

A Funeral, a Party, and a Wedding

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[0 : 00] I think you'll find it helpful if you turn open that long passage, Revelation 18 to 19.10, page 1038, 1039, 1040, it sounds like bingo. And I know it's a long passage and lots of details, and the longer we go in Revelation, the better I think it is to read longer sections.

What's overwhelming about this, and I hope you caught this as we read it, is the sheer extremity of emotion. It goes from the deepest devastation of grief to the heights of happy joy and lasting pleasure.

Chapter 18 is a funeral, the death of Babylon. There's despair, there's weeping, there's horror. And chapter 19 is a wedding, and there's lots of laughing and joy and feasting. And both the grief and the gratitude take their rise from exactly the same event, the fall of Babylon, God's judgment on Babylon, the great prostitute.

And I remind you that Babylon is a symbol, it's a Bible symbol, remember taken from the story of the Tower of Babel, the first deliberate attempt by humanity to construct a positive city and civilization and culture without any need for God, to exclude God from it. And there was just a tremendous unity and togetherness with humanity. They were going to build a tower and create this human culture where we define what it is to be human, where we define who we are, we define what's right and wrong.

And last week, if you were here, I referenced Craig Gay's wonderful book, *The Way of the Modern World, Why It's Tempting to Live as Though God Does Not Exist*. And he wonderfully explains how our modern social institutions, particularly the political life, democratic theory, science and technology, and market economy, have succeeded, where many who hate Christianity have failed, that we have created a culture where God is at best irrelevant.

[2 : 30] That all of our social structures and institutions import this assumption of atheism, and they teach us, and the institutions we've set up now reinforce this idea that Babel, the Babel way of thinking, the Babel mindset that God is just, he's just not relevant.

And the reason I mention it is because Revelation 18 is about the end of all economies. It's the end of Babylon. And it teaches us that our lives are far more significant than our net worth.

And that we don't live in this flat world of economic calculations, but we live in a very big world surrounded by angels and surrounded by heaven itself.

And it's a great chapter. These are great chapters. They show us how Babylon uses money to seduce and to imprison and to dehumanize and to flatten us and ultimately to kill us.

And it compares the empty promises of wealth with the reality of heaven. And at the heart of the chapters is a command.

[3 : 40] You know why preachers talk about these things? In Greek, when there's a command, it's a big five alarm bell warning.

There are not so many commands in the Bible, if you can believe that. So when there's a command, it's very important. And the command comes to us in verse 4. In other words, he's saying to the people of God, come out of Babylon.

And I hope you agree with me that that sounds completely unrealistic and out of touch with reality. Doesn't it? I mean, you might say, okay, yes, I struggle with greed and I compromise a bit with Babylon.

I'm too anxious about money. Yes, I give my money away resentfully and grudgingly and calculatingly and not very generously. But to come out of Babylon?

I mean, come on. I've got investments. What do you mean? Do you mean we should all move out to the middle of Canada and set up some sort of commune?

[4 : 51] Well, of course, no. I mean, the whole book of Revelation, purpose of Revelation is to encourage us to follow Christ as faithful witnesses here in Babylon.

In fact, it tells us that God fulfills his purposes through his people as we live in Babylon. So what does the angel mean?

Come out of her. He explains in the very next phrase. He says, come out of her. Take no part in her sins. And there's a very big little word in there. It's literally have no fellowship with her in her sins. Fellowship. Big Bible word about union and about communion and about marriage and intimacy and where our heart lies. So the command is not to physically leave Babylon, but to live in Babylon and to draw our true love and our true fellowship from Christ Jesus.

It's to live here with our treasure there. And I don't think that's at all straightforward. And it's much more searching and much more tricky.

[6 : 02] Because how do you know when you're living here trying to follow Jesus Christ that your heart is more committed to Babylon and more committed to him? And so I want to look with you because the chapters give us some clues along these lines.

