

Revelation 17:1-19:10 // A Tale of Two Women

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Nicola, thanks for reading that for us so helpfully. Guys, if we've not met before, I'm Martin Ayers, the lead pastor here.

And we've got a big section, but it is one big section of Revelation. That's why we're looking at it together. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet, if that would help you as you go along. I think it will help you tonight.

And it would be more helpful still just to keep your Bibles open at Revelation 17 to 19, starting on page 1245. So let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that the words of my mouth and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts will be pleasing in your sight.

Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. I don't know when you can think of when you've had a taste of the best that the world can offer. I had some experiences like that before I went into ministry when I was working as a lawyer.

[1 : 03] I got seconded to Beijing by my law firm. And it happened, the day I flew out to Beijing was my birthday. So I was very junior in my law firm. I was on flying economy.

But I asked at the check-in desk, I said, because it's my birthday, can I have an upgrade? And it was Air China and 20 years ago, I think they weren't sure what was going on. They didn't really understand. They were thinking, is this a British thing, that we have to give this guy an upgrade? So they gave me an upgrade. Good for you, Air China. And so I found myself walking on the plane and for the first and probably only time in my life, turning left instead of right.

And suddenly in business class, massive reclining chair, drinks being brought round, offers of the menu was passed around for the food, and thinking, I could get used to this.

You know, I felt like I was on top of the world. Then we arrived in Beijing and this driver turned up to get me and took me in a car to this penthouse apartment, service department where I was living for my time there.

[2 : 06] And as I walked into reception, all the staff stood up as if I was some dignitary. And it happened every time. Every time I walked into the lobby of my service department, all the staff stood up.

It got really awkward, actually, that bit. I had to ask them after about 48 hours, please, please stop doing that. And then they did stop, thankfully. But the rest of it, I could get used to it. I could get used to it.

And once you've experienced what it's like to turn left when you walk on a plane, it's quite hard to get used to turning right again. The world can be a very alluring place. And any of us can be seduced by it.

So what does God say? Well, we're in this book, Revelation, where the writer, John, is recounting for us a vision that he was given by the Lord Jesus, who gave it to an angel to give to him.

And as you heard when it was read, he uses vivid, fantastic images to give us a kind of sensory overload. That's the kind of writing.

[3 : 05] Like a Picasso painting, where it's full of imagery and symbolism, but it's to uncover for us spiritual realities. And those are realities about our present world that we wouldn't be able to tell unless they were revealed for us, and realities about the future that we need to know.

And we saw why we get this book in chapters two and three. The Lord Jesus' deep concern is that his people stick with him, that we continue in our faith in him.

We stick with the Bible. We don't go sleepy. We keep loving him. And we've got to keep going.

Now, in chapters 17 to 19, we get a new angle. We keep getting these action replays in Revelation.

It keeps flicking back and showing us the same things with the new angle. The new angle is about our present world and the coming future. And it's a tale of two really different women.

So in chapter 17, we start to meet the cast. And our first woman, so she could win the Oscar for best supporting actress tonight. And that's what our first point is about, an astonishing prostitute.

[4 : 13] And so many are in on the action. Now, John has this astonishing sight. Look at verse one. Everyone's astonished in chapter 17. And in verse one, he tells us why.

One of the seven angels who had the seven bulls came and said to me, come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute who sits by many waters. And in verse three, just the second sentence there, John sees her.

There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads. That's a picture of great authority. And ten horns.

That's a picture of mighty strength. Now, it's horrible, isn't it? And this beast, this scarlet beast, this is Satan. This is the evil one. The greatest demon.

And he is propping up Babylon, the prostitute. And she's wearing all the glitz in a picture that it's deliberately captivating and grotesque.

[5 : 12] So if we find this unpleasant, it's because we're meant to. That's meant to be how it's working on us. Verse four, she's dressed in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls.

So this is like luxury, extravagance, decadence, opulence, regal splendor, wealth. And then it's really grotty. Read on. She held a golden cup in her hand filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.

