

Two Cities

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Date: 01 January 2012

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[0 : 0 0] I can ask you to turn with me this evening to those chapters that we read. Chapter 19, we're looking this evening at God's final and ultimate purpose for the universe, not just for the world, but for the universe which He made and which He will recreate as the new heaven and the new earth, but we'll come to that in due time. I want us to begin this evening by looking at the contrast between chapter 18 in Revelation and chapter 19. I asked you to note particularly the contrast as we were carefully making our way through chapter 18 and chapter 19 in our reading.

And I first of all want us to look very generally at these contrasts just to give us a flavor so that we start uncovering these chapters because that's the first stage of any investigation is to try and break the surface and to uncover and to speak in the most general terms because these chapters are mysterious. They have captured the imagination of Christians and scholars and thinkers for centuries. And even today, not everyone is agreed as to the meaning of Revelation. What I say to you tonight, someone else will disagree with, and then someone else will disagree with him. If you ask 20 different people their opinion on the book of Revelation, you're likely to get 20 different answers because Revelation is a book full of mystery and symbolism. And it's not possible to be absolute, but it is possible to know some of the basic truths that underlie this great book. And I'm not, just because it's mysterious doesn't mean that we shouldn't read it. God has something to say to us in his word all over the word of God from Genesis to Revelation. So I would encourage you, even as we're doing this, to read along with me and to prepare for when we come together on a Sunday night over these final chapters. Well, I want us to look at just the very basic comparison between those two.

We're talking about two cities. This is the tale of two cities. One of them is called Babylon in chapter 18. In a few moments time, I'll try and investigate what the meaning of Babylon is. And the other one is called heaven, heaven and Babylon. You could not get two opposite extremes, two greater contrasts than heaven and Babylon. Let's not worry too much about what Babylon means at the moment, just let's look at the description. Let's look at the contrast, and let's look at how stark they are.

But as well as two cities, there are also two women. Did you notice that there are two females in those two chapters? One female occurs in chapter 18. She is Babylon, and she is a she. She is, if you're reading from the old Bible, she is the whore of Babylon. If you're reading from the ESV or the NIV, it is the prostitute. And then in chapter 19, heaven is described as the bride. That is also a woman. And you could not get two more opposite women than a prostitute and a bride. The prostitute has given herself into a sinful way of living. And I'm not trying to belittle one section of society.

Remember that Jesus, these were the very people that Jesus surrounded himself with so that he could reach them with the gospel. And yet here, there is a representation of someone who has given herself for money, who has longed so much for her own pleasure that she has been prepared to sell the most intimate part of herself. She's sold her own soul in order to make some money. Now compare that with the woman who has fallen in love. And as a token of that love, she prepares herself for her husband. And she makes ready that day when she is going to be married and makes all the preparations that are connected with that marriage. The marriage supper of the Lamb. There is a stark contrast between those two women.

[4 : 52] And you could also talk in terms of their attitude to the gospel. In chapter 18, Babylon or the prostitute of Babylon has hated those who follow Jesus because she or the city hates Jesus himself.

And there should be no surprise whenever we were thinking about this on Wednesday night when Jesus said, I came to bring fire on earth. And whatever else we expect to find in 2012, if you're a follower of Jesus, you can safely expect to find hostility in the world we live in. And don't be surprised when you find and when you come up against the hatred of the world around you, expressed in all kinds of different ways. Sometimes it's outright hatred. Sometimes it's just people who laugh at you or who marginalize you or who, in whose company you don't sit well. And they prefer it if you weren't there. They prefer not to get too close to you because you're a bit of an extremist. You're a fundamentalist. You believe in absolutes. You believe in right and wrong because they see you as someone who likes to point the finger, even although you don't like to point the finger. You are here to offer Jesus and to share Jesus with them. And yet, that's not the way the world outside sees us. They see us as judging them. We don't sit well in this world. Don't be surprised when you come up against the hostility of the world.

Because Jesus said, if the world hated me, it will hate you also. But heaven loves Jesus. Heaven is the home of those who follow Jesus. That's where they want to be. That's where God's people are ultimately designed and destined for. One day we will find our eternal and perfect home glorifying and singing the praises of Jesus. This is a place of perfect union. This world is not our home. We're just passing through.

But when God's people reach heaven, and we will, sooner or later we will get there. God will take us there. He said, I go to prepare a place for you so that I will come again and take you to be with myself. That's Jesus' promise to all of his disciples. And so, whereas we don't sit well in this world, in heaven, we will be ultimately and perfectly and completely at home forever. Because heaven loves Jesus. Look also at the fact that in chapter 18, Babylon has had its day. There was a day when Babylon was all the rage. When it was, whatever it means, we'll go into that in a minute, whatever it means, it was the most magnificent, attractive, compelling place to be. It was the kind of place where everybody wanted to be part of. And yet now, it's finished. It's history. It's gone.

