

# **The Fall of Babylon**

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Revelation 17:1-18, 18:1-14 (15-24)

We're now in a season of Lent. It's the period of preparation before Easter, lasting 40 days (not counting Sundays). It's a time we remember Jesus' 40 day fast before he began his ministry. We might spend extra time in prayer, Bible reading, or fasting. For Lent, I often take a 24-hour period once a week to fast. This year, I'm also cutting out any unnecessary screen time, until Easter. So, whenever I feel hungry, or I miss being able to look at YouTube or something on TV, it helps me think again of my own weakness and sin. It helps me remember that my relationship with Jesus Christ is more important than physical hunger, or personal enjoyment. When Jesus fasted, he was tempted by the devil. During Lent, we remember that we often fall into temptation. We acknowledge our own sin as we move closer to Good Friday, the day Jesus, the Son of God died on the cross for our sins. But, we also know that on Easter he rose to life as Lord of all. Today, as we think about our scripture reading from Revelation, I'd like to share about the Roman system in which John the writer lived. Much of Revelation is a critique of ancient Roman society, but it's also a message for us. Do we follow Christ, or do we fall into the sin of "following the way of Babylon," caught up in the systematic evil often found all around us?

Getting into the book, last week's chapter was the end of the numbered visions, culminating in judgement on Babylon. Babylon has a number of meanings. It represents the evil nation that conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple of God. But, it also represents the brutal Roman empire which oppressed the Israelites. On another level, Babylon represents evil systems in societies throughout history. In chapter 17 and 18, we see a close up of the judgement and fall of Babylon. At the beginning, an image of a great whore sitting on a beast is introduced. The woman is "clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.'" We read that she "was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus." Wow! Here, we see a critique of John's society. Like the woman, the Roman empire was awash in luxurious and decadent living. Through the brutality of military rule, followers of Jesus were persecuted and killed. Many were sent to the colosseum to be torn apart by wild animals. In the vivid image of the whore and the beast, both are scarlet, likely representing the colour of the blood of the faithful. The emperor, Nero, was famous for his cruelty. Born into a violent family, his mother had killed his father so he could become emperor at age 16. Later, Nero even killed his own mother, among many other people.

Some Christians may wonder why John uses such a repulsive image as the whore. One reason is that Old Testament prophets sometimes described those who have turned away from the one true God as fornicators. The Israelites started out in a faithful relationship with God, but then broke the relationship by turning to worship idols. Spiritually, they were turning away from God and putting their allegiance in the wrong place, as if they were having affairs. The kings of the world, and rich merchants bought in to dealing with Rome. In some ways, they were selling themselves as they ended up supporting the emperor and a system that brutally oppressed anyone who opposed them. The problem is that many people didn't realise they were straying. Imagine that you are surrounded by so much evil that for you to participate in it has become normal. In that case, you may need something to shock you into realising the reality of your sin. This is likely what John had in mind when he described the whore riding the beast. John saw the Roman empire system as the whore – decadent and evil. But, here it's the beast (the devil) that gives power to the evil systems of oppression. It's important for us to understand the evil that hides behind the surface of our lives.

In our society, many things feel normal for many people. We strive for success, for higher paying jobs, for recognition, but we easily forget that we live in a rich society compared to the rest of the world. Much of our economy is fueled by greed and waste. Our environment is suffering because of it.

People in developing countries are exploited so that we can have cheaper prices for many of the things we buy. It's easy to think everything is normal when we don't see the people who suffer. In Rome, the suffering was more obvious, but it had also become a way of life for many people. In ancient Rome, emperor worship was a normal part of society. People were used to it.

