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Revelation 18:1-24

30th Message

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FALLEN...IN JUST ONE HOUR!

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today marks the beginning of a season in which there is a massive disconnect between what society engages in and what the Church calls itself to. Society, as you are very well aware, has launched on its annual frenzy of rampant consumerism, but on this, the first day of Advent, the Church devotes itself to a completely different purpose: a season of quiet and sober reflection in preparation for Christmas. It is a season for remembering the promises which God gave in the Old Testament that he would come to save his people. It is a season for remembering the first advent or coming of our Lord, and for anticipating his second advent.

During this season attention is focused on certain Biblical passages that develop these themes. One of these texts is the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise in response to what Elizabeth said to her concerning the child in her womb. Our service today is shaped around this song. "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (κτν) sang Mary; *Magnificat, anima meum Dominum* in Latin, whence the title, Magnificat.

**"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant...
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46b-48, 54-55)**

She praises God for seeing the humble state of her, his servant, and doing great things for her. But by the end of her song it is clear that she understands that these great things are not just for her, his servant, but for his servant Israel. At the heart of her song are these lines:

**"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm,
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble." (Luke 1:51-52)**

The song turns on the line "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm," continuing with an exposition of these mighty deeds. Mary has faith to see that in the conception of a child in her womb God has turned the world upside down. He has cast down the proud from their thrones, but the humble he has exalted.

Continuing in our studies in Revelation, we get a vivid illustration of this great reversal in the Fall of Babylon (Rev 18). Proud and arrogant Babylon, who boasts, "I am, and there is none beside me," is toppled by God, who alone can say, "I am and there is no other."

Chapter 18 is a lament over Babylon the great city. The Old Testament contains many such laments, known also as dirges or taunt songs. These are pronouncements of doom delivered in advance by God's prophets against cities, nations or rulers who are about to be the targets of divine judgment. The primary targets of these dirges were Nineveh, Babylon, and Tyre; two weeks ago we saw that these three were the primary OT manifestations of the great city, the city of man. Jerusalem, which should have been the holy city, was also the target of lament, for she had become like the great city. John has drawn upon

these different laments to weave together a devastating dirge against Babylon the Great. Just as this Babylon is OT Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre all rolled into one, so is the lament against her made up of all the different OT laments all rolled into one. Every line in the chapter is drawn from the Old Testament.

The chapter consists of three pronouncements from heaven: a radiant angel with a mighty voice (vv 1-3), a heavenly voice (4-20), and a mighty angel (21-24).

A. Fallen, Fallen is Babylon (18:1-3)

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:

**"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!
She has become a home for demons
and a haunt for every evil spirit,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.
For all the nations have drunk
the maddening wine of her adulteries.
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive
luxuries." (Rev 18:1-3 NIV)**

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" The past several chapters have been building up to this. In chapter 14, following the installation of the Lamb on Mount Zion, an angel had proclaimed, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great" (14:8). The pouring out of the seventh bowl unleashed a devastating earthquake, so tremendous that "[t]he great city split into three parts" (16:19). Now we have an extensive portrayal of the fall of this city. This is the punishment of the great prostitute which an angel had invited John to witness (17:1).

What is Babylon the Great? The original readers of Revelation at the end of the first century would have had no difficulty recognizing the Babylon of chapter 18 as Rome. But they should also have recognized that it was more than just Rome. Every element of this chapter had previously been used of Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre, even of Jerusalem. Recognizing that this material has all been used before should keep us from restricting this chapter to Rome alone. Rome is long gone, but this chapter is still of great relevance to us today, especially here in Silicon Valley.

As we saw two weeks ago the clue to the identity of the harlot Babylon is that she is the great city (17:18). The Bible is a tale of two cities: the great city and the holy city, the earthly city and the heavenly city, the city of man and the city of God, the harlot and the bride, Babylon and Jerusalem. The great city is built by man away from God's presence. The holy city is built by God as a place for his people to dwell in his presence. God designed humanity not to live apart from him in cities of their own making, but to live with him in the city of his making. Therefore, if God is to be true to his creation purposes, the great city must fall to make way for the holy city.

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" So complete is her fall that she will be uninhabited save for wild and unclean animals, a vivid picture

of desolation. Babylon's crimes are many as we'll see in this chapter. The one for which she is indicted here is that she has intoxicated the nations with the seductive wine of her adulterous idolatries. She has led the nations astray into living with no reference to God.