You go back a few years when Babylon was in its heyday, and you didn't want to be anywhere else. If you loved Babylon, then that's where your pleasure rested.

[8 : 25] If you were a follower of Jesus, you didn't sit well in Babylon. But if you were a follower of Babylon, you were a citizen of Babylon, then you loved every moment of it because every moment provided you with more and more pleasure and luxury and opulence. But now it's gone. It's finished.

Chapter 19 tells us that it's only just begun. We're only making the preparations for the marriage supper of the Lamb, which means that from now on, there's going to be a union and a home and a love that will never, ever die.

That's the love of Jesus towards his people. And tonight, that translates to 2012 by saying this, whatever uncertainty you and I face in this world, whatever sorrow and trial and difficulty and complexity we face, the Bible tells us that if you have the love of Jesus Christ, nothing can separate you from that love. Nothing can diminish it. Nothing can add to it. The love of Jesus is something that you can lay hold upon and is working towards this great day when we will forever be united with him. Of course, we're united with him in this world. Anyway, but it's like we're betrothed to him in this world. It's like we're engaged to him. And one day there will be this massive great ceremony, this great wedding between Jesus and his people. It's put in terms of a wedding, but it will be a day of unsurpassed joy, unbreakable joy, a day like never before in this world or in this universe.

Of course, there was always a city of heaven. Heaven's not just a future place. Heaven is a present place. Revelation chapter 7 tells us that in heaven he saw a great multitude of people that no one could number. And that's another contrast. The contrast between those who are in heaven, what does it say? Chapter 19, verse 1, I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude of heaven.

Well, there's nothing new about that in Revelation because that's exactly what Revelation 7 tells us. It tells us that there is a great multitude in heaven that no one can number. Now, all these people lived for a time like you and me in this world. They were part of a culture like you and me. They weren't all the same culture. Some of them are different colors, different languages, different backgrounds. They all came to Christ in a different way. Have you ever thought of, how big heaven is? Sometimes you're tempted to think of heaven being a small place, and that's probably because we are in a kind of minority at this moment in time in the culture to which we belong. But whenever we come across heaven in Revelation, it's a magnificent place full of people.

[11 : 42] Do you think Jesus came into this world to save only a few? I'm asking you that. Do you think that Jesus came into this world to give His life to save only a tiny minority of people? I don't believe that, especially when I come to a chapter like this when it tells me that there is a great multitude, and when they started singing, listen to what it says, then I heard what seemed to be verse 6, the voice of a great multitude like the roar of many waters. This is a deafening, deafening noise when all of these people start in unison praising the throne of God and God who is on the throne.

So don't be tempted to think that heaven is just this little place somewhere. Heaven contains millions upon millions upon millions upon millions of people. Don't forget that. Do you want to be amongst those millions of people tonight? That is the question that God is asking us. Don't just see things in terms of this world and what this world can give you and what you can live for in this world.

Please try and see things in terms of what God is going to do one day when He reveals to us His kingdom. When that happens, it will be too late because we will all have missed the opportunity if you don't take it now. The opportunity is now Jesus came to lay down His life in order to redeem each one of us if we're willing to take it. The door is open. Take that step. Like I said this morning, forsaking all, I take Him. That's what faith is. Turn back. Turn back if you're on the wrong path and come and put your trust in Jesus Christ. Another interesting thing is the language of heaven, the contrast between the language of heaven in chapter 19 and the language of Babylon in chapter 18.

Babylon's language is all about riches, pleasure, what you eat, what you drink, what you wear, where you live. It's all about me. In chapter 19, there's a completely different language. It's about God. It's about the Lamb. It's about salvation, glory, rejoicing. It's about hallelujah. Do you know what that word means? You've heard it often enough? Hallelujah. It means praise the Lord. Look how often it's used in this chapter. They tell me it's only used in Revelation. Hallelujah means praise the Lord.

