

Lesson 43

Last week when we ended we had just read from verse 11 to the first half of verse 17 in Chapter 18. These verses are showing us the second of the three laments in this chapter — the lament of the merchants. They are weeping because of their loss of business.

In verses 12-13 there are twenty-seven different categories of products that were being sold by these merchants. Almost all of the products are self explanatory, but there are a few that deserve some special comment.

The cinnamon in verse 13 and the silk in verse 12 likely came from China, and the spices in verse 13 likely came from India.

The “thyine wood” in verse 12 was called citrus or citron wood by the Romans. The name “thyine” is derived from the Greek word meaning “to sacrifice,” and it was called that because it was burned in sacrifices on account of its fragrance. The wood of this tree was very valuable and was used for making furniture by the Greeks and Romans.

The phrase “slaves, and souls of men” in verse 13 is interesting. A better translation might be “slaves, even the lives of men.” There were some sixty million slaves in the Roman empire. It was not unusual for a man to own four hundred slaves, and those slaves were used for many different purposes. Some masters had slaves walk in front of them so they could return the greetings of friends when the master was too tired or disdainful to do so. Another had an educated slave stand behind him at dinners to supply him with witty quotations. Others used slaves to remind them when to eat and when to sleep.

As Barclay reminds us, “a society built on luxury, on wantonness, on pride, on callousness to human life and personality is necessarily doomed.” That was true then, and it remains true today.

Verses 16 and 17 are chilling.

*Revelation 18:16-17a — Alas, alas, that great city,
that was clothed in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet,
and decked with gold, and precious stones, and pearls!
For in one hour so great riches is come to nought.*

Much could be said of that statement and its relevance both then and now, but I will just quote Hailey:

What about the United States, which has been a land of plenty and great abundance? It has taken much for granted, wasting and squandering its resources. Is it approaching a time when it shall reach for the great abundance bestowed upon it by God, and find it gone for ever?

There is also a lesson here for the church. We must place our trust in God, and only in God. We must not trust in the arm of man, and we must not trust in uncertain riches. The only hand that will be there to lift us up at the end will be the hand of God.

2 Samuel 22:2-3 — The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my saviour; thou savest me from violence.

Unlike the kings here in Chapter 18, King David knew where to place his trust. Let's follow that example. "The God of my rock; in him will I trust."

Revelation 18:17b-19

17b And every shipmaster, and all the company in ships, and sailors, and as many as trade by sea, stood afar off, 18 And cried when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What city is like unto this great city! 19 And they cast dust on their heads, and cried, weeping and wailing, saying, Alas, alas, that great city, wherein were made rich all that had ships in the sea by reason of her costliness! for in one hour is she made desolate.

This third lament is by the shipmasters and the sailors. They were the ones who carried all of the goods bought and sold by the merchants, and so they would also suffer when Rome fell.

Rome was a great economic power, and its fall would be felt by all who depended on Rome. In fact, we have a name for the time period that followed the *physical* collapse of Rome in AD 476 — we call the next five centuries the **Dark Ages**. These verses are describing what the dark ages would be like long before the dark ages occurred.

The city of Rome is pictured here as being made desolate in one hour. We have already discussed the phrase “one hour.” It denotes a time of critical importance. It also emphasizes the suddenness, the brevity, and the unexpected nature of the event. Nero’s fire raged a week and failed to destroy the entire city yet the fire that God sends destroys the city in one hour! Rome’s fall is total and complete and worse than anything Rome could imagine.

Some people look at this description of sudden destruction, and they see an atomic bomb. Is that what we are being shown here? Of course not! This language is figurative, just as we have seen all throughout this book. The judgment and the deliverance here are spiritual, not physical. The language is intended to show a swift and unexpected calamity, and that is something that will happen not just to Rome, but to all who stand opposed to God.

This dirge of the shipmasters reminds us again of Ezekiel’s lament for Tyre.

Ezekiel 27:28-30 — And all that handle the oar, the mariners, and all the pilots of the sea, shall come down from their ships, they shall stand upon the land; And shall cause their voice to be heard against thee, and shall cry bitterly, and shall cast up dust upon their heads, they shall wallow themselves in the ashes.

Although Rome was not on the coast, the merchandise of the world entered at its port in Ostia. And again, the shipmasters weep, not over the loss of the city, but over the loss of their trade. Their concern is for themselves, not for Rome.

We see in these verses the incredible materialism of Rome, and if we are looking for modern day parallels, that one is impossible to miss. We may still print “In God We Trust” on our money, but our nation’s actions speak much more loudly than our words.

