

15. The world passes away

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Date: 30 January 2011

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[0 : 00] Now let's have a moment of prayer before we look at the passage together. Come then with prayer and contemplation, see how in Scripture Christ is known.

And so Father, I pray that as we look at this strange but powerful and haunting passage, that through the words given to us by the Spirit, that we will be led to the living Word, Christ Jesus himself, in whose name we pray. Amen.

In the town of Stratford-on-Avon, opposite the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, there used to be a most marvellous exhibition called The Elizabethan Experience.

You went into this room and for 40 minutes you were transported into the world of Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth I. There was song, there was music, there was excerpts from Shakespeare's plays, and the whole thing visually and in every other way was a wonderful and enriching experience.

As it came to an end, the music became minor, the sound died away, and light after light went out.

[1 : 31] In the end we were left with an eerie and haunting darkness. Nothing remained of the light, of the colour. Everything had gone. No sound, no music, nothing at all.

And we were struck, at least I was always struck there, by the sense of human vulnerability, the frailty of human life, and the passing nature of the created order.

So I have called this sermon this evening on chapter 18 of Revelation, The world passes away. Because that's what we have here. In chapter 18, the world, the anti-God spirit that appears in every age, that manifests itself in city after city, in regime after regime, in power group after power group, this is coming to an end.

You'll notice the past tense. Fallen. Babylon the Great is fallen, and has become a dwelling place for demons. It is in the past tense, not just because centres of power and influence have fallen in the past, throughout history, but because the judgment, the final judgment, is certain.

As always in Revelation, there are many, many echoes of the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah 13 speaks of the fall of the city of Babylon, as does Jeremiah 51.

[2 : 57] Ezekiel 26 talks about the fall of Tyre, the great commercial centre, the end of the world's commerce and merchandise.

And Nahum the prophet tells of the fall of Nineveh, the capital of the great Assyrian Empire. Gone, gone, gone. The world passes away.

That's what this is about, this powerful chapter, this haunting imagery. You'll notice there's a mixture of styles here. There is condemnation, there is doom, there is judgment.

There's also lament. You often get this in the Old Testament prophets. What are called war oracles? Oracles which pronounce judgment, and lament, which lament what could have been, and what was not, and what will not be.

It's all dramatized here. The world passes away, and all its splendor, all its glory, all its power. Now this is a chapter that's dominated by voices speaking, and that's the way we're going to look at it, as it develops in three movements.

[4 : 08] First of all, we have the authoritative voice from heaven. Verse 1, After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory, and he called out with a mighty voice.

Now the whole thrust of this book, particularly from chapter 12 onwards, where the curtain separating the seen and the unseen world is rolled aside, is that what happens on earth is controlled from heaven.

What happens on earth has a variety of secondary causes, economic, political, military, and so on. Nevertheless, the events on earth are orchestrated by heaven, and the enormous importance of God's angels in the government of the universe is emphasized.

Referred before to Psalm 103, angels are mighty ones who do his will, who carry out his bidding. And here a great angel comes. Probably his angel here is Gabriel, who also in chapter 10 announces the everlasting gospel.

Remember in Luke, Gabriel is the angel who comes privately to Mary and announces the gospel, announces the coming of the Savior. So this mighty angel is probably Gabriel, who is now announcing the gospel as well.

[5 : 31] This is judgment. And the other voice, heard another voice from heaven, verse 4, is almost certainly the Lord himself, because he speaks of my people, come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins.

This is a chapter about where do our hearts lie? Where is our treasure? Now this morning, remember we saw in Romans 7, Willie was pointing out the importance of our mindset.

What controls our minds? What controls our thinking? Ultimately, what is life about now? And what will life be about then? Do we have the mindset of heaven or the mindset of Babylon?

This chapter is raising in a poetic way, really, what Romans 7 and 8 are also raising. So this authoritative voice from heaven who fills the earth with the brightness of glory tells us, first of all, why Babylon is being judged.

Why is it the world order is going to end in judgment? The key is verse 3. You'll notice the threefold repetition. Haunt of every clean spirit. Haunt for every unclean bird.

[6 : 47] Haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. Now in the previous chapter, where Babylon Babylon was brought before us, the woman, verse 4, was arrayed in purple and scarlet adorned with gold and jewels and pearls.