That's the language of heaven. Language reflects what you do. You don't need language if you don't do anything, but language reflects what you do and what these people, all these millions of people are doing in heaven. As they are gazing upon the glory of God, they are seeing God face to face, and they're absolutely, permanently, eternally thrilled. The more they see Him, the more they want to see Him, the more they're there, the more they want to be there, and you try suggesting to them that they come back into this world, and they'll tell you, on no account do I ever, ever want to go back into this world. These are people who have enjoyed much of people who have enjoyed much of this world. They've enjoyed their families. They've enjoyed good health, but now that they're in heaven, they don't ever, ever want to go back. Nobody ever wants to come back into this world who's tasted heaven. And we tend to try and understand heaven, don't we, in terms of the language of this world. We can't. Words cannot describe what God has prepared for us. I know it's perhaps not in context, but I do believe all the same that the words of the apostle are appropriate. Eye has not seen, neither has ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love Him. You see, if you're going to take heaven, you can't understand, you can't say to me tonight, I need to know what I'm letting myself in for. I need to know exactly what heaven is like. I need to know the colors, the architecture, the place, what I'm going to feel like. I know everything. I want to know everything about it. You can't do it.

[16 : 09] That's not faith. Faith is laying hold upon what you can't see. And that's perhaps what makes it a challenge to you tonight. Because God is offering you tonight what you can't see. And He says to you, I can't show you. I'm not going to show you. But I'm going to give you it if you turn and follow me.

And that's the question. Will you turn and will you follow Jesus? So the language of heaven is not very intelligible to the person who's a citizen of Babylon.

If you're tonight a citizen of Babylon, then the language of me is the language you understand. And the language of the Lamb, the throne, the hallelujah, perhaps is all strange to you. I want you tonight, I'm asking you tonight, just putting you to this little challenge. No, no, it's not a little challenge. It's a great challenge. I'm asking you tonight to go and ask God to teach you His language. To teach you what these words mean. Words which will mean the difference between life and death, where you spend eternity. You see, you need to know about the Lamb.

The Lamb is Jesus. The Jesus who came into this world and who was born in Bethlehem. It's amazing, isn't it, how much interest there is at this time of year about into the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem.

And then He's all forgotten. Because the Jesus who is the baby is no threat to anyone. You don't have to learn the language because He's a nice little baby. And He gets put back in the box and He gets left till next Christmas time. You know, that's an assault on the glory of God and what God did.

[18 : 04] And that's the problem with this time of year. That's the problem, that you fail to see the greatness of God becoming man and indeed becoming the Lamb of God that took away the sin of the world.

If you're a Christian tonight, then Jesus is your Lamb. And you know perfectly well what that word means. And you love the fact that He is the Lamb because as the Lamb of God, He gave Himself as the sacrifice for your sin. And so you love Him as your Lamb and He is forever the Lamb of God. That's the language of heaven compared to the language of this, of Babylon. So what is Babylon then? What does it mean?

Well, there are Christians who actually believe that it's to be taken literally. Babylon is a city. It was a city. It was an ancient city that goes all the way back thousands of years. But I believe that tonight what we need to particularly pay attention to is not the literal city of Babylon. It is the fact that it is a city. That's the first point of interest. It's a city. Now you go back in the Bible and you ask yourself, where was the first city? What is the idea, the concept of a city means? It's quite, so many of us have visited some of the greatest cities in the world. We've been awestruck as we've wandered the streets of New York or Washington or Tokyo or Paris or London. And you know that a city is almost, it's awe-inspiring, isn't it? You watch all these great buildings. They're a monument to the genius of mankind, of humankind. You wonder what kind of genius it took. How does it go back in history? Where was the origin of these cities? Because that's what Babylon is. It's a great city. It's a city. That's first and foremost what it is. Well, cities go back all the way in the Bible to a man called Enoch. There were two men called Enoch in the Bible. One of them was notable from the fact that he walked with God. We're not talking about him. We're talking about the son of Cain. God had told humankind at the very beginning to go and replenish the earth, to spread on the earth. But instead of that, they came together and they wanted to be together and live together in a city. And Cain named that first city after Enoch, which does give a little clue about the significance of a city. A city was a place where you could make your name and where you could make a fortune and where, because you traded with other people, you could buy and sell.

And all the way through history, that's what a city has been. It's been a collection, a close quartered collection of people having been brought together so that they can survive by buying and selling to each other. Babylon actually came into existence in Genesis chapter 11. It's not that long before we, since we looked at it, the Tower of Babel. Well, Babel is very often thought, it's thought by scholars to mean the origins of Babylon. But Babylon really came to the fore under the leadership of a great man called Hammurabi. He was the originator of many of our laws of civilization and laws of legality even today. Then after, Babylon became a magnificent place. You go before Christ into the Babylonian empire. You read about it in Nebuchadnezzar and then the Darius, and then the Persian empire, Babylon was a fantastic place. I can tell you, if you lived in that era and somebody asked you, what city in all the world would you like to visit, then there would be no question about it, you would say Babylon. But like every other city, whatever its magnificence and its attractiveness in its time, it had its day. And it came to an end in 700, round about 700 AD. Today, only the foundations of Babylon remain.