B. Call to Flee (18:4-5)

A second voice picks up the dirge, starting with a call to God's people:

Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

**“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;
for her sins are piled up to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes.”** (18:4-5)

The call for God's people to flee Babylon, repeated several times by Isaiah and Jeremiah, signified their imminent salvation and the imminent judgment of their enemies. It was also a call to avoid entanglement in Babylon's sins for which she was about to be judged. But we should not read it here as a call for the Church to physically remove itself from the great city. Since Pentecost God has been infiltrating his holy city deep into the heart of the great city. The seven churches to whom Revelation is addressed are located in seven cities of the Roman Empire. God wanted his churches there in these pagan cities, functioning as lampstands. The churches were to resist contamination by the great city, remaining in the city but not of it. The call to “come out” is therefore a call to live uncompromised lives, as a colony of the holy city within the great city. It seems that the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were struggling with this very issue. Pergamum was tolerating the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans; Thyatira was tolerating Jezebel the false prophetess. In both cities this teaching was leading the believers astray into the eating of food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality, best understood as a metaphor for idolatry (2:14, 20). Whatever the exact nature of this teaching, it is likely that the saints were being persuaded to take a compromising line in their relations with the world. We'll see that the Laodicean church was in an even worse condition.

A major purpose of the book of Revelation is to wake up the churches that have compromised. John paints a black and white world in order to clarify their vision, to show them the world as it really is. To see the world as it really is requires us to see into the unseen realm, the realm that is visible only to the eye of faith. John shows the great city as she really is, a seductive harlot whom we should flee, lest, entangled in her sins, we be caught up in her judgment. Yet God still wants his churches shining in the midst of Babylon. God wants PBCC shining in the midst of Silicon Valley.

C. Call for Judgment (18:6-8)

The heavenly voice switches from addressing the saints to calling on heaven to execute judgment upon Babylon:

**“Give back to her as she has given;
pay her back double for what she has done.
Mix her a double portion from her own cup.
Give her as much torture and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.
In her heart she boasts,
‘I sit as queen; I am not a widow,
and I will never mourn.’
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:
death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.”** (18:6-8)

Here we are shown another of Babylon's distinctive sins: her arrogant, self-centered sufficiency. John here draws upon Isaiah's lament over Babylon, some verses of which are worth reading in full:

**You said, ‘I will continue forever—
the eternal queen!’
But you did not consider these things
or reflect on what might happen.
Now then, listen, you wanton creature,
lounging in your security
and saying to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.
I will never be a widow
or suffer the loss of children.’
Both of these will overtake you
in a moment, on a single day:
loss of children and widowhood.
They will come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries
and all your potent spells.
You have trusted in your wickedness
and have said, ‘No one sees me.’
Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you
when you say to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.’** (Isa 47:7-10)

Babylon can be characterized as sensual, self-centered and self-secure. Babylon is sensual: a “wanton creature,” living a life of sensual self-gratification, driven by her senses, seeking the immediate satisfaction of her sensual desires. Babylon is self-centered: “I am, and there is none beside me,” she boasts, but this is a blasphemous parody of God, who alone can say, “I am the Lord, and there is no other.” Babylon is self-secure: “I will continue for ever—the eternal queen.” Confident of her eternal nature, her invincibility, she lounges in her security.

Sensual, self-centered and self-secure. This was true of Babylon, Nineveh and Tyre. It was true of Rome. It has been true of every manifestation of the great city. Babylon is alive and well, not least here in Silicon Valley. It is inevitable that the great city should be this way for she is the city built by man away from God's presence. If you live your life without reference to God, this is what you become. The great danger is that this thinking contaminate the church. This had happened to the church in Laodicea, which said, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” (3:17). That's Babylonian thinking, great-city thinking to the core. This church had shut out even Jesus, leaving him pounding on the door, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock” (3:20). He's not meekly knocking on the heart of an unbeliever, but pounding on the door of a church that has forgotten him.

Babylon's thinking revolves around herself. The thinking of the Laodicean church revolved around herself. Around whom does your thinking revolve? Who is at the center of your mental map?

Judgment is pronounced upon Babylon for her self-centered hubris. There is repeated emphasis throughout this chapter that her judgment fits the crime. Judgment when it comes will take just one day, nay just one hour. The city that thinks itself eternal will be brought low in an instant.