The motto “In God We Trust” first appeared on our coinage during the Civil War. But did you know that there is one particular gold coin that does not include that motto? Teddy Roosevelt specifically asked that it not be put on the gold coins that were minted during his presidency. Why? Because he knew

the lifestyles of many of the men out West where those gold coins were most often circulated, and he did not believe that God's name should be used on coins that were spent in saloons, gambling halls, and brothels. The President expressed that view in a letter dated November 11, 1907:

My own feeling in the matter is due to my very firm conviction that to put such a motto [In God We Trust] on coins, or to use it in any kindred manner, not only does no good but does positive harm, and is in effect irreverence which comes dangerously close to sacrilege. A beautiful and solemn sentence such as the one in question should be treated and uttered only with that fine reverence which necessarily implies a certain exaltation of spirit. Any use which tends to cheapen it, and above all, any use which tends to secure it being treated in a spirit of levity, is from every standpoint profoundly to be regretted.

How times have changed! How far we have fallen!

Sadly, many today trust in their dollars rather than in God. They have everything that money can buy — but have nothing that it can't.

As one commentator noted, “like the uprooted vine that generated the self-consuming fire in Ezekiel 19:14, a culture that worships commercial success will strike the sparks that ultimately burn it to ashes.” We are seeing that here in Chapter 18 with regard to Rome.

Revelation 18:20

20 Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her.

We have made the point many times that this book refers to the faithless Romans as those who dwell upon the earth, and this book pictures the church as being in heaven even though many of them were still living on earth and suffering under the Roman lash. God pictures the church as being safe in heaven to comfort them and to assure them. Yes, to literally live in heaven eternally, those Christians must remain faithful unto death. But if they do that,

then their eternal destiny is assured — and Rome can do nothing to change that.

Verse 20 is proof of what we have been saying. Who is told to rejoice? Heaven, the apostles, and the prophets. What does that trio remind us of?

***Ephesians 2:20** — And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.*

In that verse Paul discusses the church, the apostles, and the prophets. Here we see a command to rejoice directed to heaven, the apostles, and the prophets. The three groups are the same in each verse — the difference is that in this book the church is pictured as already being in heaven, and so that is how the church is addressed here in verse 20.

The end of verse 20 gives us any more proof of that fact. The reason that heaven is told to rejoice is that God has avenged the church by God's judgment on Rome. That takes us all the way back to Revelation 6:10 where the martyrs asked God to avenge their blood on them that dwell on the earth. Elsewhere the book describes the prayers of all the saints coming before the throne of God (5:8, 8:3-4).

God is addressing the church here in verse 20, including its foundation. As before, the contrast shown here between Rome and the church is stark. While Rome and its allies mourn, the church is told to rejoice.

But I thought we were supposed to weep with those who weep. Aren't the Christians in verse 20 *rejoicing* with those who weep? Absolutely! But they aren't rejoicing out of personal bitterness. Their concern, like that of the four living creatures, is for the holiness and reputation of God. The church rejoices at the vindication of God and at the defeat of this great enemy of God and of God's people. These events are an answer to their prayer in Revelation 6:10! **How could they not rejoice?** God had answered their prayers!

And Rome deserved everything that Rome got! Rome had the church in its crosshairs, and Satan through Rome was intent on destroying the church. The Roman emperors were evil, godless men who were bathed in innocent blood. What is our best evidence for that fact? Ancient historians? Roman coins? No. Our best evidence is the Bible. Daniel, Paul, and John all describe those Roman rulers, and those inspired descriptions are our best evidence about what those emperors were like. I recently finished reading a biography of Nero that made him look more like Saint Nero the Chaste! According to the author, Nero perse-

cuted no one, killed no one (expect his mother!), and sought only the best for his beloved people. Not only does that portrait not fit with the secular historical record, it does not fit with the Bible, which refers to Nero as a beast that was slain, and who figuratively returned as Domitian. Yes, those secular historians (such as Tacitus and Suetonius) might have been biased (as that author argued), but the Bible was not biased. The Bible is truth (John 17:17).

Rome's judgment is a cause for great rejoicing. God's people requested justice, and God has delivered it. The righteous are victorious, and the evil have been defeated.

Rome was rejoicing in Chapter 11 when it appeared that the two witness had been defeated, but Rome's rejoicing was premature, and now the tables have turned. Again we find a parallel in the Old Testament judgment of literal Babylon, who also had the tables turned on it.

***Jeremiah 51:48-49** — Then the heaven and the earth, and all that is therein, shall sing for Babylon: for the spoilers shall come unto her from the north, saith the Lord. As Babylon hath caused the slain of Israel to fall, so at Babylon shall fall the slain of all the earth.*

By this point it should go without saying, but here it is: If we want to understand the book of Revelation and what it says about Rome (which Peter calls Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13), we need to carefully study the Old Testament and what it says about ancient Babylon. Over and over again we see the same language used for both judgments, and in neither case is it describing the end of the world. "Babylon is fallen!" And for that reason the people of God rejoice.