In fact, it was thought that Saddam Hussein, the late Saddam Hussein, who was executed a short while ago, that part of his plan was to rebuild the city of Babylon and try and restore some of its magnificence, because he realized he knew the kind of place it was before. He never did it. I think he managed to get to rebuild some of the foundations, but today it still lies in ruins.

[23 : 00] And some Christians believe, I can't find myself agreeing with them, that when we read chapter 18, that it suggests that the day will come when someone will actually rebuild the literal city of Babylon.

They take the chapter literally, and they believe that sometime in the future, it hasn't happened yet, but one day when it happens, it will become the trading center of the world.

But I don't think we have to believe that. I don't think we have to interpret it that way. The key element in this chapter is that it is a city which once enjoyed the most extraordinary magnificence and attractiveness. It's once attracted people from all over the world who went there to buy and to sell, because that's what a city is, but is now. It is now being reduced literally to a rubble.

And whereas men and women would have praised it in times gone past, that's the place they wanted to be now. They say, alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls. For in a single hour, all this wealth has been laid waste. So what is it about the city that makes this so significant in the book of Revelation? What is the writer trying to tell us about his vision? He's trying to describe, he's using the word city to describe something much greater. And I want to suggest to you tonight, now come back at me if you think I'm wrong. If you think we should be looking at it more literally, then by all means come back with your questions. But what I'm going to suggest to you tonight is that instead of looking at this as one particular geographical place in the world, like Babylon in Iraq, we should look at it much wider than that. And to say this, that it is a symbol of the world in which we live in, in every age, and particularly our obsession with ourselves. What do you do in a city?

What's a city for? What's the idea of a city? What's the purpose of a city? Well, let me tell you. In one simple word that everyone tonight here will understand.

[25 : 43] Shopping. It's true. Shopping. Where do you go to Inverness? Shopping. Where do you go to Glasgow?

Shopping. Shopping. That's what goes on, isn't it? You go into the heart of Glasgow the week before Christmas, it's hard to find your way through the crowds. You know, Gile Street, and all the great shopping centers in Glasgow, and Aberdeen, and Edinburgh, and Inverness. It's what people go there for. To buy and to sell. And it happens in the shops, but it also happens in the high-rise buildings.

They're shopping too. They're shopping by computers. They're shopping for shares. And they're selling different types of things. They're selling money, and they're trading in bonds, and all the rest of it. They're shopping. Nonetheless, just the same as you are in the shop, buying some necklaces, or a blouse, or whatever. Shopping. And that's what went on in Babylon.

And we're not to think of it as one geographical place. We're to think of it as the whole world. Somebody said once, the whole world is a stage. No, it's not. The whole world is a shopping mall.

That's what goes on in the world. Shopping. Shopping not just because you need something, but shopping because it's fun. That's what Babylon. Go through this chapter, and ignore the bits about it being destroyed, and try to imagine it. What it was in all its glory is a place of ultimate fun, where you wanted to spend money, not just stuff that you needed, but stuff that you wanted. It's one thing to spend money on stuff you need. It's another thing altogether. It's to spend money on what you want, on what's going to give you luxury, and luxury, and the kind of goods. It's quite strange, isn't it? I was looking at this. I've been trying to understand this chapter for months, probably even more than that. And it's only when it occurred to me that this is not about a geographical city.

[27 : 57] It's about the world we live in. I tried to look around me to try to find evidence of what's being described in this chapter. And I was on a plane two years ago to Dubai, and I started watching the promotional videos that they have on the plane. Some of you have been there. I started watching the promotional videos, and it was fascinating. And I was reading this chapter at the time, and I was trying to compare myself. I'm not, this is not anything to do with Dubai. I'm not talking about Dubai. I'm talking about all over the world. But just give me an example. I'll give you an example.