When all that is stripped aside, when all the glamour of the world is stripped away, what do we find? Unclean spirits, unclean birds, unclean and detestable beasts.

Behind all this lurks the devil himself. And that's what lies behind the worship of luxury, the worship of the world, the worship of sex.

This, an attitude to living where there is no number but one, no pronoun but me, no interest but my interest, no job but my job, no family but my family, no church but my church, me, me, me.

That is the spirit of the world, that is the spirit of Babylon. And behind it all we hear another voice, don't we, from the very beginning of the story.

[8 : 01] You will be like God, knowing good and evil. Eat of that tree which looks good. It will make you wise. It will make you sophisticated.

It will make you clever. You will impress people. You will be like God. So why is Babylon going to fall? Babylon is going to fall because it's rotten inside.

There is nothing of lasting substance, nothing that will endure the fire of God's judgment. Everything will be consumed and burned up because it is anti-God.

So what can we do about that? Verse 4, the voice of God himself, come out, lest you take part in her sins. Now, this echoes another part of the Bible, doesn't it?

This echoes the call to Abraham to leave the city of the world and travel to the city whose designer and builder is God. Just as at that crucial stage in the story of salvation, Abraham left hour of the Chaldeans, a great Mesopotamian civilization, the area of Babylon, Tower of Babel and so on, to strike out into the unknown, to go to the city whose builder and maker is God.

[9 : 19] John, the Lord is saying, don't be like Babylon now, otherwise you'll share in her judgment then. What is Babylon like?

She glorified herself, verse 7, and lived in luxury. In other words, Babylon's interests were totally in Babylon.

and therefore will be sudden and devastating. This reason our plagues will come in a single day. This city which looks as if it would last forever, this has happened throughout history.

Regimes which seemed indestructible. Regimes which were going to last forever. Hitler boasted in 1941, I think it was, about the thousand year Reich.

The thousand year Reich that no one would ever conquer and only a few years became history and so on. Throughout history this will never pass away. It passes away in a moment.

[10 : 15] Her plagues will come in a single day. Why will they come? For mighty is the Lord God who has judged her. Ultimately it is God who raises up kings and puts down kings as Daniel says.

So the authoritative voice from heaven is saying Babylon is doomed. Nothing of any lasting substance can be built in Babylon. Nothing that will last into eternity and escape the fire.

So come out of her. Don't live with the mindset of Babylon. Don't live with the love of Babylon because all that will do is lead to judgment.

She glorified herself. Verse 7 Notice I sit as a queen. I am no widow and mourning I shall never see. The sheer arrogance of power and wealth.

which is so much a part of our society and it finds such an echo doesn't it in our own hearts. We are all tempted by Babylon aren't we?

[11 : 18] There would be no warnings against Babylon if Babylon were not tempting. Babylon does not come to us as a haunt for every unclean spirit and every unclean bird. Babylon comes to us dressed beautifully talking smoothly and tempting us into an anti-God lifestyle.

But the authoritative voice from heaven says the end of Babylon's story is one word fallen. That is the end of Babylon's story.

Then we have the mourning voices on earth in verses 9 to 20. The picture shifts again. Remember I often compare Revelation to a picture gallery or to a kind of montage or the sort of things you have on your computers nowadays where images and pictures dissolve into each other and we mustn't be pedantic about this.

We mustn't try and give this a kind of mathematical precision. Remember those who are mourning Babylon are also part of Babylon.

That's part of the picture here and you'll notice of course what's happening here. This once again is a repetition of the Garden of Eden isn't it? Those who are mourning Babylon are trying to disassociate themselves from her.

[12 : 40] What was it was said in the Garden of Eden? The serpent tempted me and I ate. The woman you gave to be with me, she tempted me. The kind of thing I used to hear as an English teacher which was both a lie and bad grammar.

It was not me. That is the voice of humanity. It was not me. I hope you all realise what I meant when I said it was bad grammar but who knows.

So the godless world are saying that same sort of thing. She was to blame. I notice how we've got all the leaders of the earth, political leaders, verse 9, the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her.

We have the commercial leaders, the merchants of the earth, verses 11 and 15. Then we have the whole, I suppose you might call it, the whole communication and transport industry.