Revelation 18:21

21 And a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all.

Here we see a great millstone that is thrown into the sea by a mighty angel to show how the great city of Rome would be thrown down and found no more.

A similar image is used in Jeremiah to describe the fall of ancient Babylon.

Jeremiah 51:63-64 — And it shall be, when thou hast made an end of reading this book, that thou shalt bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of Euphrates: And thou shalt say, Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise from the evil that I will bring upon her.

Rome, like Babylon, would fall never to rise again.

It is interesting (but not surprising) that premillennialists teach just the opposite! They say that the so-called Antichrist will rule from a **revived** Roman empire. Verse 21 leaves no place for a revived Roman empire! “That great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all.”

Verse 21 reminds me of something Jesus said in Matthew 21.

Matthew 21:21 — If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.

We usually describe that verse as hyperbole, but is it? Didn't the church ask in faith for Rome to be judged in Revelation 6:10? And don't we see God answering that prayer of faith by casting Rome as a millstone into the sea? And remember how it was described in Revelation 8:8 — “a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea.” Yes, when we utter a prayer of faith, God will move mountains on our behalf! And that is no hyperbole! We see it happening right here with the mighty Roman empire!

Revelation 18:22-24

22 And the voice of harpers, and musicians, and of pipers, and trumpeters, shall be heard no more at all in thee; and no craftsman, of whatsoever craft he be, shall be found any more in thee; and the sound of a millstone shall be heard no more at all in thee; 23 And the light of a can-

dle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth.

Verses 22-23 show us five aspects of normal Roman life that would vanish with the judgment of Rome.

- The sound of musical instruments and rejoicing would go away.
- The sound of craftsmen plying their trade would never be heard again.
- The sound of the mill would disappear.
- No lights in the houses or in the streets would be seen again.
- The sounds of weddings would no longer be heard.

The picture being painted here is that Rome is to become a terrible **silent** and **dark** desolation. Rome, the city that had once set Christians aflame to provide light for Nero's drunken orgies, would be plunged into darkness and silence.

As before, we find similar descriptions in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 25:10 (concerning Judah) — *Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle.*

Ezekiel 26:13 (concerning Tyre) — *And I will cause the noise of thy songs to cease; and the sound of thy harps shall be no more heard.*

Why did this happen? Verses 23-24 give us three reasons. First, it was because Rome's merchants were the great men of the earth. Second, it was because by Rome's sorceries all nations were deceived. Third, it was because in Rome was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon

the earth. In short, this happened because of Rome's greed, because of Rome's false evil religion, and because of Rome's persecution of God's people. Those are the three reasons given in verses 23-24.

These verses remind me of the reasons why God judged another evil city — Sodom.

Ezekiel 16:49-50 — Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good.

Was Rome a great nation? Yes, Rome was the greatest nation the world had ever seen from an earthly perspective. But Rome had not used that greatness for good. God had used Rome for good, but Rome had not used Rome for good.

Instead, Rome had used its greatness to deceive and mislead the world. Rome had made its material greatness the goal of its existence. Rome had used its great power to persecute and murder the people of God. Rome had caused all nations to adopt Rome's false standards and Rome's false worship.

Rome fell because Rome was covered with the blood of God's people, and, like Tyre in Ezekiel 24:6, Rome was truly a "bloody city." Verse 24 does not just say that Rome murdered Christians; that verse says that Rome also murdered all who were slain upon the earth. Rome was blood-thirsty, and that blood-thirstiness did not extend only to Christians. Rome murdered many others as well, and God is holding them to account for that as well.

And which is the worse crime from God's perspective (if either is "worse")? Murdering a faithful Christian who would then go to be with Christ, or murdering someone who had not yet heard the gospel but who might have heard it the very next day? Rome killed both.

Rome fell because Rome worshipped wealth and luxury. Rome fell because Rome lived a prodigal and wanton life. Rome fell because Rome found no pleasure except in materialism and perversity. Rome fell because Rome was lifted up with pride and felt it had no need for God. Rome fell because Rome murdered and persecuted God's children.

Waste? Materialism? Wantonness? Perversity? Pride? The shedding of innocent blood? Do we see any modern day parallels in that list?

Introduction to Chapters 19-22

Four chapters remain in the book of Revelation, and these final four chapters are some of the most debated and misunderstood chapters in the entire book. Before we dive in, I think it would be helpful to pause and consider 10 points that will be helpful to us as we study these closing chapters of the book.

