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## REVELATION 18

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### WE WITNESS BABYLON'S FUNERAL

We find ourselves still in the middle of what is perhaps the darkest and most gloomy part of John's visions in the Book of Revelation. And so it is good to remember that in the end, all this is still about the glorious victory of Jesus Christ, about the unfolding of our history according to God's plan of salvation.

Rev. 16:19 reports briefly about the destruction of Babylon when the last one of the seven bowls of God's wrath was poured out, ushering in God's final judgment.

Then, in the next part (17–19:10), it is all about this city of Babylon, which is also called 'the great prostitute'. Through the eyes of the apostle John we see a variety of details of Babylon's disastrous future. In this way we learn to see how the holy God will deal with sin and evil, for the comfort and encouragement of his people.

Rev. 17 showed how and why Babylon is getting ready for the day of God's judgment.

Here in Rev. 18 we see what is going to happen to her on that day. Next we hope to see in Rev. 19:1-10 what the effect of all this is on those who belong to God, followers of Jesus Christ and angels in heaven.

One more thing we must remember is that throughout all this, Babylon, the great prostitute, stands for the world without God; the human culture that rejects Jesus Christ; the world driven by secularism and materialism; the world obsessed with hedonism; the world where sin is the norm, so that right is wrong and evil is right; the world that hates the Christian faith, persecutes Christian believers, and has as its ultimate goal to destroy the church of Christ.

With this in mind we turn to Rev. 18, where we witness Babylon's funeral.

## **T**HE DEATH NOTICE ---

As the story unfolds of what is going to happen to Babylon on the Last Day, the apostle John sees in Rev. 18:1 another angel. It is not the same as the one in Rev. 17. The angel who talked to him in Rev. 17 has made clear that *Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes* is ripe for God's judgment. And now she has it coming!

This is a different angel, because this one comes straight from heaven. You could say that all angels come from heaven. But it is mentioned here to emphasize that this angel is a messenger directly from God. And that there should be no doubt that his message is God's own message.

You could also see this. He comes with *great authority* and *the earth was made bright with his glory*. He reflects God's power and glory in such a way that everyone can see it, and so that everyone will understand that his message comes with the absolute authority of the holy and almighty God himself.

It is clear that John is greatly impressed by what he sees. And this feeling becomes even stronger when this angel opens his mouth. *He called out with a mighty voice*. We have noticed before that Revelation is not just a picture-book, but a very noisy picture-book. Here we have it again. What this angel has to say, he shouts so loud, that it can be heard everywhere.

Everyone in this world, believers and unbelievers, must hear his announcement about the destruction of Babylon, the great prostitute, riding on the scarlet beast, as pictured in Rev. 17. Here is the breaking news headline of the Last Day of the history of our world: *Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!* The absolute end of this sinful world is here.

As a matter of fact, this announcement is a repeat of what another angel had announced already in Rev. 14:8. That was a forewarning. But now is the time to paint the harrowing picture of what will happen to a world dominated by an antichristian culture, and by hostile political powers that try to eliminate God's church by violence.

To be sure, it is a vision with a prophetic message about the world in which we live today. So, it still has to happen. But it will happen! It is so certain that this angel issues a public death notice, as if it has happened already.

The powerful and wealthy city of this world, a vibrant business centre, where people from all over the world enjoy the good life, will become a barren wasteland, a collection of desolate ruins that will forever be uninhabitable. It is a graphic picture in v.2. It will be a dead ghost-town, only fit for housing unclean, detestable creatures; a haunted place, filled with evil spirits.

The description is symbolic, and stands for everything that is disgusting, repulsive, ugly and scary, awful, terrifying.....! Anyone ready to sign up for a place like that? And yet – this is the future of the world without God.

Why is this? What is wrong with this world that makes this death notice inevitable?

The angel explains (v.3). It is because of the poisonous and corruptive influence of Babylon's sexual immorality, her hostility towards God and her antichristian propaganda. The *kings of the earth* and the *merchants of the earth* stand for the political and economic powers that control the nations. And the way these politicians operate and run the economy is not determined by what God says in his Word, but by their intimate involvement in Babylon's ungodly pleasures and treasures.

Babylon tempts us to forget about God's will as holy and good, and to find our joy and happiness, the true meaning of life in her values, what is called

here *the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality and the power of her luxurious living.*

John then hears another voice in his vision. He does not see another angel. No, this voice comes directly from heaven. So we probably have to think of the glorified Jesus Christ speaking, or perhaps even the Holy and Almighty God himself.

This voice sort of takes over, and continues to elaborate on the reason why the Day of God's judgment comes with this unavoidable death notice of Babylon.

*Her sins are heaped high as heaven,* the voice says (v.5). There is an element of irony here. Do you remember the story of Babel in Genesis 11? The folks in Babel were determined to build a tower that would reach to the heavens. They wanted to challenge the authority of Almighty God. But the whole endeavour was a miserable failure.