The name written on her forehead was a mystery. Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth. Now, as ever in Revelation, the Old Testament is our key to understanding what this means.

Babylon was a great empire. And those of you who know the story of Daniel and the lion's den, that was when the Babylonian empire sacked Jerusalem. God's people went into exile.

People like Daniel and his friends were taken to Babylon and they were kind of awestruck by Babylon and its power. They were, some of them, the temptation was to be seduced by Babylon and they were also deeply threatened by Babylon.

[6 : 25] if they stuck with God, with the living God. And that makes Babylon, then, a symbol of human greatness while rejecting the living God.

Today for us, it's all the human achievement and greatness around us that looks so seductive as it offers us wealth and sensual pleasure and comfort if you live for it.

people are captivated by Babylon. That's a message from this chapter in verse 2. Those in power in the world are sleeping with her. Did you notice that? With her, the kings of the earth committed adultery.

And it's not just them, it's everyone under them. The inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries. So all around us, we will find people, this is what people are living for.

This is what they love. This is what they serve. And John wants us to see it's grotty. Babylon is grotty. Look at how Christians are treated by the world without God in verse 6.

[7 : 27] I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people. The blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

And this is a reality all over the world today that committed Christians are hunted down and imprisoned and degraded and killed for their faith by Babylon.

And the Babylon that we might see in our, like the corridors we walk in in life might look very different to that. We might meet people who are worldly, who have nothing to do with God, but think, well, I've got nothing against Christians.

But John wants us to see here in Revelation 17 that the beast is propping up the whole thing. The whole thing is demonic. And it stands against Christ and his people.

And when you read Revelation, God does not want you to be a Christian and he has two main tactics in Revelation. One is that he wants to terrify you with persecution, with the cost of being a believer.

[8 : 28] And the other is he wants to use alluring seduction. And it's that second way that is in focus with this picture of this woman that the Lord says to you and me, sorry, that the world says, the world says to you and me, come and have some of Babylon's pleasures.

Just focus a bit less on this Jesus of yours and look at the fulfillment that you could have. Look at what you could enjoy. Think of the freedom. You'd have peace. You'd have contentment. You'd have luxury. Self-indulgence. You'd just have fun. Loads of fun. And we think, oh, it looks harmless.

And Jesus shows us here, she is a whore. Do not sleep with her. She is a whore. It is grotty. The whole system has a dark side. And already by the end of chapter 17, the cracks are appearing. In verse 16, it turns in on itself. What looked so great and together is actually fundamentally unstable with enmity. And that brings us to our second point, a sensational verdict.

[9 : 36] Be sure that judgment is coming. In chapter 18. So two glorious angels appear. The first one is so glorious, the whole earth is lit up in verse 1 by this angel with this verdict that he brings on Babylon.

And then we get a second angel who brings an appeal to God's people. So the verdict is Babylon is going down in verse 2. Have a look. With a mighty voice he shouted, Fallen!

Fallen is Babylon the great. And really that's the big idea for us tonight. That judgment is coming. Why? Because God sees the world for what it really is.

Just in these chapters, a few reasons get picked out. He says Babylon is demonic in verse 2. She has become a dwelling for demons and a haunt for every impure spirit.

We've seen already that that results in the persecution of Jesus' people. And he lines himself up with his people when they get flack for belonging to him. And she is drunk on the blood of Christians.

[10 : 46] And God is right to be furious about that, about the treatment of his people around the world today. We also see in these chapters the way Babylon exploits people.

Without a moral framework other than greed is good, self-indulgence is good, what you get is you get winners who are selfish and you get losers who get exploited.

So if we just look down again at verse 12 of chapter 18 as the merchants sing after Babylon falls, it's just this great section where you see how Babylon's riches are so attractive and at the end there's this horrible twist.

Did you notice that as it was read? Let's read again verse 12. As they remember how great Babylon was they say cargos of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. That's the precious stones.