1. The subject of the book has not changed.

There is no reason to think that we will have a giant change of subject between Chapter 18 and Chapter 19. We should expect that whatever we have been seeing the first eighteen chapters will remain front and center as we study the final four chapters. Revelation is a single book, and we need to continue to treat it as such. One reason some people have such strange ideas about the closing chapters of the book is that they went off the rails back in Chapter 1, and by the time they get to these final chapters they are so far off the rails that the train track is no longer even in sight!

2. The time frame of the book has not changed.

We saw the first century time frame of this book in the very first verse of the very first chapter. We saw it again a few verses later. We have also seen it scattered throughout the first eighteen chapters we have studied. There is no reason to expect a giant leap forward in time as we approach these final four chapters. In fact, the same time frame that we saw repeated twice in the first chapter of this book will again be repeated twice in the final chapter of this book.

3. The purpose of the book has not changed.

The purpose of this book was to provide comfort to the persecuted first century church. The purpose was to promise them victory if they remained faithful unto death. The purpose was to answer their prayers for vengeance against bloodthirsty Rome. There is no reason to suspect that the purpose of this book has suddenly changed in the closing chapters.

4. The cast of the book has not changed.

So far we have seen a rather limited cast of characters in this book. We have seen God the Father sending out judgments against those who dwell upon the earth, which we know are the faithless persecuting Romans.

And we have seen God the Son. In fact, Jesus is the star of this book. The first words of the book are “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” and from that point on we have seen Jesus playing the central role in everything that has happened.

In fact, Jesus is the reason that these things are happening. And Jesus is the reason why there is a promised blessing to those who remain faithful unto death.

But we have also seen some other characters. We have seen the church portrayed as a radiant woman. We have seen Rome portrayed as a bloodthirsty harlot. We have seen the Roman emperors portrayed as heads, as horns, and as beasts.

There is no reason to suspect that the closing chapters of this book are going to shift to a different cast of characters. If we haven't seen the Russians, the Chinese, or the Pope so far, I don't think we should look for them in the closing chapters.

5. This is no time to start ignoring the rest of the Bible.

All throughout our study we have carefully considered everything that the Bible has to say about the subjects we have studied. At no time have we studied a verse of this book in a vacuum. We have rejected views of this book that veer away from other easy to understand verses in the Bible. We need to continue operating this way as we study these final four chapters. Those who have done otherwise have come up with all sorts of strange ideas about what these chapters teach.

6. This is no time to start ignoring similar Old Testament language.

The Old Testament has grounded us in our study of Revelation. Any time we have been tempted to say that certain language can only mean the end of the world, we have seen the same or similar language in the Old Testament used in reference to some past judgment of an enemy of God's people. The Old Testament has kept us from seeing in these verses atomic bombs, Cobra helicopters, and hoards of Chinese soldiers.

7. We should continue understanding the language in these final four chapters as apocalyptic language.

Most of the language in this book is apocalyptic language. We saw some of it in the first three chapters, and then we saw a great deal of it once the main vision began in Chapter 4. There is no reason to expect that we will suddenly quit seeing it in these closing chapters. We must continue to understand this language as figurative language unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

8. The rule for understanding apocalyptic language is that numbers are figurative, and we should not depart from that rule now.

Yes, sometimes numbers are also literal, and we know that because an angel told us that in Chapter 17. But that was an exception to the rule, and likely the reason we received that divine explanation. Numbers are figurative, and we have seen many example. Two. Three. Three and a half. Four. Six. Seven. Eight. Ten. Twelve. We have seen all of those numbers used as figures. And we have seen them combined to create new symbols such as with 144,000.

9. The theme of this book has not changed.

The theme of this book is that things are not always what they seem. The theme is that to truly see something as it really is, we must look at that thing through God's eyes. That theme hasn't gone anywhere.

10. The choice presented in this book has not changed.

Caesar or Christ? The city of man or the city of God? The kingdom of man or the kingdom of God? The bloodthirsty whore of Chapter 17 or the beautiful radiant woman of Chapter 12? Those who dwell on the earth or those who dwell in heaven? Those are the choices that everyone has been called upon to make so far in this book, and we should not expect that call to change in the closing chapters. We have been tracing the number two throughout our study of this book. That number has been a thread throughout our study, and two is the number of decision. Either one or the other. There is no third choice.

With that background, let's dive in.

Chapter 19

God's people were told to rejoice in verse 20 of Chapter 18, and that is what we see them doing here in Chapter 19. The church rejoices over the fall of the great city and the victory of the church.

