notice that I think. Sorry, let me start again. Also, I think that the seven seals have parallels with this.

This chapter we're going to look at now with the city of blood. And that is particularly clear if we include the introductory comments. In chapters 4 and 5 to the seals being broken.

For example, if we look at those two stories set together, John is told to come up in both. John has an in the spirit experience in both.

The scene of heavenly worship in the first is contrasted with earthly idolatry and blasphemy and false worship in the second. The lamb receives glory and honor and power in the first, while Babylon receives ignominy and destruction in the second.

[8 : 41] There's a series of devastating judgments on humankind in the first. And then these are matched by a series of laments over the destruction of Babylon in the second. The 144,000 are sealed at the end of the first.

That is matched by the marriage of the lamb to his bride in the second. And both result in shouts of praise from the multitude at God's great salvation.

So I think these are a matching pair. Okay, now let's get down to work with the details and let's look at what happens. First, one of the angels who was caught up in the devastating judgments of the seals comes to John and shows him some more.

And now we had met the first woman back in chapter 12, haven't we? Do you remember the first woman? She was clothed with the sun. Do you remember her? The moon was under her feet. And she had a crown of 12 stars.

She was pregnant. And she is pursued by an enormous red dragon. And now there is a totally different sort of woman. Anyway, this angel that is spoken to John and spoken to us has great authority.

[9 : 51] He's clothed with splendor. Did you notice that? It's the first one really amongst the angels to look like this. And sure enough, just like the angels of the bowls, the judgment of punishment continues.

And he says, come, I will show you the punishments of the great prostitute who sits by many waters. If you skim down to verse 15, you'll notice that many waters actually stands for many peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.

So here she is. She is the great prostitute who has an audience of many nations, many peoples, many languages, multitudes.

If you look at verse 5, you'll see she is named. She is Babylon the great. Now, even in scripture, Babylon represents is represented by numerous.

In numerous parts of the Bible, sometimes she's called Babel. Genesis chapter 11. Sometimes she's called Babylon itself. Daniel and Jeremiah. Sometimes she's seen to be sort of imperial.

[10 : 59] That is of Rome as she is in one Peter chapter five, verse 13. Sometimes she's even seen to be the seven cities of Asia. She is, I think, any city in any age that has similar characteristics to Babel.

Does that make sense? That is who Babylon is. Any city, any power in any age that has similar characteristics to Babel. So there she is.

The climactic great city. A city where the kings of the earth commit adultery. I suspect this means spiritual adultery. That is, rather than worshipping and serving the true and living God, they commit adultery with this harlot, this representative of a false god.

They are intoxicated with what she offers. And there is more identifying markers for Babylon.

Apparently, the scene of her judgment is the wilderness.

There she sits on the scarlet beast who has all the marks of being the same beast we met back in chapter 13. What I think it means is that the great prostitute and the great beast work together.

[12 : 15] They are in cahoots with each other, as it were. Look at the picture of the wealth of the woman. There is this mix of great might and power, the beast, with pleasure and wealth, the prostitute.

Now, let me say that combination is not unusual or uncommon in our contemporary world, is it? That is, great might and power mixed with pleasure and wealth. Particularly if there is a sexual innuendo associated with it.

Look at the picture of the wealth of the woman. By the way, just that picture again of enormous wealth and might and power, pleasure and wealth.

That has enormous potential, doesn't it? To suck in and intoxicate enormous numbers of worshippers, doesn't it?

If you get someone parading around with those things at their hand, the potential is enormous. But there is one more characteristic of this anti-God prostitute and her power.

[13 : 20] It's spelled out in verse 6. It is her most heinous crime. It is her participation in the persecution of the holy people of God, those who bear witness to Jesus. And you can understand why those things might be linked, can't you?

Because if you've got great might and power, if you've got pleasure and wealth, who wants to hear the gospel of Jesus and have people talking about it? And telling you it's wrong?

No one does who has that power. The second part of the verse tells us that the portrait of the harlot astonishes John. The angel asks, come on, why are you so astonished?

And he offers to explain the mystery of the woman and the beast to him. Friends, this section is a minefield for those who want to identify the beast. Now let me tell you, there are undoubtedly some allusions to Rome.

Undoubtedly. However, there are problems with thinking that this exhausts the content of these verses. After all, the woman or the city is filled with blood and not just of believers, but also those who have killed the earth.

[14:50] Also, the city is named elsewhere as Sodom, Egypt and even Jerusalem as well as Babylon. Now, if we understand Babel in Genesis 11, that's why I started where I started.

If you understand Babel in Genesis 11, you'll understand this woman. She is all powers in all time who seek to make a name for themselves and seek to divorce themselves from God and seek independence from him.

She is the kingdom of this world. She is worldliness incarnate. She is all those who band together and set themselves defiantly against God and say, I want to make a name for myself.

She is who? She is the one who hates the word of God, despises his son, persecutes his people and is allied with the evil one.