Verse 17, the ship masters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea. All of the centres of world power, whether they're military, political, commercial, intellectual, whatever they may be, all the great and the good.

[13 : 57] Now, something very important here, I'm going to come back to this in the final section, these things are not wrong in themselves, obviously. We need to be governed well.

We need commerce and we need transport and the communications industry. These are all good things in themselves, but after all, they have become self-sufficient.

They've behaved like gods. The early command to humanity was to fill the earth and subdue it. And of course, in one sense, that's what all these groups of people have done.

But the trouble is, they've filled it and subdued it as if they were gods and not the representatives of God. Now, when we take out the book of Revelation again, of course, we'll be seeing by contrast, the other city who is also the bride of the Lamb, where all these gifts and blessings from God have become part of the new creation.

Because these things are good in themselves. What's wrong then with what's happening here? First of all, there is selfish gain instead of serving others.

[15 : 09] This is the point of verses 9 to 11, purely. The point here is that they are using power and wealth for self-aggrandizement.

That is the point. I'm wrong with any of these kind of cargos and so on. All of these things are good in themselves. But the key to it, surely, is in verse 13, the end of verse 13, and slaves, that is, human souls.

What has been all this wealth, this power, this luxury? For it has been to exploit humanity. This is not just slavery.

This is the exploitation of humanity, using people as if they were simply pawns to increase power, to be moved around at will by those who hold the levers of power.

And when that happens, that is going to receive nothing but condemnation and judgment and slaves. That is human souls.

[16 : 16] Here is the inspired writer saying to us, look, look at all these things. What's the aim of it? What are they doing? What are all these kings and merchants and tradesmen and so on doing?

They are exploiting human souls. And then there is the worship of wealth in verses 16 and following. Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels and with pearls.

You see, the kings mourn the downfall of Babylon because of the loss of power, political and military power, commercial classes because of wealth. See, both, all these classes of people, they're only interested in their own aggrandizement.

They worship power, they worship wealth. And we know very, very well how strong these temptations are. When we read a passage like this, don't distance itself from us.

Don't say this is what happens when, I'm not going to mention names, but we can all think of names in the papers. We can think of people who are phenomenal wealth, who are not obviously using that wealth to help humanity.

[17 : 32] But that temptation is in all of us. Many of us don't succumb to that temptation because we don't have the opportunities. I mean, we mustn't pretend we're holier than we are. That is why this passage is so relevant.

It is not just about tycoons. It's not just about politicians. It's not just about the phenomenally wealthy. It's about you and me. Because every temptation lies in our hearts.

When Eve saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, that it would make her wise. All of these good things in themselves.

And what's the point of verse 20? Rejoice over her, O heaven. You see, we've had the perspective of Babylon. From the perspective of Babylon, the destruction of Babylon is the worst thing that could ever happen.

That the world order should disappear. That the centres of power, the centres of industry, the centres of commerce should be destroyed. It's the worst thing that could ever happen. But the heavenly hosts now see from a different perspective.

[18 : 36] They see clearly without sin, without unholiness, that their lifestyle on earth had been vindicated. They had not chosen the world. They had not chosen to follow their own desires.

They had followed the lamb, and they had taken up their cross and followed him. And they see now that when they stood against the beast, when they stood against the world, that they were right.

I mean, very often it seems it's not right, doesn't it? Some of you know T.S. Eliot's poem, The Journey of the Magi, where all the romance and glamour is stripped from the story of the wise men, camels kneeling down in the melting snow, bad-tempered and so on, villages dirty and charging high prices.

And we heard, says one of the Magi, voices singing in our ears, that it was all folly. I'm sure you've often had voices singing that in your ear.

So we sang a moment to, why this cross? Why this fasting and praying? Why not make it easier for ourselves and simply choose the world?

[19 : 52] John says, the reason is that the world passes away. The one who does the will of God remains forever. So the authoritative voice from heaven that pronounces judgment.

The mourning voices on earth that wail the fall of the city. And finally, in verses 21 to 24, the voice that says that judgment is certain.

A mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea. This is an echo of Jeremiah 51 where the prophet is told to do this kind of thing.