But now, here we are, at the end of our history, and look, Babylon manages to build a tower into heaven. Only, it is a tower of sin and evil. That is a metaphor for this world's massive accumulation of terrible wickedness.

And it keeps going. You watch and read the news, and sometimes it looks as if God does not care about the evil that is going on. Should he not do something about it? The sins of this world keep piling up.

But do not be mistaken! Remember Genesis 11. God will remember. This is again so certain that he can say, *God has remembered her iniquities.* Every single sin will be accounted for. None of it will be forgotten. The day is coming that she will pay for what she has done. This evil, sinful world will not get away with anything.

Some people have trouble with this idea. What we read in v.6 and the beginning of 7 sound more like an Old Testament thirst for revenge, than the New Testament message of love and forgiveness, they say. Does it not say that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son Jesus as the Saviour?

That is correct. But always remember that salvation is for all who believe in him, and not for those who reject him. The Lord is a God of grace and of jus-

tice. And his judgment is a fair judgment. Babylon's amount of punishment will be the exact equivalent for the wickedness of those who reject Jesus.

Look at her, as she sits there in arrogant self-glorification. The second half of v.7 gives the same picture as Rev. 17:3-6. *I am invincible. I am the queen of this world. I will rule forever.* And it seems to make sense. Do we not live in exciting times?

Sure, there is trouble in various corners of this world. At the same time: most of us enjoy prosperity and technologies as never before in history. And without God! It's impressive. Don't you feel intimidated by that, sometimes? The godless world we live in seems invincible.

But her claim to divine power is a direct assault on the holy and almighty God himself, the King of kings and Lord of lords. And therefore, she will not escape her deadly destruction. Hear the death notice! Babylon's punishment is inevitable.

God's judgment over a wicked world seems to linger. But it will come. And when it comes, it comes fast and furious! One day is enough to make this whole arrogant world-power collapse. *Her plagues will come in a single day,* says v.8. The one disaster after the other. It will not stop until she is completely consumed by God's fire.

This prospect makes the call in v.4 really urgent! God's voice from heaven calls, *Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins. Abandon Babylon lest you share in her plagues.* It's like the angels urging Lot to leave Sodom: "Hurry! Get out of this place. Or you will be swept away when the city is punished" (Genesis 19:15-17).

The difference is, of course, that here Babylon is not just a place on a map, which you could literally leave by loading your family in the car and getting out of town.

No, Babylon is the human society, the culture of the world where we all live in the in-between times. God's children share the world with all other people. It is impossible to get away from it physically. As a matter of fact, even trying to do so, would be wrong.

God gives us a place here, in the midst of this antichristian world, because the church has a message for this world, for the culture we live in.

People may not like a message that challenges our modern culture and that gives God and Jesus Christ the proper place as the only source of hope and comfort. But that does not mean that we can abandon the responsibility to proclaim this counter-cultural gospel, calling people to follow Jesus Christ, and to do so loud and clear as long as we have the chance in this world.

However, when he says “Come out of her,” God’s voice calls for ‘spiritual separation.’ He warns us not to associate with the morals, values and beliefs of Babylon. Do not accept her religious, political, and economic corruption. Refuse to become comfortable with her immoral lifestyle. Distance yourselves from her attractive influence.

That is not so easy. We all like to share in the prosperity and be part of the social life of people you hang out with in this world. And if that means that you will have to compromise your faith... It’s very tempting to think that you can juggle being a Christian, and at the same time living a life adapted to the pagan culture around you.

Yes, we live here, and as Christians it is hard not to get involved in economic, political and social activities that support secular, antichristian initiatives in this world. Economic grandeur and growing wealth are also attractive for Christian believers. But before you know it, you forget the death notice that has been issued for Babylon’s funeral, and then her punishment will be your punishment.

The temptations can be very subtle. That is why we need to discern carefully what it means to separate yourself from the world.

How can you do this? Know God’s will. Know God’s Word. Don’t say: “I feel that this is okay”. Or: “I feel in my heart that God would not have a problem with this”. Or: “If everybody talks or acts like this; it should be fine”. No, let the Word of God teach you to recognize evil and wickedness for what it is.

Parents, please show your children, your teenagers, what true faith in Jesus Christ is worth, what it looks like and sounds like. Model these things. Talk about these things. Teach them, with the Word of God in your hand, heart,

and mind. Help them to discern between good and evil; to reject and refuse the values and morals of this world.

Remember, the trek to the new Promised Land is a journey of ongoing dissociation from this world if you want to stay the course. It is a spiritual rebellion against the immoral and corrupt values of the Babylon we live in. God's voice warns us not to be deceived by the charms of a culture without God. Her death notice has been given.