With evil and the evil one. Please understand what I'm saying. You see, this prophecy, this piece of apocalyptic, this testimony, this letter are like all similar pieces of scripture.

[16:00] They are designed by a human author for a particular situation. They therefore speak to that situation. They have real echoes of that situation. Hence, it's not unexpected.

We hear echoes of things they know. Rome. However, friends, it is designed to speak to all God's people in all ages. Those who confine this letter to one age cause it not to do what God intends scripture to do.

To speak to all people, all his people in all ages. It was written for the seven churches who received it, predominantly for them, as it were. But it was written for other first century people who would read it as well.

And it was written for us. And it is particularly written for those upon whom the last days will come. Well, the last days have started from the time of Jesus himself, of course. But those very last days. Now, let's turn to chapter 18. This chapter is a myriad of allusions to Old Testament passages about Babylon and other cities that fall because of God's wrath.

[17:04] They include Tyre in Ezekiel chapter 27. And Babylon in Jeremiah 50 and 51. The angel in this situation is noted for his authority and splendor.

Clearly, this is a special angel here. Clearly, his message is something extraordinary. And with a mighty voice, he just shouts it out. Fallen! Fallen! Is Babylon the great!

Just as she was unclean, so will her successes be. Demons. Impure spirits. Look at the text. Unclean birds.

That is, those who occupy the space she occupied. Detestable animals. Her reach, you see, in the world had been overwhelming. All nations had drunk from her maddening, sorry, the maddening wine of her adulteries.

The merchants of earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries. She was not only immoral and ungodly, so were those who were associated with her. But then, another voice cries out from heaven.

[18:10] Chapter 18, 4 to 8. Come out! 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.

You see, the call is clear to the people of God. Do not line up with the harlot and her ways. Do not be sucked in by her wealth and power. And sexual immorality.

Friends, be separate, is what is being said. Come out! Friends, this is the call that God has given to all his people in every age. We are not to participate in the ways of the world.

I don't think that means we are not to sort of find our own little hidey hole where we can sin with other Christians. Or whatever. Do you know what I mean? Where we still fall into sin because we're still sinful human beings.

But no, not to allow the dominant force in our life to be the prostitute and the beast. We are not to participate in the ways of the world.

[19:15] We are to come out of her and be separate. Friends, I want you to take special note of verse 5 here. It shows us that Babel is never far from the surface of this story.

And that our starting point in the story was the right one. You see, we're told that Babylon's sins have piled up to the heaven. Can you hear the building language?

They've piled up to the heaven. And he has seen. They've come to his notice. And God has remembered her crimes.

In the Old Testament, fire was an integral part of war. And so it is recorded here as part of God's way on the harlot. She had boasted. And God will meet her arrogance with plagues, death, mourning, famine, and consumption by fire.

And now we come to verses 9 to 20. Friends, one of the reasons that Babylon worked was that she offered people what they wanted. Sexual gratification.

[20 : 22] Luxury. Might. Wealth and trade. All sorts of great goods. And goods that were traded at the expense of others.

Look at the particularly telling end of the list. It's there in verse 13. Human beings sold as slaves. Literally it reads, bodies and souls of men.

That is, their whole beings. Their souls as well as their bodies. They've been traded around the world.

Friends, there is a profound self-centeredness in those dirges. See the dirges of chapter 18?

They're sung by the various key merchants around the world. By the sailors and so on.

By all those who trade. There's a profound self-centeredness about them. They had benefited from what Babylon gave them. They didn't mind that it cost.

[21 : 23] They didn't mind that it cost others. Friends, this is not the mark of us, the people of God. You see, the people of God are the slaves of Christ.

Who was their slave and gave his life for them. So their disposition, our disposition is different. We do not do what these people did. And so in verse 20, we can rejoice at the end of such evil.

Rejoice over her, you heavens. Rejoice, you people of God. Rejoice, apostles and prophets. For God has judged her. And with the judgment she imposed on you.

Friends, I beg you. Don't be afraid of rejoicing at the end of evil. Oh, I know it will have a human face to it. But don't be afraid of rejoicing at it.

Wickedness needs destruction. And it will get it. And it will get it from a God who is just. And who hates evil.

[22 : 26] And who will do it reluctantly. And those who love God and love good will rejoice at the end of those who do evil. And they'll rejoice that God has judged.

Friends, this judgment spoken of here I don't think has yet happened. But it will. God will surely judge. Now we turn to verse 21.

A mighty angel picks up a boulder the size of a large millstone. And he throws it into the sea. And hauntingly, he recalls the end of the great city Babylon.

He says she'll never be found again. And in contrast to the former festivity, there's a dirge sung. It captures an emptiness now.

No music. No harpists playing. No pipers. No trumpeters. No workers.

[23 : 24] No sound of working. No lights. No joyful voices of bridegroom and bride. None of the good things in life are left.