The great joy of those who overcame and who conquered is compared here to the joy that accompanies a great wedding feast. The picture is one of victory and unrestrained joy.

The battle at Armageddon (which was first portrayed in Chapter 16) is considered again in this chapter. The two beasts are defeated and cast into a lake of

fire. This chapter provides some of the details that were omitted when that battle was first described.

Revelation 19:1-2

1 And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: 2 For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand.

A great multitude in heaven rejoices over the judgment of the harlot. This great multitude (which we first saw in 7:9) represents all of God's people both living and dead. Although they are pictured in heaven, this book (as we just saw in the previous chapter) has consistently divided the godly from the ungodly by describing the former as being in heaven while describing the latter as those that dwell on the earth.

Verse 2 reminds us that God's judgments are true and just. God's greatness rests not just on his power but on his character. God's judgments are **always** true and just, and this judgment of Rome is no exception.

In judging Rome, God avenged the blood of the martyrs as they had requested him to do in 6:10 where they cried with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth." That prayer set events into motion, and verse 2 tells us that prayer has been answered.

If the villain in this book is not first century Rome (as many argue), then how do we explain the answer here in Chapter 19 to that prayer from Chapter 6? What other world power was martyring God's people at the time of this vision? It wasn't Jerusalem. Jerusalem was just a pile of rubble in AD 79, and Jerusalem was not close to being a world power at any point in the first century. The only

world power martyring Christian was Rome. Verse 2 here is a link back to Chapter 6. If Chapter 6 is describing Rome, then so is Chapter 19.

Verse 2 also provides an important focus for what is about to be described. Verse 2 tells us that the focus of the joy and the focus of the judgment is the great harlot — and we know that that great harlot is Rome. We should keep that context in mind if we are tempted at times to leap ahead thousands of years (and possibly many more) to the final judgment at the end of time. This vision is still focused on Rome!

Let's pause for a moment and look at one word in particular from verse 1: "**Hallelujah.**" In the Old Testament that one word is written as two words. For example, it appears twice in Psalm 150:6 — "Let every thing that hath breath *praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.*" In the New Testament the one word form, Hallelujah, appears only here in verses 1, 3, 4, and 6. It is a translation of the Hebrew phrase we saw in Psalm 150, which means "Praise ye Jah [Jehovah]." Here, that word is being spoken in the very presence of God.

What is my point? My point is that the word "Hallelujah" is a powerful and beautiful word, but sadly it is used more often than not today with no thought of God. The word "Hallelujah" includes within it the very name Jehovah, and yet the world uses that word as a byword. And more often than not the world uses it to express approval for something that God condemns. We need to make sure we treat that word just as reverently as we do the names for God and the references to God in the Bible. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). The quickest and easiest way to stand out in this world is simply to guard our tongues. The world will notice that very quickly.

Revelation 19:3

3 And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever.

Rome is depicted in verse 3 as a city set on fire by God that burns forever. In Revelation 18:9-10, the kings of the earth stood far off and watched the city burn. The shipmasters in Revelation 18:18 also watched the great city burn.

Fire is a common symbol for the judgment of God. Sodom and Gomorrah were literally destroyed by fire, yet eventually that fire went out. So that means a

fire that literally goes out can't be a fire that burns forever and ever, right? Wrong. Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah are presently "suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."

What does that mean? At least two things. It means that the evil people of Sodom and Gomorrah are still suffering the punishment for their sins, and it also means that Sodom and Gomorrah continue to serve as an example to others who might be tempted to follow their evil example.

Those two cities fell never to rise again, and their fall serves as an eternal example. Edom is likewise described in Isaiah 34 as burning forever.

*Isaiah 34:9-10 — And the land thereof shall become
burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day;
the smoke thereof shall go up for ever.*

That they burn forever simply means that they serve as an example forever. We are seeing the smoke from those cities today as we study about their judgment and refuse to follow their example.

Rome likewise provides an eternal illustration of the power of God and of God's ability to deal with anyone or anything that opposes his will and harms his people. In that sense, Rome burns forever and the smoke that rises from it is always visible.

Of course, Romans were very familiar with the image of a burning city. They had literally lived through such an event in AD 64 during the reign of Nero. Many, including myself, believe that Nero himself set the fire so that he could rebuild the city in his own image. How bad was the fire? According to Tacitus, of Rome's fourteen districts, three were completely devastated, seven more were reduced to a few scorched and mangled ruins, and only four completely escaped damage.

As bad as that fire was, it was eventually went out, and eventually the smoke could no longer be seen. The smoke here in verse 3 will always be visible. Why? Because this smoke is shown in the word of God, which will never pass away (Matthew 24:35).