Chapter 18 and chapter 19. Firstly, fellowship with Babylon, chapter 18, ends in a funeral. And in chapter 19, we'll see that fellowship with the lamb ends in a wedding.

So let's look at the funeral, which ends in a dirge. And the first thing that happens is a massive angel with authority and glory announces in verse 2, fallen, fallen is Babylon.

And what immediately follows is an astonishing outpouring of grief. Weeping and wailing from the kings of the earth, verse 9. Weeping and mourning from the merchants of the earth, verse 11.

And in verse 19, everyone involved in trade, both great and small, verse 19, they throw dust on their heads as they weep and they mourn and they cry.

[7 : 09] This is not quiet grieving. This is loud, full-throated despair and desolation. It's bitterness beyond belief. And why is it?

Well, we're told a couple of times because they take their fellowship with money. In verse 15, they gain their wealth from her. In verse 19, they grow rich by her wealth.

But the angel wants us to know more about this. He wants us to know there's something about the power of money over us that brings with it a unique desolation. It messes around with our hearts and our hopes as we begin to try and draw our fellowship and our significance from money and from wealth.

And the angel draws us into two things in two directions. He tells us, this passage tells us, that fellowship with money, the fellowship of money is slavery.

It doesn't come across quite. But in the Greek, in verse 2, just after saying fallen, the angel says, And the word for haunt is literally the word prison.

[8 : 26] A cage. Because we're made for God and we're made to love him. And if we give our love, and if we give out the fellowship of our hearts to anything other than God, what we do is we create a cage for ourselves.

And we love our cages. You know, we decorate them and we say they're fantastic. But in the end, they just become dark and unclean. Do you know, sociologists call modern economic life the iron cage.

They say we've trapped ourselves in systems of technological efficiency. Our values and our beliefs reinforce the view that our lives are determined by calculations, by pragmatic.

It used to be rational economic factors. They're no longer rational. We're all born inside this cage and it's hard to imagine a life outside. Do you know, I've met a lot of people, I've never met someone who believes they're enslaved to money.

We all think we have it pretty well under control, don't we? This is a much more searching question. Where is our true communion? Where is the gravity of our hearts?

[9 : 42] Is it more attached to this world or to the next? First, what gives our heart comfort and what gives our heart energy? What motivates us? Is it what money can buy or is it the love of Christ?

Because fellowship with wealth and fellowship with Babylon is a slavery. And secondly, the passage teaches us that fellowship with Babylon consumes us.

You become a consumable. She's the great prostitute, remember from last week. She offers us love and intimacy. She's got no intention of giving us anything.

Wealth doesn't love you. Wealth wants to use you. Look at how she speaks in verse 7. We get to listen inside her heart in verse 7.

She says in her heart, the second half of the verse, I sit as a queen. I am no widow. Mourning I shall never see. See, she glorifies herself.

[10:44] And every relationship is a financial transaction for her. Just for her own glory's sake. And she says, I am no widow. I was never married. I never intended to give my heart away to anyone.

The only thing that matters to me, she says, is my own glory and my own luxury. Luxury, luxury, luxury comes through the passage. It's one of the favourite words in Vancouver advertising right now.

Luxury. And here it has sexual overtones, which means that having fellowship with her is not innocent. Or as it says in verse 3, all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.

Kings of the earth have committed immorality with her. The merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her. Luxury. I mean, growing rich seems innocent enough, doesn't it?

I mean, isn't that the whole purpose of life in Vancouver? Isn't it why we live here? To get enough money to do the things I want? I mean, nobody says that they love money for its own sake, do they?

[11:52] And I think that's the point. Nobody loves Babylon for her own sake, only for what we can get out of her. And she has no intention of loving you, only for what she can get out of you.

And what she offers is false joy, false security, because material possessions, we know this, they never last. So fellowship with Babylon is like two ticks sucking on each other, and it just doesn't end well.