Nineveh thought itself secure but was taken by Babylon in 612 BC. Babylon thought itself secure behind its massive walls, but was taken suddenly by Cyrus in 539 BC. Tyre thought itself secure on its island fortress, but was taken by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Rome called itself the eternal city, but after nearly 1200 years it fell to the Germanic tribes in AD 410. What of more recent examples? Who thought the Titanic would sink on her maiden voyage? Hitler intended his Third Reich to endure a thousand years, but it fell after only twelve. In 1989

who imagined the Berlin Wall would come down so quickly? In the euphoric days of 1999 who thought the dotcom boom would suddenly burst? On September 10, 2001 who imagined that the twin towers could collapse so quickly? Fallen, fallen in just one hour!

D. Three-Fold Lament (18:9-19)

The heavenly voice now describes a three-fold lament by three parties who are ruined by the fall of Babylon: the kings of the earth (9-10), the merchants (11-17a) and the mariners (17b-19).

“When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

“Woe! Woe, O great city,
O Babylon, city of power!
In one hour your doom has come!”

“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.

“They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out:

“Woe! Woe, O great city,
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!”

“Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

“Woe! Woe, O great city,
where all who had ships on the sea
became rich through her wealth!

In one hour she has been brought to ruin!” (18:9-19)

These three parties are drawn from Ezekiel’s lament over Tyre (Ezek 27). Together they constitute the inhabitants of the earth, the earth-dwellers who live their lives in autonomy from God, the residents of the great city living away from God’s presence. Each group responds the same way to the collapse of Babylon. Each stands afar, weeping and mourning, looking in terror on the collapse of that in which they had invested their lives. Each cries out, “Woe! Woe, O great city!” And each acknowledges that the city has collapsed in just one hour. The kings of the earth bewail the loss of the city of power. The merchants and mariners bewail the loss of the city of profit. Whether power or profit these parties had gained much from their association with Babylon and had much to lose from her fall.

The lament of the merchants is particularly detailed. They “weep and mourn...because no one buys their cargoes any more.” There follows an extensive list, drawn from Ezekiel 27, of the cargoes that have enriched these merchants. We might put the lament of these merchants into the language of the year 2000: “The dotcom companies weep and mourn because no one buys their products any more—switches and

routers; servers, disk arrays and computers; online groceries and pet food...” Noting that the list of cargoes is in a descending order of value, starting with “gold, silver, precious stones and pearls,” it is shocking to find at the end after the “cattle and sheep; horses and carriages” the “bodies and souls of men,” or as the TNIV now better translates it, “human beings sold as slaves.” The slaves are considered as mere chattel to be traded for the personal profit of the merchants. Some of you may think that you are like slaves, toiling for your bosses, but generally we are free agents. Our danger is more that we are on the side of the merchants, looking to profit from the great city. Nevertheless, there are many places in the world today where people, made in the image of God, are bought and sold for the profit of the merchants.

With the exception of the human slaves, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the list of cargo traded by the merchants. Gold and silver, wine and olive oil, cattle and sheep, are all made by God for his glory and our enjoyment. Even the products of human manufacture, the fine linen and purple cloth, are elsewhere prescribed for God’s people. Again putting this into modern terms, technology is not in itself necessarily bad. I appreciate modern technology and its benefits. I have technology in my home and am glad to use it. But I don’t make it my heart’s desire. We are not called to be Luddites or to remain fixed in yesteryear like the Amish.

The wrong attitude of the merchants and Babylon to material things is clarified by what the merchants say next, addressing Babylon: “The fruit you longed for is gone from you.” We might translate this as “the fruition of your heart’s desire is gone.” Eugene Peterson in *The Message* exactly captures the sense here: “Everything you’ve lived for, gone!” The objects of Babylon’s heart’s desire were not eternal; they vanished, never to reappear.

What are your heart’s desires? The Church has had an uneasy relationship with desire. Early monasticism, rooted in neo-Platonic thought, saw a stark opposition between the evil physical world and the good spiritual world. It had an uneasy relationship with the human body. Early monks sought to mortify the flesh, to rid themselves of physical desires for food, sleep, warmth. The more extreme even dispensed with Scripture for it was written, it was material. With the Platonists they longed that their soul would be released from its entrapment in the prison of the body. But this attitude is much closer to Buddhism: since all suffering is attributable to desire, the path to nirvana is through the surrender of all desires, even the desire to be.

This is not Biblical Christianity. God has made us with minds, hearts, wills. He has created us capable of deep desire. The problem is not that we have desires, but that we allow our desires to be too easily satisfied. Let me repeat what I said two weeks ago, quoting C. S. Lewis’ sermon “The Weight of Glory”:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

Since the great city is sensual, she seeks satisfaction in those things which her senses encounter. Madison Avenue understands this only too well: advertising targets our senses, seeking to arouse our appetites then persuade us to immediately gratify them. But God has not made us to live by our senses. He has made us to live by faith in relationship with him.