The beautiful soft furnishings come next. Fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth, every sort of citron wood. And you get these costly materials fit for a celebrity.

[11 : 51] It says articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble. Then you get the decadence of fine dining, cargos of cinnamon and spice.

Then the finest beauty products and facial treatments, incense, myrrh, frankincense. And then it just goes on. The ultimate consumer culture, wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses and carriages and human beings sold as slaves.

That's what happens in Babylon in the midst of a bunch of people having a great time in decadent greed. You get other people who are commodities.

They're treated as property. And Babylon then thinks it will last forever in its power. Look at her boast in verse 7. In her heart she boasts, I sit enthroned as queen.

I am not a widow. I will never mourn. And then by the end of verse 8, it's like those fires in Los Angeles a few weeks ago. Verse 8, she will be consumed by fire for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

[13 : 02] And these are the moments in Revelation and in the Bible where we thought in the last couple of weeks of how often we find that hard coming to it. The idea, this picture of God's promise, His assurance, there is a coming judgment.

And we might think, well how can this fit with God being a God of love for Him to be angry like this? But anger is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love is indifference.

And it is right and good that God is so concerned with how we live because He is a God of love, a holy God, a righteous God, His wrath is coming.

So that the true response when His judgment does fall is in verse 20. If you look down there towards the end of the chapter, where there's this call, rejoice over her, you heavens.

Rejoice, you people of God. Rejoice, apostles and prophets, for God has judged her with the judgment she imposed on you. Babylon will get what it deserves, says God, and it will be this display of God's justice, His goodness.

[14:05] that's the verdict. And then comes the appeal, which is our application, really, for tonight, from chapter 18, verse 4. 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.

And for anyone who isn't a Christian and is proud, proud of their achievements, maybe if they've achieved wealth, or position, or popularity, and they think, I did this, I've made it, it was me.

Verse 7 is very shocking news, isn't it? Verse 7, where God says, give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself.

So God says, all the glory that you gave yourself, all the luxury, that will be matched by grief at the coming judgment, if you've done that without reference to him.

God will put every wrong right. And the appeal to God's people to come out from Babylon is not an appeal to kind of retreat into a little enclave.

[15:21] In the Roman Empire in the first century, for the original audience of this book, that would have been completely impossible for Christians. The call, rather, is to remain in the world, but not to belong to the world, not to be of the world.

Jesus wants you and me to be his people in the workplaces of Babylon, on the campuses, in the schools, the hospitals, the office blocks, the restaurant kitchens, and the pubs and the sports clubs, but never compromising, because we don't belong to her.

You and I to stay resolutely faithful to Jesus, while people around us are absolutely captivated by money and sex and power, because we see what Babylon really is, that through the cracks you can see she's grotty, and we believe this promise about the future, that judgment is coming.

The orgy all around us today is going to become a bloodbath, and that paves the way for two very different reactions to the coming judgment. We see a wake and then a wedding.

So our next point, point three, a wake around the world, for it's all so suddenly completely over.

That's what the rest of chapter 18 is full of. It's three laments, three wars, as people are heartbroken that Babylon is gone.

[16:47] First it's the kings in verse nine, and we might think of political leaders, presidents, first ministers, maybe we think of captains of industry, of big tech, big pharma, people with power.

The kings of the earth, verse nine, 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, war, war to you, great city, you mighty city. of Babylon.

Then in verse 11, it's the merchants. We might think of the traders, the bankers, the entrepreneurs, business owners, retailers. Hear them weep in verse 14.

They cry, the fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered. And thirdly, in verse 17, it's the sea captains and sailors.

[17:48] So we might think of lorry drivers and railway workers, the transport infrastructure. Look at verse 18. 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 weep. What's he saying with these wars? When the prostitute dies, it is a sad day for everyone who has been sleeping with her.

There are two other things God reveals to us here about Babylon's coming fall. He reveals that it is sudden and it is complete. The suddenness of it all is repeated, is in the repeated phrase, in one day.