## THE LAMENT

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How do the kings and merchants of the earth, the folks who are, according to v.3, so intimately connected with Babylon, the people on earth who are committed to the modern godless culture, how do they react when they get her death notice, and when they see what happens to their beloved Babylon?

John hears this in the next passage. On the day of the Last Judgment, when this world filled with sin and evil will find her end, all her lovers and friends will join in a loud funeral dirge. It will be heard all over the world. As a matter of fact, in the v.9–20 we actually hear three categories raise their voices. They all sing their heart wrenching lament from the same page in three-part harmony.

The first group are *the kings of the earth*, the mighty political leaders (v.9). “They committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her,” it says. These are political leaders who supported and promoted the self-absorbed, hedonistic lifestyle, characteristic for the world that has rejected God. In return they were also stimulated and empowered by the modern antichristian culture to persecute the believers.

The second group are *the merchants of the earth*, the wealthy businessmen, the economic bigwigs (v.11). These are the men who have become filthy rich by delivering without scruples everything the prostitute Babylon ordered, as demanded by her excessive and evil lifestyle. Our world is driven by greed and materialism. It promises endless happiness to those who love to indulge in luxuries. And it is in the interest of these businessmen to encourage this poisonous influence.

In the v.12 and 13 we have a whole catalogue of the fancy stuff they have been selling and shipping to Babylon. There are twenty-eight items on the list, and that number is not accidental. It is the number four times the number seven, the number of the earth and the number of completeness. It represents all the luxury products of the whole world, symbolically standing for Babylon's extreme extravagance. The point is that our sinful world is never satisfied. In her never-ending search for joy and happiness she is always looking for more, for better and bigger wealth. Babylon is good for business.

We do not have to go one by one over all the items listed here, but look at the end of the list. It highlights the deep depravity of a world, a society, a culture that wants nothing to do with God. The merchants do not hesitate to even sell *slaves, that is, human souls*. And do not think only about the slave-trade of 200 years ago. It is also what we call today human trafficking: men for forced labour, women and children for the sex-trade. When evil and immorality become the standard in this world, human lives are just commodities, to be bought and sold as animals.

The third group are *the shipmasters and seafaring men*, the mariners, the sailors, the folks that make a good living of transporting the cargos Babylon is buying from those traders (v.17). They stand for the people in this world who are eager to support the views and values of our secular society, because it is a good way of making a living. It will bring more prosperity, and thus a better life, and without God!

When you see all this, Babylon with all her loyal supporters, you might think that this will go on forever. Who will be able to stop this powerful, wealthy, and popular antichristian culture? Her supporters have money and power. They are the ones who are calling the shots in our narcissistic and hedonistic godless world.

And yet, the death notice has been issued. One day it will all go up in flames.

On that day, all Babylon's friends and lovers will gather around what used to be this great city of power and wealth. And as they mourn her death, they will join the loud lament, filled with sadness. That is not because they see how foolish they were. And that is not because they repent and turn to Jesus Christ.

No, they feel sorry for themselves. They are sad that they lost her pleasures and wealth, all the things they enjoyed so much. What do we do without her? When this wealthy and powerful world without God will collapse, there will be no future left for those who have supported her and benefitted from her. Nothing!

That is why they all *weep and mourn* on that day. When Babylon burns to the ground, people will face political and economic chaos. Markets crash. Expensive luxuries become worthless. Wealth evaporates, just like that.

But they all *stand far off* because they are desperately trying to escape their own judgment. They do not dare to come close to the fire. They fear that they may also burn. Babylon's destruction may cause their own destruction. And they have good reason to think so.

They are all shocked and *terrified by her horrible torment when they see the smoke of her burning*. This is awful!

And, unified in hopeless despair, they raise their voices to lament the sudden end of Babylon, the godless and sinful worldly culture, which had looked so strong and successful. *Was there ever a city like this great city?* No, nothing in history compares with the grandeur of Babylon. And look at her now!

On the day that the glorified Christ will come with his final judgment, we will hear the somber cry echoing all around the world. *Alas! Alas! O great city! Alas! Alas! O great and mighty city! In a single hour your judgment has come, you have been ruined, and all your power, wealth, and beauty has been laid waste!*

Did you hear that? One hour. Now that is fast and furious!

The question is, where do we stand when the day comes that the whole thing goes up in smoke? Will we join the lament, because we will also miss the material wealth of our earthly life in this world? As Christian believers we are not immune for the tempting glitter of Babylon with the promise of a good life without God, or for the social pressure to be accepted by the antichristian culture in this world. But if that is your life here and now, what will you have left on the day of Babylon's funeral?

But then, in the midst of all the weeping and crying, and in sharp contrast to this gloomy earthly point of view, there is also in John's vision the viewpoint from heaven. In v. 20 God's voice calls for another song, a song of praise that will drown out the funeral dirge. He calls his church to rejoice when this wicked world goes up in flames, and they see the smoke of her burning. For God's people in heaven and on earth Babylon's death notice is reason for joyful celebration.