What are you longing for? Power? Wealth? Security? Reputation? Those are all Babylon’s desires. Material things are not in themselves

wrong, but when they become the objects of our longing we miss the purpose for which God has made us.

Lewis writes of two different types of longing: “The one is an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease.”² Here’s a sobering question for us all: Are our longings a disease or a spiritual exercise? As parents well understand, it is not necessarily good to be given one’s heart’s desire. Children can have such a short-sighted view, wanting only what is immediately visible. Adults are often no better!

God has filled this world with many material things for his glory and our pleasure, but he has not made these things to be the objects of our longing, nor has he made us to be satisfied by these things. He has made us capable of much greater desires. Let me repeat another portion I read two weeks ago, this one from *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, where Jeremiah Burroughs writes of a paradox in the life of the Christian:

...he is the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world...A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion...A soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God.³

Don’t allow yourself to be too easily pleased! It is only when we are deeply satisfied in God, finding all our desires met in him, that we can enjoy the material things in this world without setting our longings on them. We can take them as from the hand of God rather than as the reason for living.

The mariners ask, “Who is like the great city?” (18:18), just as the earth-dwellers had asked, “Who is like the beast?” (13:4). This is the problem: the world sees the great city and is seduced; it sees the beast and is astonished into worship. Revelation is a book about worship. Whom do you worship? To whom do you give your allegiance? Whom do you see? Revelation opens our eyes to see God, so that we ask, “Who is like God? Who is like the Lamb?”

E. Call to Rejoice (18:20)

In contrast to the lament of those who profited from Babylon, God’s people are called to a different response:⁴

“**Rejoice over her, O heaven!**
Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her for the way she treated you.’” (18:20)

The three-fold lament of the kings, merchants and mariners is here contrasted with the two-fold call to rejoice. This call is addressed to heaven, that is the realm of God, and to God’s people. In the imagery of Revelation the saints, apostles and prophets are not three categories of Christians, but three ways of describing all Christians. This rejoicing is depicted in 19:1-8 with its four-fold “Hallelujah!”

F. Babylon’s Fate (18:21-24)

Finally a third angel takes up the dirge:

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

“**With such violence**
the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,
never to be found again.
The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters,
will never be heard in you again.
No workman of any trade

will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone
will never be heard in you again.
The light of a lamp
will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride
will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the world’s great men.
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.
In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints,
and of all who have been killed on the earth.” (18:21-24)

So complete will be the fall of Babylon that she will never be found again. Then five times we hear that the positive things of life will never be found or heard or seen in her again. This prepares us for the contrast with the New Jerusalem in which there are seven things that will be no more: sea, death, mourning, crying, pain, curse and night (21:1,4; 22:3,5). The positive things are gone from Babylon; the negative things are gone from the New Jerusalem.

The dirge ends on a disturbing note. None of the positive things will be found in Babylon, but what is found in Babylon is cause for her judgment: the blood of the saints. The great city, being the construction of man living apart from God, has always been opposed to God and his people. God allows the great city to endure, up to a point, and he allows her to slay his people, up to a point. Why? Ultimately this is hidden within God’s inscrutable purposes. But at the heart lies the slaying of his Son. John first mentions the great city when noting that the bodies of the two witnesses “will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (11:8). Jerusalem, that was to have been the holy city, had become the great city, indistinguishable from Sodom, from Egypt, from Babylon. God sent his Son, as we remember at Advent. In its climactic act of revolt against God the great city killed that Son: his blood was found in the city. God raised that Son to life and raised him to heaven where he installed him as King. Then, astonishingly, he extends forgiveness to us and calls us to leave the great city and join him in the holy city, redeemed by this shed blood of his Son.

When God fells the great city, what will your response be? Which city do you have your eyes on? When called to rejoice over the fall of Babylon, would you be able to do so? Or would you be lamenting with the kings, the merchants and the mariners?

God “has performed mighty deeds with his arm, he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.” Let us magnify his name. Who is like God? Who is like the Lamb?

1. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1949]), 26.

2. C. S. Lewis, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 39.

3. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1648]), 42-43.

4. NIV is wrong to punctuate verses 19-20 together as the mariners’ speech, an error which the TNIV has corrected.