And why is this? Why is this anti-God order going to be destroyed? The point is, this anti-God system and its demonic hordes would destroy the universe if not judged.

God is going to have a new heaven and a new earth. This is not going to be destroyed to leave of action. This is not going to be destroyed in order for nothing to take its place.

[21 : 07] This is going to be removed so that the city of God, the new Jerusalem, the new creation can be established. But here an eerie silence falls. As Shakespeare said, the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, all which it inherits.

So like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a wreck behind. That's what's happening here. And there are two things to notice, I think, about these last verses.

And the first thing is there is a sense of regret. Because all these things mentioned here are good things. Music, craftsmen, light, the bride room and the bride.

These are all good and wonderful things. These are the things that make life rich and worth living. And once again we go back to the beginning of our Bibles to get the perspective.

In Genesis 4 we read about the growth of civilization. We read about the beginning of community living. We read about the rise of technology. We read about music.

[22 : 13] We read about culture. The beginning of civilization. Now all these things are good in themselves. But what they cannot do is lead us into the kingdom of God.

And once we start regarding these things as ends in themselves then they become demonic. I love literature and music but literature and music in themselves will not bring us into the kingdom of God.

Although I believe that in the kingdom of God there will be literature and music. If you want to hear my ideas on it, wait until I expound Revelation 21. Kings of the earth will bring their treasures into the city which I understand to mean that all that has been good and wonderful in this present world will survive.

And if you read the last chapters of Narnia you'll see that as well. All that is good is drawn through the door into the Narnia that is to come.

Wonderful. But if we regard these things as ends in themselves, they become as Ecclesiastes says, they become havel, they become empty.

[23 : 22] Remember in Ecclesiastes, everything is tried. Intellect, sex, money, all the wonderful things, all good in themselves and yet, what does the, what does Gohella say in that book?

Everything is Hevel, everything is futile, everything is empty, dust and ashes left in your mouth. There's this terrible sense of regret.

You see, as C.S. Lewis said long ago, if we try to have the kingdom of this world instead of the kingdom of God, we'll lose both.

But if we set our hearts on the kingdom of God, we will find that when we reach there, the things we have loved and have been good in this world will be there as well.

You see, particularly the voice of the bridegroom and bride. what was it God commanded at the beginning? Be fruitful, have children and replenish the earth.

[24 : 26] That's gone, isn't it? The sense of the continuity is gone. Fallen, fallen, fallen. So there's a sense of regret, but there's also a sense of condemnation, isn't there?

Verse 23, for your second part, your merchants are the great ones of the earth. once again, the self-greed, the ultimate disregard for humanity.

And notice verse 24, it's very interesting, in her was found the blood of the prophets and the saints. Obviously, the great persecutor, the destruction of God's people, the trials that God's people have to face.

But you'll notice all who have been slain on the earth, the devil hates, all the devil wants to do is to destroy. Particular hatred of Christ and his people, but the devil doesn't love anyone.

Death is after all, death is an outrage, death is an alien intruder in this world, and death must be destroyed before the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem.

[25 : 36] And what's one of the things said about there? The former things had passed away. And what's the particular former thing? Death itself. had been destroyed.

Satan is a dealer in death. Satan is a dealer in judgment. So you see, as we come to the close this evening, we have to ask ourselves which city we belong to.

Do we belong to Zion City, saviour of Zion City, I through grace, a member am? Or do we want to be entangled with Babylon? Because if we are entangled with Babylon, the destiny is fallen, fallen, fallen.

If, however, we are part of the city of God, then that will last into eternity. And the second thing is this. It's not just a question of choosing a city, it's a question of choosing our allegiance.

And once again, we've seen this in Romans, haven't we? Who are we going to serve? Are we going to serve the beast? Or are we going to follow the lamb wherever he goes?

[26 : 46] The world passes away and all its pleasure. But the one who does the will of God remains forever.

That is the gospel. That is good news. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. God, our Father, how we praise you for this great book at the end of scripture, drawing together so many of the earlier threads, so many of the earlier pictures, warning us away from Babylon and attracting us to Zion.

And so help us to walk in the footsteps of the lamb, to follow him wherever he goes, and to be with him at the end when he returns for his people.

We ask this in his name. Amen.