And the tragedy in chapter 18 is that many will realise this too late. I mean, this is a chilling taste of what's going to happen on the day of judgment. And on that day, those who've given their lives to money and their hearts to fellowship with Babylon, both great and small, wealthy and poor alike, will weep and wail, because what looked so permanent, it's just going to disappear, it's going to be judged.

What beggars belief for the merchants and the kings is the suddenness and the completeness of the overthrow. Three times they say, alas, alas, in a single hour your judgments have come.

And we say to ourselves, it just can't happen like this, can it? I mean, yes, we've left God completely out of the picture, but we've got blocks of nations waiting to make deals, trading partnerships.

[13:18] I mean, that's never going to disappear. Sure, we've made ourselves rich and we've bought all sorts of nice, shiny new things, and we haven't thought very hard about how it affects anyone, but we've invested in ethical funds.

And all the economists and all the king's men have assured us that the infrastructure is there, that it's just going to keep growing, and nothing can take this all away. But it's at the point of her death we see something of the true colour of that relationship, because three times the kings and merchants say, or we're told, that they stand as far away from her as they possibly can.

They don't grieve her, so they don't try and give her comfort and relief. They don't try and help her. They recognise their own complicity.

There's no grace in Babylon. There's no love for the best of others. Just more guilt, more anxiety, more fear. And even though they wish to save their own skins, the terrible thing is there's no repentance toward God, only more slavery, more fear, and consuming guilt.

It's a terrible picture. Fellowship with Babylon leads to the funeral. And now we need to switch gears, because fellowship with the bride, fellowship with the lamb, I'm sorry, ends in a wedding.

[14:41] Because there's a second command in chapter 18, and it's in verse 20. Verse 20, the command is, Rejoice over her, over Babylon, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her.

Now, this is not taking pleasure in the suffering of others. It's not bragging, you know, we were right and they were wrong. This shows the outcome of lives that believe that Christ alone is to be loved for his own sake, that he alone is worthy.

Why is it a good thing for Babylon to be judged? Why should we be merry at the destruction? The passage gives us at least three reasons.

First, because there's a terrible human cost to the wealth of Babylon. You can see something of this in the cargo list in verses 12 and 13.

I mean, it's a catalog of opulence and decadence, gold and silver and jewels. But the last two items at the end of verse 13 give the game away.

[15:58] It reads, and slaves, you see, horses, chariots, and slaves, that is human souls. And in the Greek, it's literally bodies and souls of humans.

The practical atheism that's so readily assumed and embedded in market capitalism has to strip away our true humanity because we learn how to put a price on each other.

We talk about net worth. Karl Marx, who was the founder of communism, he called this the alchemy of gold.

I quote from Das Kapital. He says, gold does not disclose what has been transformed into it.

Everything, he says, commodity or not, is convertible into gold.

Everything becomes saleable and buyable. The circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown to come out again as gold crystal.

[17:00] He says, not even the bones of saints are able to withstand this alchemy. Clever, isn't it? Because you see, if you love Babylon, if we have fellowship with Babylon, if we think in terms of net worth, in the end, we will end up trading and trafficking in human souls.

And that's the first reason why we should be merry at the judgment of Babylon. The second reason is that there's a terrible deception as well.

Just look down at verse 23, please. Halfway through, the angel says, for your merchants, O Babylon, were the great ones of the earth and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.

In her was found the blood of prophets and saints and all who have been slain on the earth.

Babylon deceives by sorcery and the word sorcery is the word pharmakeia.

It's the word for drugs, for medications. Because money works like anti-anxiety or anti-depressants. It offers to take away our fears and our insecurities.

[18:12] Have fellowship with me and you will be secure. And it's very easy to live under her spell. Because, you know, if you can reduce things to price, you don't have to think, you think more about maths than you do about morals.

Babel is all about deception. Babel is about trying to portray something that's false as true. That economic realities can make our lives ultimately happy.

But I want you to see how textured this is. Because the Bible never says that money itself is evil. All the things to do with money are evil. The Bible recognises the good in human culture.

