

Sermon – 30/03/2008 pm

Babylon Buried

Study Text: Revelation 18:21–24

What comes into your mind when you hear the word ‘Titanic’? This was the name of the biggest ship in the world which sank in the Atlantic Ocean almost 100 years ago. The name comes from the Greek word ‘titan’ which means a man or thing of enormous size and strength. The ‘Titanic’ was a super ship, so large and powerful it was said to be unsinkable.

Architects, engineers, builders and all craftsmen could be proud of their work. On board the Titanic the passengers, including some of the richest people in the world enjoyed the finest of food and wine, of music and entertainment, as the ship glided across the ocean. Some probably took the opportunity to get married while on board this magnificent liner.

You know what happened. It was a moonless night and the sea was calm. The party went on until 11.40pm when an iceberg was sighted. 37 seconds later the Titanic hit the massive iceberg and within a few hours the biggest ship ever built by man was at the bottom of the ocean, and 2/3 of the people on board were dead.

Not Anymore

If John were writing the book of Revelation today he might have used the word Titanic instead of Babylon. Yes, I know he was writing what the angel told him, but the point is Babylon was a word that brought specific thoughts to the mind of New Testament Jews and Christians. The Babylonian empire came to an end hundreds of years before but the picture of the exile recorded in the prophets was still vivid. They were experiencing similar tribulations in the Roman Empire – deprivation, enforced emperor and idol worship, persecution and death.

The message Jesus gave to John to send to the churches was that the power of Rome, symbolically called Babylon, would be broken. The message in fact extended beyond Rome and to the very end of the age. All world powers would come to an end, and not just world powers but the power behind these powers, the power of Satan. ‘Babylons’ exist today and will do so into the future.

The point for us to observe is that ‘the pleasure mad, arrogant world, with all its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its antichristian philosophy and culture, with its teeming multitudes that have forsaken God and have lived according to the lust of the flesh and the desires of the mind, shall perish’. Greed and covetousness are sins according to the word of God, but according to the world and to Babylon, they are essential to success in this world.

Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen the angel declared (18:1-2). Now what seems to be another angel, a mighty angel, appears to tell of the fall of Babylon from another perspective (18:21). Here, if you like, is another eyewitness account of Babylon’s destruction. Is this the same mighty angel who appeared to John previously (5:2, 10:1)? Certainly this angel needed to be strong in order to throw what was like a great millstone into the sea where it *shall not be found anymore* (18:21). A millstone was a large flat stone pulled by an animal to grind grain and make flour.

The previous angel announced the fall of Babylon in terms of her being *utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her* (18:8). Fire evokes images of total destruction, with things being reduced to ashes. But there are some things that do not burn up in a fire. Here we have another picture of the destruction of Babylon which ensures her destruction is comprehensive and final. There will be no phoenix rising from the ashes. Consigned to the depths of the sea, Babylon will disappear never to be seen again.

Jeremiah prophesied of the fall of the literal Babylon, the great city that was full of idols, corruption and violence. He sent a man to Babylon with a book detailing the judgment of God. He told the man that after reading the book he was to tie it to a stone and throw it in the river, saying *thus Babylon shall sink and not rise from the catastrophe that I will bring upon her* (Jeremiah 51:63). The prophesy came true, of course. King Belshazzar was assassinated in the middle of the party he had thrown for a thousand of his friends.

In the New Testament Jesus speaks of one who causes sin having a millstone hung around his neck and being thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:6). Being lost at sea usually means a person's body is never found. The picture is one of Babylon's sudden and certain end. Note the words 'no more' or 'not anymore' repeated six times in this passage.

Think of the Titanic if you like as you read this passage about Babylon. Music was a must for any party then just as it is nowadays – the louder with better. The band kept playing as the Titanic sank into the icy waters of the Atlantic – they did not want the party to stop. Some find it strange to worship God without music – and the louder it is the better they worship. 'A church without music, how can that be' they say. *The sound of musicians...shall not be heard in you anymore* (18:22).