So in verse 10, sorry, in one hour even, in verse 10. In one hour, do you see that your doom has come? And look at verse 17. In one hour, such wealth has been brought to ruin.

And then verse 19, it's the same again. In one hour, she has been brought to ruin. Which, it's worth pausing to reflect, isn't it? This is why, for some of us here tonight, this may be something we're struggling to believe.

[18:57] It may seem implausible. I'm sure you can think of people around you in life who, if they knew this is what you believe, if they knew this is what the Bible says, they would mock.

They would scoff at the idea. But Jesus says, it will be very sudden. It will come like a thief in the night. You won't see signs of it that help you to believe it.

It seems hard to believe, doesn't it? The idea of the human structures around us that seem so stable and at times so awesome. Cities like New York and Shanghai and London or Glasgow, the

boardrooms of our businesses where they don't start with a framework that Jesus is Lord, the award-winning schools around us where nobody would dream of teaching that Jesus is Lord. It all seems so stable like it could just go on and on. And in verse 10, we're being told in one hour it will fall. It will be that sudden.

And it's complete. I don't know if you've ever been, I think, when we go to Keswick and you're at the lake at Derwent Water. Sometimes you try and find big rocks and throw them into the lake for the drama of them plunging through the lake.

[20 : 15] And in verse 21, a mighty angel takes a huge boulder and throws it into the sea. And you can imagine it just plummeting through the ocean into the floor, the seabed.

That's never coming back. And look at the words, verse 21, with such violence, the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again.

And then we get this message, the music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters will never be heard in you again. Verse 23, the light of a lamp will never shine in you again.

The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. You know, the dinner parties, the 21st birthday bashers, the golden anniversary bowls, it will stop, it will never happen again.

Gone, gone, gone. Finite. Kaput. I worked on a law case when I was a lawyer and there was this guy, Mr. Sub-Romanian, and he was this guy who just kept coming back.

[21 : 15] Years and years and years, he had kept bringing claim after claim after claim against our client. She was in America, she kept flying over to try and defend it. Every time you thought it had finished, he was back, Mr. Sub-Romanian, a new action, a new appeal.

It went on for years and years and years and then we had one case before a trial judge and at the end of his judgment where he dismissed the claim, he leaned over and he said, this time, Mr. Sub-Romanian, it really is the end.

And that's a bit like the message here in Revelation. The angel is saying, this time, Babylon, it really is the end. There is no future for her. It's over.

That's the wake. But what we see next is that not everyone will be grieving. That's our fourth point. Hallelujah's in heaven for here comes the bride.

And here's a question for your trivia. The word hallelujah, we get it in church songs, don't we? We hear it in pop songs. Leona Lewis made it famous.

[22 : 24] Was it Leone Lewis? Is that right? No, you're shaking. Have I got that wrong? Alexander, right. People have sung about hallelujah and we get it everywhere and it means praise the Lord, hallelujah.

How many times would you guess the word hallelujah comes in the New Testament? Just keep your answer to yourself, have a mental guess. How many times would the word hallelujah appear in the whole New Testament?

The answer is four and every one of them is in this chapter. Why? Because the holy judgment of God brings joy to his people and they praise him.

Chapter 19, verse one. After this, I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting, hallelujah, salvation and glory and power belong to our God.

for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.

[23 : 34] Aren't they beautiful words? God's judgment is true and it's just. Praise God. And the angels in the throne room of heaven, they praise God in verse four and then it's the people of God, Christians from all the ages in verse six.

Together, verse six, then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder shouting, hallelujah, for our Lord God almighty reigns.

And now we meet the second woman in our story tonight. The reason Babylon is depicted as a woman, as a harlot, is because we now meet another woman and she's beautiful, she's pure, and she's unblemished for her wedding day.

And verse seven, let us rejoice and be glad and give him, God, glory, for the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.