Even the human cultures that have done their best to reject and replace God. And it's fascinating that at the end of chapter 18, that last little song from verse 21 onwards, the angel sings a sad song of lament for Babylon.

Have you noticed? Six times he says, no more, no more, no more. He says, no more is their music, the making of melody, arts. He says, no more is their technical skill and craft and the ordinary things of life like the mill or the ordinary human love.

[19:33] It's no more. He recognises and the Bible recognises the goods that money can bring and also the corrosion that money brings. And this is where the deception, I think, is so sneaky.

Deception doesn't happen all at once. It happens little bit by little bit. It begins with the temptation to forget God. or to focus on the present or to keep more for ourselves or to be a little bit secretive about our money.

And each time that happens, we harden our hearts a little bit and each time we harden our hearts, it makes it easy to see a world without God entirely. And the deception, this kind of deception is tragic.

And it's a second reason why we make merry. The third and final reason to rejoice is a positive reason because the end of Babylon is the beginning of the wedding.

If you look down at chapter 19, verse 7 over the page, let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.

[20:52] Just, we need to hear this in this context because Jesus does not take an economical, rational view of us. Jesus wants us for himself.

He doesn't get any economic gain from our worshipping him. He doesn't benefit financially at all, just the opposite. He gives himself over to death for us to rescue us from every enslavement, demonstrating that we are more precious to him than life itself.

See, our fellowship with him is based on his kindness and his grace and his riches which he wants to give us and to keep giving us. So you see, the destruction of Babylon is an occasion for rejoicing because it's the occasion that Christ comes to us to take us to himself to be our groom.

And the fellowship that he has begun with us now here in this life is consummated at the great wedding feast and it goes on to increasing intimacy and communion and fellowship forever. So I think we need to keep these two commands together.

The command to come out of Babylon, have no fellowship with Babylon, have no heart for fellowship with her and the command to rejoice because it only makes sense to not have fellowship with Babylon if you have something in your heart that is of infinite more value.

[22 : 19] A fellowship that tells you you're not a cog in the machine, that you're a precious son or daughter of the God who is on the throne who's loved us beyond measure and is waiting for us and preparing for us the great wedding feast.

And I think the challenge for us before we become the new Jerusalem is to not opt out but to draw our fellowship from Christ here and now and to bear witness and to sing the alleluias that are sung in chapter 19 verses 1 to 7.

Do you know alleluias this is the only place in the Bible they come and they come as a sort of a defiant call don't surrender to the Bible mindset.

I mean take your joy from the sheer gift of the life God's given you and that he's made you his own. And I think for us as Christians the issue is it's not just how we make our money or it's not how much money we have it's not how we spend it it's not even it's not even just the sin of greed it's this bigger issue of the mindset where we're deceived to locate our aspirations here in this life in this world only and to begin to believe that yes my life will be really different with different income or different possessions to imagine that God somehow is not involved in my thoughts or in my decisions about money that's the way of slavery and that's the way of sadness let me finish with this I think that's why the passage ends the way it does we have another blessing from God in verse 9 he says the angel says in 19 9

John write this blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb blessed not lucky blessed and just in case we find it hard to believe he says these are the true words of God and there's this crazy moment where John is so overwhelmed with happiness and joy and I think particularly in contrast with the sadness of chapter 18 he does something absolutely crazy he falls down at the feet of the angel and begins to worship the angel this is the apostle John who had lived with Jesus close to Jesus had served him faithfully all his life is now serving you know a prison term on the island of Patmos who's seen 19 chapters of visions about not worshipping anything but God and he's so overwhelmed he's so overcome with the thought of the final eternal wedding feast of the lamb that he falls down he worships the messenger not the savior and I'll bet he felt stupid doing it and the angel won't have anything of it he issues a crisp rebuke he says stop it you must not do that

[25 : 16] I'm just a fellow servant with you and your brothers and I hold testimony of Jesus worship God because that's where the blessing is let's kneel and pray not but but but do