The work of the craftsmen shall cease (18:22). The great prostitute encourages men to build bigger and bigger things – like tall towers or the Titanic. Nebuchadnezzar looked over Babylon and said *I have built a royal house by my mighty power* (Daniel 4:30). While these words were still in his mouth a voice fell from heaven condemning him.

The millstone fell silent in symbolic Babylon (18:22). The food and wine ran out. Moreover, the voice of those taking their wedding vows was heard no more (18:23). In the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark (Matthew 24:38). Their voices fell silent as the waters rose to engulf them. As much as the Lord delights to hear people take marriage vows, he must hate the word that breaks those vows. All will be silenced one day.

Finally her lights go out (18:23). Lifeboats were launched from the Titanic and people scrambled to get on board – although some refused to go outside because it was too cold! Apparently most lifeboats left with only half their capacity. In the midst of this scrambling the lights went out. Darkness suddenly engulfed the whole ship as it sank – it was a moonless night. On this darkest of nights the ship slowly but surely disappeared beneath the water of the Atlantic Ocean sinking almost 4km to the bottom of the sea where it remains, silent forever.

Self Glory

In the aftermath of the Titanic sinking an enquiry was set up. Why did this mighty ship sink? When God judges the world many ask why? Why did Babylon the great get judged by God. After all, the 'majority' it seemed were happy to be in the same house as the great prostitute. Beware of this word 'majority' so cleverly used by 'Babylon', by the press, and by politicians

today. Not matter how immoral or evil something may be in the eyes of God, Babylon will seduce the ‘majority’ and claim everyone wants it made legal.

The angel gives the reason for the divine judgment of Babylon. The first of these is pride and self-glory. *Your merchants were great men of the earth* (18:23). The picture is one of riches and luxury, but it is not the possession of riches *per se* that brings judgment. ‘Possession of wealth is not the reason for God’s judgment of Babylon. The cause lies rather in her arrogant use of it and trust in the security it brings which is tantamount to idolatry’.

Riches often blind the eyes to needs of the poor (as with the rich man and Lazarus story) and to God (as with our generation). The merchants became rich by association with Babylon. They boasted ‘I am a self made man’ – and they worshipped their creator. They worked hard to get to the top or to get rich; they are congratulated by the world and themselves. Does the CEO being paid millions think for a moment he does not deserve what he is paid?

Sorcery

By your sorcery all the nations were deceived (18:23). This is the second reason for her judgment. Babylon will be punished because she influenced the nations to worship idols through sorcery and magic. She promoted false religions and idol worship. Idol worship is compatible with pride and self-glory, unlike true religion. True religion on the other hand is this – *to look after widows and orphans in their trouble and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world* (James 1:27).

It was Satan himself who sought to lead the Son of man astray with promises of worldly glory. ‘Turn this stone into bread’ he said, and ‘jump off this tower. I will give you all this if you worship me’. The great prostitute was in cohorts with the beast of the sea and the dragon or Satan. Jesus would only use his power according to the will of God. Too many people still look to Jesus as a miracle worker rather than the Son of the sovereign, holy God who demands repentance, belief, obedience and exclusive worship.

Saints

The third reason for Babylon’s guilt is the blood of the saints (18:24). In an earlier vision the martyrs cried out from under the altar in heaven for God to avenge their blood (6:10). The great prostitute was drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6). She was guilty of persecuting the church, the special people who belonged to God. She was also guilty of the blood of many other innocent people – victims of poverty, war, and abortion. The sovereign, holy God will ensure justice in the end.

We are reminded a man like Hitler who was guilty on most of these charges. The great prostitute must have been so pleased to see this man marching across the world. Bent on self-glory, on conquering the world and being worshipped as a god, he killed Jews, Gypsies, the disabled and millions of other innocent people who got in his way. We rejoice over the demise of such a man, but was he the last man to be deceived by Satan? Was he the last man to be ruled by pride and self-glory, by the lust for power and everything this world offers?

The party is almost over. The lights will soon go out. This world will soon be no more. Are you on the ship that is sinking, or are you by the grace of God in the lifeboat with Jesus?

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