So this is the future, this is the world restored, being depicted as a wedding banquet. The joy of a wedding for a bride and a groom and the groom is the Lamb, the groom is Jesus Christ, a Lamb because he's died a sin-bearing death to make this wedding possible, to rescue his people.

[24 : 52] And he's now risen and he's glorious and majestic and victorious and ready to be united with his people forever. And his bride is the people of God.

And they're wearing this beautiful dress, verse eight, fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. And then John tells us, fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people. Isn't that extraordinary? So every time we live faithfully, we just make the right choice in a world that stands against Jesus. As we choose not to compromise, as we choose to please Jesus in what we do and in what we don't do, those works, they have this eternal value.

They will glorify him because they will adorn us as his bride on that wedding day. And the joy, the happiness will be without any shame and it will go on for endless days.

So we're left with the appeal of verse nine. Then the angel said to me, write this, blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the land. And he added, these are the true words of God.

[26 : 04] So thinking about these chapters together, if you're here and you're still looking in at the Christian faith, if you're still exploring, so glad you're here, would tonight be a night for you to get off the fence and throw in your lot with Jesus?

For the offer that's here, I think Jesus is saying to each one of us tonight, which woman do you want to be with in my story? Do you want to be captivated by Babylon for acceptance and approval from the world, but where under the surface it is toxic, it's sordid?

Or do you want to be part of the people of God, the resplendent bride of Christ? Will you refuse the seduction of the world now for the pure joy of the world to come?

So that for those of us who are already Christians, we could ask ourselves tonight, in what area of my life do I find Lady Babylon most captivating?

That's a matter for our hearts and we need to reflect on it because you might be living or working right at the heart of Babylon in the sense of where you have to spend most of your life and your time.

[27 : 19] and God may grant you great success there. You might be rich, you might be popular, you might do those things and remain wonderfully faithful to Jesus, a great ambassador for Christ, used by him where he's put you.

But you could ask yourself, where do I notice that I'm in a battle here? Because if you don't see that you're in a battle, maybe you've compromised. Where are you drawing lines in your life to show that you're in Babylon, you can't avoid that, but you're not in bed with Babylon.

You're not selling out. Your heart is firmly fixed on the wedding supper of the Lamb. That's where you belong. That's what you're yearning for. We might picture a couple of characters.

Faithful Frankie, she is a senior investment banker or she's a school head teacher. She's someone respected in her working life, but she loves Jesus.

She is uncompromising in her faith in Jesus. And then let's picture Swithering Steve, who is, if you called Steve here tonight, it's not you.

[28 : 27] Swithering Steve, he's much more junior in his working life, but already his heart is adrift. He's being drawn away from Jesus. He still gets to church now and again, but the thing that really gets his heart thumping is the daydream, the thought of worldly success, of a nice flat in the West End, the holidays, the business class travel.

I've had chats here with guys where I can see that it's when they start talking about their next golfing weekend away with their non-Christian mates or their next overseas trip to follow their football team, that's when you really see their eyes light up.

And we have to ask ourselves, personally, am I in the world still making time in my diary for my non-Christian mates because I'm praying for them and I'm longing for evangelistic conversations with them because Jesus has captured my heart?

Or am I in the world because I love it? I just love the world. I'm sold on it. What area is it for you where you feel Babylon is pulling on your heart?

The message is see through it, see what Babylon really is and have faith in the promise that judgment is coming. It's going to be sudden and complete and devastating and it has to come so that the hallelujahs can ring out from heaven.

[30 : 02] And when they do, everyone who's been faithful to Jesus will enjoy fullness of joy forever. Let's pray. Sorry.

Sorry. Lord Jesus, we thank you for this revelation, this prophecy.

May we go from here changed by it, resolved to be faithful. we choose not to belong to Babylon.
And in our lives, we know where our hearts are being captivated by the world.
But we repent of that and we pray that you will grant us sincere repentance, that you'd be at work in
our hearts so that what we really long for is to be found at that wedding supper where the joy will be
a godly joy that goes on for endless days.
Amen. Amen.