Here's what they said. Coming to this restaurant is more like of an experience, like coming to the theater. You come for an evening out. You come for a seven-course journey across loads of flavors and textures and qualities of food that you'd never expect in the deserts. Dubai's restaurants offer cuisine art and atmosphere. Why? Because eating is not just doing what we need, but indulging in magnificence. These are not my words. This is a promotional video to attract you to delight in the experience of eating out in Dubai. Let me give you another. Dubai is known as the shopping capital of the Middle East, home to more than 20 malls, with everything from international high street labels to the world's most stunning brands. With beautifully decorated ceilings and sculptures, shopping is a true experience. Dubai is the city of gold, a dazzling sight to behold, aligned with hundreds of jewelry stores, meander, spice, go through our souks. A souk's a marketplace, apparently. And one thing that really fascinated me was this. In chapter 18, there's all kinds of details on cargos, gold, silver, jewels, pearls, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wool. Do you know what you get in the souks of Dubai? Do you know if you wander around those souks with thousands and millions of other tourists and people every day? Exactly the same thing. It's not even, it hasn't even been modernized from Bible times. Do you know what people talk about? Do you know what the celebrity chefs talk about in our own time? You watch the TV in the morning and they're talking about spices?

Exactly what you have in this chapter. Nothing has changed. That's what the world, you would expect in a highly technological advanced world to have moved beyond the first century. But what is it?

What are we talking about? What is a person made into a celebrity for? Because he knows how to use spices. It's all the rage. If you want to be fashionable in today's world, you've got to know about spices and how to use them in a variety of ways. Listen, I'm not condemning cookery. I'm not condemning Dubai.

I'm simply saying this, that this world has a particular character and it's always been the same. A world that when it's faced with the choice of what I need over and against what I want, that world will always choose, give me more.

[31 : 42] And the character of that world is all because we have turned our eyes away from God. We've stopped because way back in the Garden of Eden when God said, here is the choice you have. You either put me first and glorify me in the garden I'm giving you or else you go your own way. We chose to go our own way and here is the consequence of going our own way. But eventually, when you live like that, you're destroyed. And that's why chapter 18 is not a picture of prosperity and wealth and happiness. Oh, it's been there. It was, but not anymore. It's a picture of misery and sadness. Alas, alas, alas, alas. You don't have to go to Dubai to find the marketplace of the world. It's here in my heart, in your heart, if we are citizens of Babylon. To be a citizen of Babylon is simply to be a citizen of the world that we belong to and to live for yourself. Because if you don't live for

God, you live for yourself. There's only the one choice, the only the one option, however you live. And while the going is good, everything can be fine for a while. But look at what happens in chapter 18. In fact, in chapter 17, it tells us that that whole magnificent system turned in on itself. It imploded. It wasn't that God rained fire and brimstone from heaven. The world destroyed itself. There's a reference in chapter 17 to the beast turning against the whore and destroying her and all the ways in which she tried to seduce people into the pleasures of her living.

And that's because we live in a world that hates God and that wants to go its own way and has no time for listening to the Lord. But heaven is a place in which God's people have been called and invited out of this world. And that's why in chapter 18, God says to all of us tonight, if you're a follower of Jesus, you have to come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues, for her sins are heaped high as heaven and God has remembered her iniquities. And the challenge that you and I face as Christians tonight is this. How do you live in that world? You and I live in Babylon. We live and we function as God's people in Babylon. And yet we are to be part of that world and yet not part of it. We are to be in the world and yet we are to be not of the world.

And there is only one way in which we can meet that challenge. God doesn't want us to be monks. He doesn't want us to be nuns. He doesn't want us to come away and to live in an isolated house somewhere and not have a TV. He doesn't want us to be Amish. We are to be in the world. We are to interact with that world. And you know, that's when it gets most difficult. In a way, it would be easier for God's people to escape from the world and live together in a kind of community only doing what we believed was the right thing and shutting everything else away. That's not the way we're to live.

We are to live as witnesses in that world. We are to let our light so shine before people that they, Jesus says, will see your good works the way you live. And they will glorify your Father in heaven.

[36 : 03] Because if we don't live in that world and at the same time live lives that are different from the world, the world outside, the Babylonians are not going to see the truth of Jesus Christ if we're the same as them. If you and I live for ourselves, if you and I put ourselves first, if we follow the same principles of our surrounding communities, then there's going to be no witness and Jesus is not going to be made known. But if you and I live lives that are different from this world, we're in it and yet we're out of it. And the only example that we have, the ultimate example that we have as to how to live that life is Jesus Christ, who himself came into Babylon and lived in Babylon and was surrounded by Babylonians. And he didn't sit well in that city. Eventually they killed him.

They nailed him to a cross because they hated him. And yet he is our example. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and to take up his cross daily and follow me. That's the challenge that you and I face at the beginning of this year, to be like Jesus, not escaping, being in the world, and yet come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins. Are we up for that challenge?

challenge? Are we part of God's, are we in God's kingdom? Are we belonging? Do we belong tonight by faith in Jesus to the Lord Jesus Christ? If we are, I hope we're ready for the biggest challenge that we can ever face. Let's pray together.