The book of Revelation reveals images that are an outward expression of internal problems in Roman society. J. Nelson Kraybill, in his book, "Apocalypse and Allegiance", gives us historical background on how Roman society functioned at the time when John wrote of Revelation. Kraybill writes from the perspective of worship, emphasising that Revelation gives the readers a challenge, "Whom do you worship, God, or the surrounding empire?" He describes how society, in biblical times, was set up to favour emperor worship. Rome had conquered the surrounding nations and brought a certain "peace" to the land. Under Roman control, there weren't as many smaller army groups crossing the land, killing and stealing as before. There was stability, and people appreciated it, even though the Roman control was through brutal violence. As the Roman army conquered more and more nations, people of surrounding lands started showing allegiance to the emperor in order to keep from being the next area attacked. This allegiance turned into a form of worship. Kraybill quotes an ancient author describing one incident:

"As [Caesar Augustus] sailed by the gulf of Puteoli, it happened that from an Alexandrian ship which had just arrived there, the passengers and crew, clad in white, crowned with garlands, and burning incense, lavished upon him good wishes and the highest praise, saying that it was through him they lived, through him they sailed the seas, and through him that they enjoyed their liberty and their fortunes. (p.144-145)

We see symbols here that are also used in the book of Revelation, symbols that describe Christian worship such as the white garments, crowns, and incense.

With Rome having strong military power, all of society was set up in various levels of power. Those in upper levels would give benefits to those below them. In return, people on the various levels would give back loyalty, service, and worship. At the top of society was the emperor, then the kings of the earth below him, followed by the rich and powerful, the regular people, and finally the slaves. Revelation portrays Satan (the beast) as giving power to the Roman empire (the whore).

The seven heads of the beast are said to represent seven mountains as well as seven kings. The woman on the beast has already been labelled with the name Babylon. Now, John gives a strong hint, saying she sits on seven mountains. Rome was known as "the city of seven hills." Later John writes, "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." (verse 18). Everyone would have easily connected these images to Rome.

Chapter 18 gives a poetic lament of the fall of the great nation, which could now represent any number of oppressive systems people experience even today. As we read the lament on the city's destruction, we see that John starts the list of things lost with the luxurious items, "gold, silver, jewels and pearls." At the end of this list he finally includes "slaves – and human lives." He is showing how mixed up the priorities of Rome were. Luxury came first, and human lives didn't matter as much.

Rome became so powerful that emperors and other leaders below them were living in decadence and luxury. Kraybill describes one place he visited in Rome called "Potsherd Mountain." In biblical times, wine, oil, and other foods were shipped in heavy pottery containers. Rome had been known to receive ships from all over the world. The vast amount of imports can now be seen in this mountain of smashed pottery, the pieces of which cover about 20,000 square metres. All that decadence in Rome had been at the expense of people's lives.

As we sift through all the images from Revelation, I'd like us to take note of verse 4, in chapter 18. "...Come out of her, my people, so you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues." This brings the Revelation account back to our lives, today. In what systems are we mixed up? It's easy to get caught up in the self-centred push for earning more money, buying more things,

building our own success, or gaining recognition. When these become our number one priority, we lose sight of God. Earlier this week, I was talking with my daughter, Irene about what would be a fair deal when negotiating to buy something. Our conversation turned to the problem of multinational corporations that pay poor wages to workers in developing countries. A result of this is that we can buy cheaper food and clothing. How can we come out of this system that oppresses the poor? It's not easy, but we can begin by becoming more aware of where our purchases come from. Do the companies treat their workers fairly? Maybe we can avoid a company if it oppresses their workers. We can then support companies that have a good reputation for fair treatment of their workers. We can also consider how we spend our money. Do we spend most of our time and money only on ourselves, or do we also contribute to blessing others as well? We live within systems that encourage self-centred living. And, they are often supported through violence and oppression. In Romans 12, the apostle Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. Let's pray.

Loving God, we confess that all around us there are temptations to slip into self-centred living. Draw us nearer to you we pray. During this season of Lent, give us eyes to see the areas where we fall short. Help us to see where we might be participating in systems that oppress others. When we notice something that is not right, give us the courage to "come out" and make a change. We don't have many people in our church, but we thank you that your Spirit is at work among us. We pray that your church will grow. May more of our friends and family members find freedom in your love through Christ we pray, Amen.