None of the sounds of life are there. None of the joys of life are present. She who is great has now diminished beyond recognition.

But look at the closing firm words of judgment. She led astray the nations. But more importantly, in her was found the blood of God's people.

Of God's prophets. Of God's holy people. And all of those who have been slaughtered on the earth. We can't, of course, end there.

I was going to end there. I thought, it's a bit dark, isn't it? And I'm not sure that the passage actually ends there anyway. So let's go on to chapter 19. This is 1 to 10.

[24 : 24] The dirge suddenly changes. You know, you've got this end of chapter 11. And it's dark. It's empty. It's really sombre. And then it turns into multiple hallelujahs.

Can you see it? Let's listen to it again. And let's soak it in. Because it's just fantastic. After this I heard what sounded to me like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting, Hallelujah!

Salvation and glory and power belong to our God for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.

And again they shouted, Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever. The 24 elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who was seated on the throne.

And they cried, Amen! Hallelujah! And then a voice comes from the throne saying, Praise our God, all you servants, you who fear him both great and small.

[25 : 26] And then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters, and like loud peals of thunder shouting, Hallelujah! For our Lord God almighty reigns.

And then God's response to the dead prostitute is announced. The great multitude meets the grieving and mourning over a dead prostitute in 17 and 18 with gladness over a bride of different nature.

Let us rejoice and be glad. For the wedding of the Lamb has come. And his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. Fine linen, of course, stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people. Friends, the imagery, particularly in contrast, is so stark and profound, isn't it?

Joy. Purity. Intimacy. Love. Again, in fulfillment of the prophets. The contrast with the absences and the corpses of the previous chapters is profound.

[26 : 40] Now friends, let me tell you that the news of the accomplishments of this chapter are, in my view, overwhelming. For a start, in the face of hands raised toward heaven and gross immorality and worldliness, this chapter is overwhelming, isn't it?

Just as God judged Babel, so he will judge all similar attempts, either by humans, by spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places, and anyone, anything else that might attempt it.

They will not succeed. The kingdom of God will win over the kingdom of man. There are no uncertainties about this at all.

If there are uncertainties in your mind, it is not fed well by the word of God, for God has no uncertainties. The result was announced in the third chapter of the Bible.

Where a serpent will strike a child's heel, but the offspring of the woman will squash his head. It was prefaced in the 11th chapter, where humans lifted themselves up against God and God spread them.

[28 : 05] It was assured in the death of Jesus on the cross 2,000 years ago. Now, friends, we rightly worry about our world. And I've mentioned already a number of times in these last few weeks that we rightly worry about the dark times we are entering.

For I think we are. It is possible that things might get worse toward the end. However, let me tell you that no matter how long that end takes, it is assured.

The persecuted woman in the wilderness will survive. The 144,000 sealed ones will be victorious.

It may take 42 months. That is a time cut short. But it will surely come. And we will be able to repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat the hallelujahs as they did in chapter 19, 1 to 10.

The wedding of the lamb will come. The future will work its way toward its God-ordained future. This is the word of God and it can be trusted. However, you'll notice that the book of Revelation hasn't finished yet.

[29 : 17] We have a journey still to go on. There's still a problem remaining. I wonder if you've spotted it. Have you spotted the problem? Did you see it?

We may have a wedding to go to, but there's a shadow over it. Did you see it? We've had the woman dealt with. But there's still a beast hanging around, as you'll see.

And there's still the one behind the two of them. The serpent. And there is still the judgment of the living and the dead to come.

And they will come. So there's still a problem remaining, which we need to see resolved. And you'll have to come on Sunday night for that. But I want to close with a reading from Matthew chapter 25. So I'd like you to look it up with me. Matthew 25.

[30 : 22] Matthew 25. We read. At that time, the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps, but didn't take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.

And the bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. And at midnight, the cry rang out, here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him.

You can almost hear the hallelujahs, can't you? And then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish ones said to the wise, give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out. No, they replied.

There may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves. But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived.

[31 : 20] And the virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later, the others also came. Lord, Lord, they said, open the door for us.

But he replied, truly, truly, I tell you, I don't know you. Therefore, keep watch. Because you do not know the day or the hour. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the wedding of the Lamb. And we do look forward to it. For that will be a wedding above all weddings. That will be a time when our hearts are filled with joy.

Perhaps overwhelmed with relief. But certainly filled with joy. And Father, we pray that you'd prepare us and keep us.

So that we might be ready to meet that day. Rightly. Father, we thank you that you are the judge of evil. Father, we know, though, that if you are the judge of evil, you see our hearts as well.

[32 : 42] So please, this night, we pray, forgive us. But Father, we want to hear the message of this passage. Please, this day, help us to remember the coming of your Son.

And the marriage of the Lamb. And equip us so that we might be there. And Father, we know there's only one way to be equipped for that.

And that is to believe in your Son. So please help us to do that. And to not give that up. Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.