No, that is not a matter of malicious revenge. That is definitely not a matter of smug Christian self-complacency. But the victory of Jesus Christ will eliminate all injustice and all anti-Christian power and influence. And that is a reason for praise.

On the day of God's judgment, the time has come to set all things straight forever.

## **T**HE BURIAL

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As the last sounds of the gloomy chorus of the lament on the day of Babylon's funeral fade away, we witness one more, final act in John's vision. The apostle sees how an extremely strong and powerful angel picks up a huge boulder, the size and weight of a large millstone, and hurls it away with a powerful swing of his arm into the sea, to be buried deep in the ocean-bed (v.21).

The symbolism is striking. When you throw a rock in the water, you first see waves and ripples as the effect. But it will not take long, and then such disturbance is quickly gone. Then the surface of the water is smooth again. There is no trace left. It is as if nothing has happened.

The explanation comes immediately with the act. We witness Babylon's burial. The image shows that the last judgment of Christ is indeed the permanent, absolute, irreversible, and radical end of this sinful world. All sin and evil will be buried, gone forever. Never again will the earth be polluted, poisoned, filled with the stench of Babylon's hatred, immorality, evil, injustice, and wickedness.

Babylon the great, the great prostitute, who led the world astray by the intoxicating influence of her immorality, will find her violent end, *and will be found no more.*

This becomes the deadly refrain in the v.22–23. She was a vibrant city, full of life. People went happily about their daily activities. This describes our world, today. But it will not last.

No more music, or other arts to cheer people up, no more cultural creativity, no more joyful entertainment...

*never again.* Only deadly silence

No more craftsmen who take pleasure in their trade, no more carpenters, bricklayers, metalworkers, painters, architects, landscapers to enhance Babylon's beauty...

*never again.* Only dreary brokenness.

No more familiar sounds of people using the hand-mill to prepare meals and baking for their families...

*never again.* Only hopelessness.

No more lamps that light all the houses in the evening, for people to enjoy family-time and social activities...

*never again.* Only silent darkness.

No more weddings filled with laughter and the happy voices of young people who are looking forward to the future with excitement and hopeful expectations. No more love...

*never again.* Only despair.

As a pounding hammer the repetition of the words “no more... no more...” reinforces the finality of what is happening. It amplifies the sheer magnitude of the disaster our world will be facing on the Day of Judgment, the final, complete, and unrestrained outpouring of God's wrath over all sin and evil.

This is the inevitable end for a world that rejects Jesus Christ and is obsessed by human greatness; the end of an arrogant, pleasure-mad world, filled with

brutal violence, filled with the blood of God's murdered children and other innocent victims; the end of a world filled with hatred toward God, his Word and his people.

It leaves us with a frightening picture of a dark, silent, and empty world. The world as it was before God said, "Let there be light".

But this is not the end. Our Father in heaven does not give up, even if he has to start again from scratch.

The city of death will die and be buried to make room for the city of eternal life and eternal joy, God's new city in God's new creation.

Babylon's funeral will clear the way for the Marriage Feast of the Lamb Jesus Christ.

How do these references help you to understand the symbolism of the use of this name in Revelation 17?

2. In this chapter Babylon is seen as the influential antichristian culture that lures people away from God and from Jesus Christ by controlling their moral choices. Discuss examples of how today's culture will try to do this.
3. Some see the woman or Babylon as a religious power, the apostate church that persecutes (or supports persecution of) the faithful church. There is an element of truth in this. Why?
4. What does it mean when this chapter wants us to remember that "little Babylons" operate also in our own heart?

### Chapter 26 – Revelation 18

1. In v.4 the voice from heaven urgently calls the believers: *Come out of Babylon, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues*. What does this mean for Christian believers today, and how do you put this into practice?
2. Someone summarized the intention of v.4 in this way: "The church is in the world, but the world must never be in the church." Explain this statement.
3. How does Rev.18, so full of wrath, revenge, and destruction fit with the Christian message of love and forgiveness? How does v.20 fit here? Does it mean that Christians are called to malicious pleasure at the misfortunes of unbelievers?
4. Read Ezekiel 27 and 28. In Ezekiel's time Tyre was a wealthy and powerful city that was hostile towards Israel. What are aspects of the lament and prophecy Tyre that come back in Rev.18?

### Chapter 27 – Revelation 19:1-10

1. Would those who live in heavenly glory with Christ be aware of the terrible fate of the wicked? And if that is the case, how can they rejoice when they see the horrors of God's judgments (v.3 and Rev. 18:20)? What is the key expression in this connection (v.2)?
2. We can have a hard time with the idea that heaven rejoices when God's wrath destroys the world. What does that tell us about our-